

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 21 - 20 - The Blood of a Hunter

Teclos stood by the window of the chief's house, hands pressed against the cold glass.

Outside, torches flickered as the party gathered.

Hunters adjusted straps and checked their blades for the last time. Guards murmured final words to one another. Father Pella stood among them like a comander, a beacon of hope—armor catching the firelight, axe resting against his shoulder as if it were nothing more than a walking stick.

They looked ready to move out.

And that terrified him.

What if they die... was the thought gnawing at his consciousness.

If they all die because of me—

His chest tightened.

They were marching into Ragla because he had told them to—or so he thought. He had run away and left the people behind, while his words sent new sacrifices to that horrible... thing.

All of this happened because he had been there... he was the reason Ragla burned, he told himself.

And what would he do now?

Stay behind?

In a warm home.

Safe and pampered by Saldia.

Useless...

Teclos clenched his hands.

Brahm had already left to fetch Saldia. The thought of seeing her made his stomach twist. She would worry. She would comfort him. She would tell him he'd done enough and that it wasn't his fault.

But maybe enough for her, didn't really feel like enough for him.

His gaze drifted toward the small table beside the hearth, where Elira had set the tea earlier.

The scent still lingered.

Herbs.

His eyes narrowed slightly as memory stirred.

Those leaves... the way she crushed them before steeping. Not common herbs. Saldia used them sometimes—sparingly. Teclos remembered his mother once

speaking of her own mentor, how she'd learned which plants could strengthen the body instead of healing it outright.

"Her master burned her finger once," his mother had said, amused. "Right here."

Teclos swallowed.

An absurd idea formed in his head.

Elira had that same burn mark.

Right on her index finger. His heart began to race because of what he was about to do.

He crossed the room quietly.

Elira had been careful, but not secretive. Inside what looked to be a herbal room, awfully similar to theirs back home. Jars of dried roots and bark, toxic herbs, and books were neatly stacked on the shelves, and a working bench sat in the middle of the room.

Inside, he looked for specific herbs he knew of, thanks to Saldia's teachings.

Frostveil Moss – pale blue threads, used to ward off bitter cold.

Sunroot Shavings – bitter, but known to restore stamina.

Mindleaf Petals – rare, silvery leaves that sharpen focus.

Gravebloom Resin – dangerous in excess, but capable of reigniting spent mana reserves as well as stopping a mild bleeding.

Just as he was about to take them, he caught his breath.

This could help the villagers and the expedition, as well as himself.

I'll return it, he promised silently. I'll gather twice as much later. I swear.

Guilt stabbed at him even as he slipped the full pouches into his jacket and rucksack.

His heart pounded harder now.

He knew this was wrong.

But doing nothing felt far worse, so he decided not to be a wimp anymore and, for once, be useful.

He pulled on his coat, strapped on his dagger, grabbed the bow and quiver from Brahm—near the door, and for just a second hesitated.

This was a bad idea, but one he wanted to go through with. And then making up his mind, he walked toward the window.

The drop wasn't far.

Still, his hands trembled.

Not because of monsters he might face.

Because of Saldia and Talmir.

They're going to kill me, he thought faintly.

Then he jumped.

Snow crunched beneath his boots as he landed and immediately moved, keeping low and as silent as possible. He skirted the shadows, climbed the narrow stairs built into the wall, slipped past the archer's platform, picking up a few more arrows—

And jumped down the far side.

Cold air burned his lungs.

He ran, toward Ragla again.

Without looking back, and with a new resolve.

Moments later, the house was quiet.

Too quiet.

Saldia stepped inside behind Brahm, her brow furrowed. Elira's hearth still glowed faintly. The scent of herbs and nostalgia lingered.

But—

"Teclos?" Saldia called.

No answer.

Her eyes moved quickly now. The blankets that should have been wrapped around him—folded. The cup empty. The window—

Open.

Her heart dropped.

"No, he wouldn't..." she whispered.

Brahm crossed the room in two strides. He looked outside, then back at the table. He noticed his wife taking a nap as well.

"There are footprints outside in the snow."

Their eyes met.

Understanding struck them both at once.

"That boy," Saldia breathed. "That reckless, stubborn—"

"He must've followed them," Brahm said grimly.

Silence followed, heavy with shock at the stupidity.

Saldia closed her eyes—and then she ran after him.

Meanwhile, on the road to Ragla, the forest felt wrong.

Father Pella and the hunters noticed it immediately.

No birds.

No insects.

No life.

The guards noticed it too.

"Anyone else got the creeps?" Obin muttered.

"It's too quiet," Darnel said. "Like the forest is scared of something."

They marched on, weapons close, shoulders tense. Ready for anything.

Halfway there, unease settled like the frost on the trees.

Murmurs began more frequently—worry, doubt, and fear slowly creeping closer.

Then Pella stopped.

He turned, planting the haft of his axe into the earth.

"Enough already, you wimps!" he said firmly.

The group halted.

"I have fought undead before," Pella said, voice steady. "They fall like anything else when struck by my axe."

A few hunters exchanged glances.

"Our numbers are good enough," he continued. "If nothing else, we extract the survivors and retreat. That alone would be our victory."

He lifted the axe slightly, a faint smile tugging at his beard.

"And besides—this old thing's cleaved worse than just those undead bones in Ragla."

A few chuckles broke the tension.

Shoulders eased, reassured once again. Backs straightened.

They marched anew.

Unaware—

That a boy was already running behind them into the dark.

But as much as there was hope, there was also despair elsewhere.

Snow clung to boots and hems, crunching softly beneath dragging feet as the line of survivors pushed onward through the dark forest. Breath came in ragged bursts, each inhale burning the lungs, each exhale fogging the air in thick, trembling clouds. No one spoke. There was no strength left for words.

The villagers marched in a ragged formation, towards Kolma as per that hunters instructions.

Most were injured. Cuts wrapped hastily in blood-soaked cloth. Burns hidden beneath borrowed coats. Blood frozen stiff against sleeves and collars. The gravely wounded were carried between two or three people. The elderly leaned heavily on younger villagers, children pressed tightly against chests, eyes wide and silent with shock.

Progress was painfully slow.

But it was progress nonetheless.

Someone whispered it aloud—half a prayer, half a lie.

"One more step... just one more step away from Ragla and we are safe."

They clung to the thought desperately. Every footfall carried them farther from the screaming, farther from the burning streets and the dead that refused to stay dead. Ahead, the forest thinned slightly, and beyond that lay the wide road—open ground, visibility, hope.

And as if by fate, their hope was cut again by something moving just behind them.

A low, wet sound slipped through the night, almost lost beneath the wind.

Someone turned and screamed.

"Ghouls!"

Five shapes erupted from the darkness.

They did not charge blindly like zombies. They moved with intent—low, fast, long limbs carrying them from trunk to trunk with terrifying ease. Claws bit into bark.

Snow scattered beneath their landings. Torchlight caught brief flashes of fangs and glinting eyes before they vanished again into shadow.

Panic rippled through the group.

"Form up!" a man shouted, voice cracking. "Form a Circle! Now!"

They obeyed instinctively.

Men and women stepped outward, torches raised high, axes and woodcutting tools clenched in numb hands. A handful of bows were drawn, arrows shaking as stiff fingers struggled to find purchase. The injured, the elderly, and the children were dragged into the center, pressed close together in a knot of shivering bodies.

Firelight flickered.

The ghouls circled.

They didn't rush in.

They watched.

"They're waiting," someone whispered hoarsely. "For an opportunity."

That realization settled like ice in their veins.

"River," another hissed urgently. "If we can reach the river... where there are no trees. No hiding or jumping for those monsters, we might survive."

It was a gamble.

But staying meant certain death.

Slowly—agonizingly—they began to move again, the circle shuffling forward, step by careful step. Torches swayed. Snow crunched. Somewhere ahead, the faint sound of flowing water grew louder.

Then one of the ghouls struck.

It slipped through a blind spot faster than eyes could track, claws hooking into an injured man near the edge of the formation. He screamed once before being dragged backward, heels carving frantic lines in the snow.

"Help him!"

Axes swung. A torch flared.

Too late.

The darkness swallowed him whole.

They pressed on, terror tightening their formation, breathing accompanied with sobs. Minutes passed—maybe less—before it happened again.

This time it was a child.

A mother's scream tore through the night as her grip was ripped away, small hands flailing before vanishing into the trees.

The scream ended abruptly. Blood sprayed across the snow.

One of the defenders fell moments later, throat opened from behind before he could even turn. His body collapsed at their feet, eyes staring lifelessly upward.

By the time they reached the riverbank, their numbers were smaller.

They backed against the icy water, the river at their heels, breath shaking violently as exhaustion and cold gnawed into their bones. The ghouls prowled just beyond the firelight now, hissing softly, snapping their jaws in frustration.

Two of them lay dead—one with its skull caved in by combined axe blows, another riddled with arrows and burned until it finally stopped moving. It was a minor success, but one that cost them heavy casualties to kill.

Three remained still, hungry and angry.

The cold was merciless—but the fear was worse.

They held their ground for now.

But for how long would their luck last?

Somewhere between the trees on his way to Ragla—

Teclos ran until his lungs felt like they might tear themselves apart.

Snow burned his throat with every breath, legs heavy and numb beneath him, yet he forced himself onward until flickering torchlight appeared ahead through the trees.

Organized.

Evenly spaced.

A marching line.

Relief surged through him so sharply it almost brought him to his knees.

Kolma's hunters.

He nearly called out—

Then stopped himself just in time.

He would surely be sent back if they knew.

Besides, an arrow could fly faster than recognition.

Teclos slowed, heart hammering, and veered wide to the left—far enough to keep distance but close enough to follow. Darkness mana seeped outward, bending shadows around his form, dulling his presence just in case. The effort burned his reserves, but he didn't dare ease it.

He followed like a ghost.

When the path split toward Ragla, the hunters halted briefly, voices low and tense. Teclos couldn't make out the words—but something else caught his attention.

Fresh footprints and blood.

The hunters missed this trail because they were too far to the right.

His heart skipped violently.

Talmir...

Without thinking, Teclos turned away from the hunters and followed the trail into the trees. The blood worried him—but hope clung stubbornly to his heart.

My father's alive. He has to be.

Then he saw claw marks gouged deep into the bark of a tree and a dead person.

Dread pooled in his stomach.

Teclos stopped, closed his eyes, and forced more mana into his concealment, wrapping himself fully in shadow. He moved slower now—quieter and fully concealed.

He heard the river before he saw it.

Then torchlight flickered ahead through the trees.

Relief surged for a second—then froze solid.

Something was wrong.

His shadow sense screamed.

Above him.

A ghoul clung to the branches overhead, muscles coiled, eyes fixed not on him—but on the villagers by the river.

Teclos's breath caught painfully in his chest.

Panic flared—

Then another ghoul burst from the darkness to his left, leaping into the firelight below. Screams erupted as it slashed wildly, inflicting shallow but bloody wounds before retreating into the trees again.

Just great... more than one, he realized numbly.

He stayed still and watched.

The villagers were barely holding together—shaking, freezing, eyes hollow with terror. Children whimpered weakly. Men gripped weapons with white-knuckled desperation.

Seeing that scene, more than anything, Teclos wanted to help.

Then the idea came.

Another spectacularly stupid and dangerous idea.

He gulped.

And started climbing the tree the ghoul was on, to get a closer look.

He stayed just beneath it, studying the ghoul above him—its breathing, the way its muscles tensed before it moved, the pattern of its attention. Minute by minute, fear dulled into something colder, sharper.

Then after twenty minutes passed, and he was getting used to this new sensation.

The ghoul never noticed him.

It was both frightening and exhilarating.

When it finally shifted away, Teclos climbed down slowly, silently, every movement measured. He nocked an arrow, fingers steady now.

Next time one of them strikes—

I won't miss.

With newfound conviction, he stalked his prey like an expert hunter.

Like he had Awakened, remembering Talmir's lessons and training.

Silent, concealed, and ready to attack, he read their intent and habits.

Out of the three ghouls, he chose the one on the right flank. It was waiting to jump from a bush near the riverbank, but that wasn't his true target, as he knew this ghoul would be the last to attack based on the distance. His real goal was the other two ghouls that would strike eventually.

Arrow nocked, he waited in the tree for the next attack, aiming for a swift double kill—one with the arrow, the other below with the dagger.

After a while, the silence shattered. A ghoul from the opposite flank lunged at an injured defender. Teclos didn't miss this moment.

He unleashed the arrow, coated in darkness mana, while the arrow was flying—almost invisible. He jumped down already, dagger in hand, ready to strike the second one like a venomous viper.

The arrow struck perfectly, lodging through the ghoul's eye and skull mid jump.

But he wasn't done.

Falling onto the ghoul beneath him, he stabbed it through the eye as well, darkness mana coating the blade, piercing it effortlessly.

Not even a scream of pain escaped either of them.

Like marionettes with their strings cut, both ghouls collapsed to the ground.

Dead—still and final.

Chapter 22 - 21 - Red Snow

Triumph surged through Teclos like fire in his veins.

He had done it.

Two ghouls lay dead in the snow behind him, their bodies already beginning to stiffen as the darkness mana seeped away. His heart pounded violently, breath coming fast—not from fear, but exhilaration. For the first time in this world, he had killed something on his own.

I did it...

I actually did it.

For a fleeting moment, he felt unstoppable. Like nothing in this world could touch him.

And that was when the last ghoul noticed.

It froze at the edge of the firelight, hunched low among the trees. Its head tilted slightly, nostrils flaring as it took in the scene. Something was wrong. Two of its pack were gone—dead without warning, without sound.

The ghoul retreated several steps, claws scraping softly against bark as it slipped deeper into the shadows.

Teclos saw it and misunderstood.

'It's afraid,' he thought, a dangerous confidence blooming in his chest.

'It's backing off because I'm stronger.'

That belief—brief and intoxicating—settled in his chest. Everything had gone according to plan, he thought.

He let go of the shadows.

The darkness mana that had wrapped him like a second skin unraveled and faded, releasing him fully into the firelight. Snow crunched beneath his boots as he straightened and stepped forward, raising a hand.

"Hail! It's me!" Teclos called out, his voice cracking slightly. "I came to help!"

The villagers flinched.

And the ghoul snarled as it saw him.

Its face twisted with fury, lips pulling back to reveal rows of jagged teeth. Yellow eyes locked onto Teclos with murderous intent, burning his shape into memory. Whatever concealment had hidden him before was gone—and the ghoul would not lose him again.

Behind him, the villagers reacted in waves.

At first, relief.

Someone laughed weakly. Another sagged to their knees.

Then they got a really good look at him—

A boy. Small and familiar. Cloaked in shadow-stained clothing. Standing among dead monsters.

—The relief curdled into wariness.

Several adults stepped forward instinctively, pulling children behind them. Hands tightened on weapons. A few muttered prayers under their breath.

One old man spat into the snow.

"You started this whole mess. I saw it with my own eyes!"

Another cursed loudly.

"Monster-whisperer!"

The words stabbed his heart harder than Teclos expected.

The high drained from him instantly, replaced by something cold and hollow. His heart slowed down. His hands trembled—not with fear, but shame.

'I should have expected it.' He thought bitterly.

He swallowed and forced himself to speak again, trying to be gentler in his tone.
"There's still one ghoul left. We need to stay alert."

As he spoke, he extended his senses into the darkness, spreading them outward like invisible tendrils. He strained to feel for the creature—but it was too far now, lurking beyond his reach.

Another round of complaints and blame was hurled at him.

Before the murmurs could grow too loud, a sharp voice cut through the crowd.

"Enough!"

A broad-shouldered man stepped forward, his face lined with exhaustion and anger. His clothes marked him as a trader—fine once, now torn and bloodstained.

"Kartall," someone murmured.

He pointed at Teclos. "What is wrong with you people? This boy just saved our lives, and you're ready to drive him off?"

The old man scoffed. "He's cursed—"

"I don't care!" Kartall snapped. "Being "cursed" doesn't matter when you're alive because of it. There's still a beast out there, and if you chase him away, you'll answer for it when it comes back!"

Heavy silence fell over the riverbank.

Then another voice spoke—quiet, but firm.

"He's right."

The wounded defender who would have been killed stepped forward, clutching her bandaged arm. Her face was pale, but her eyes were steady. "That ghoul would have killed me. I could almost feel its claws. If not for him... I'd be dead."

She looked at Teclos and bowed her head slightly. "Thank you."

Something like a knot loosened in his chest.

He hadn't been ready for the hatred—but he hadn't been ready for this either.

Gratitude.

His throat clogged painfully, just like it had back in Kolma—but this time, it was different.

Wordlessly, Teclos shrugged off his rucksack and set it down in the snow. With shaking hands, he pulled out several small pouches.

"I—I brought medicine," he said softly. "Herbs. For wounds....i thought it might help."

The sincerity in his voice cut those people deeper than any argument.

A few villagers looked away, shame flickering across their faces. Others relaxed, shoulders sagging as the tension drained from them. Not everyone trusted him—but most stopped glaring, stopped blaming him.

Then a raspy voice hissed from the back of the group.

"You're all forgetting something!"

An old man jabbed a finger toward the treeline. "The ghoul is still out there!"

The firelight flickered.

Somewhere beyond the light, the monster waited.

Teclos felt that he could defeat it.

He had won this first fight against two of them, after all.

Although the ghoul still alive somewhere was worrying, there was a more pressing matter right now.

He knelt in the snow and opened the pouches one by one.

"These are simple herbs," he said, forcing calm into his voice. "But they'll help."

He held up the first pouch, pale blue threads glinting faintly in the firelight.

"Frostveil Moss. Grind it between your fingers and smear it on exposed skin—arms, neck, face. It'll help ward off the cold."

He passed it around. The villagers followed his instructions hesitantly at first, then with growing urgency. Almost immediately, stiff shoulders eased and shivering slowed.

Next came a darker pouch.

"Sunroot shavings. Bitter, but eat a little. It restores stamina."

Faces twisted as they chewed, but relief followed quickly. People straightened. Backs uncurled. Breathing steadied.

"Mindleaf petals," Teclos continued, holding up silvery leaves. "Crush them and inhale. Don't eat these."

Those who did found the fog lifting from their thoughts, fear retreating just enough to think clearly again.

A child near the edge struggled with one of the herbs, tiny hands failing to break it apart. Frustration welled in her eyes.

Teclos moved without thinking, crouching beside her. He gently crushed the herb between his fingers and rubbed it onto her arms and legs.

"There," he said softly. "That should help."

The girl blinked, then smiled—it was small, but genuine.

"Thank you," she whispered.

A warm feeling bloomed in his chest.

Around them, the villagers looked better. Still exhausted, still wounded—but no longer on the brink of collapse. Color returned to cheeks. Hands stopped shaking.

And that was when the ghoul grew nervous.

From the treeline, it watched as its prey recovered. As fear faded and strength returned. A low, irritated hiss slipped from its throat.

Its gaze locked onto Teclos, it had to stop him now!

Slowly, carefully, it began to circle.

Teclos was helping an older man wrap a bandage when voices nearby rose in cautious conversation—talk of returning, of routes, of survival.

Then—

His shadow sense screamed.

"Get back—!" Teclos shouted, spinning mid air, as he threw himself backward.

The ghoul burst from the darkness, claws flashing. Teclos hit the snow hard, narrowly avoiding its strike. In the same motion, he slashed upward with his dagger.

The blade bit into the ghoul's side.

It wasn't deep enough.

He hadn't had time to coat it in darkness mana.

The ghoul shrieked, stumbling as it landed among the villagers. Its face twisted—not just in rage, but shock.

That ambush should have worked.

Panic erupted. People screamed and scattered, but the ghoul didn't pursue them. Its eyes stayed locked on Teclos.

With a snarl, it leapt backward, retreating once more into the trees.

Teclos lunged to follow, but the creature was already gone, swallowed by the night.

Silence fell—broken only by ragged breathing.

"How... how did you do that?" the little girl from before gasped, eyes wide.

Teclos blinked. "Do what?"

The wounded woman stepped closer. "She means—how did you dodge it? It attacked from behind."

Teclos frowned. "You didn't sense it?"

Confusion rippled through the group.

"You have earth mages," he continued slowly. "They can feel vibrations. And water mages can sense disturbances if they spread mist or moisture..."

Kartall laughed, a rough, disbelieving laugh.

"Boy," he said, shaking his head, "not everyone trains to hunt monsters."

He studied Teclos more closely. "That aside—you're abnormal. I've traveled far and wide, and I've never seen someone your age move like that."

Teclos stiffened. "Really? I thought... I thought everyone trained like this."

Kartall snorted. "Most people are lucky to reach three or five mana circles in their lifetime."

That statement froze him in place.

Images flashed through his mind—Kolma's hunters, his father's strength, the way training had felt... normal. Hell, even Ralph and Gillard were the same.

Kolma is abnormal, he realized.

'And my father a maniac too...'

A small, incredulous smile tugged at his lips.

It's really like I'm the protagonist in a story, isn't it?

Then a heavier thought crushed his merry mood as he remembered...Talmir, where was Talmir?

He looked up sharply. "My father—Talmir. Is he safe? He came to the village with me."

Kartall's expression softened, pity flickering in his eyes.

"He put me in charge of the retreat," he said quietly. "Once we were able to move, he turned back."

Teclos's chest tightened.

"He went back to fight the monsters in Ragla."

Worry surged like ice through his veins again.

But seeing the scared people around him, he knew now was not the time.

The march toward the main road resumed shortly after.

They formed a tight circle once more, weapons outward, torches held high. This time, Teclos stood at the center—as their warning bell.

"If I call a direction," he said firmly, "defend that side immediately. Left. Right. Front. Back. Don't hesitate."

They nodded, grim but focused.

As they moved, Teclos expanded his senses into the darkness.

It's easier at night.

The shadows felt thicker, more responsive—like cold water he could sink into. His range stretched farther than ever before. Ten meters. Then more.

He clenched his jaw.

Dad... hold on.

He wanted this over quickly. The faster they killed the ghoul, the sooner he could move toward Ragla—not back to Kolma.

As if answering that wish, something shifted up ahead.

The ghoul was moving with them.

As the wide road came into view through the trees, the creature grew agitated.

Fewer shadows. Fewer trees.

Beyond that road, the humans' freedom was all but certain.

So it climbed high into the canopy of a tall tree, clinging upside down as it watched the villagers approach. Its thoughts were simple—either return to its supreme master through death, its soul dragged back along the chain that bound it...

Or succeed, and bring more sacrifices for the ritual.

So the ghoul waited.

And when the first villagers passed beneath it—

It struck.

"Front!" Teclos shouted.

The ghoul launched itself straight at him.

What shocked Teclos wasn't the attack—it was the intent.

It ignored everyone else and wanted only him.

But Teclos was ready.

He had his bow drawn already, feet planted, breathing steady. He loosed the arrow at the ghoul's chest the instant it entered range.

It should have hit.

But the ghoul twisted midair with inhuman instinct, spinning just enough for the darkness-coated arrow to miss entirely.

It landed in front of Teclos with a heavy thud, snow spraying outward. Its eyes gleamed with malice—and something close to delight.

Teclos drew his dagger.

Fear was still there—but beneath it was something new.

Confidence.

"I can do this," he muttered.

He was wrong.

Very wrong.

He'd made two fatal mistakes.

The first—there were no fighters near him. Only the injured, the elderly, and children stood around him.

The second—he'd forgotten that the only reason he'd killed the other two ghouls was stealth.

And this was no ambush.

The ghoul charged.

It crossed the distance in a blink.

Teclos barely raised his dagger in time, bracing it vertically against the creature's claws. The impact was brutal—far heavier than he'd expected.

He was sent flying.

Crashing into the people behind him, pain exploding through his body as tendons screamed in protest. Dizziness washed over him.

The ghoul didn't wait and lunged again.

Teclos rolled desperately, avoiding a downward slash by inches—but the follow-up came instantly. An upward strike caught him square in the chest.

Feeling something crack.

He was thrown and slammed into a tree, ribs breaking as blood sprayed from his mouth. His vision blurred, darkness creeping at the edges.

'I'm going to die.'

The ghoul was already there.

Its maw opened wide, breath hot and foul as it snapped for his head.

Instinct took over.

With the last of his strength, Teclos raised his arms, dagger still clutched tightly between his fingers. Of course, it was to no avail—the teeth tore into his flesh, pain beyond anything he'd known. Only the blade stopped it from biting through completely.

The villagers screamed all around him, scrambling to safety—all but one.

Kartall ran as fast as he could.

The ghoul pressed harder, jaws inching closer to Teclos's face. Just a few centimeters more—

Then shadows snapped tight.

Darkness coiled around the ghoul's neck, limbs, and head, halting it mid-motion. The pain from the bite kept Teclos conscious.

He commanded the darkness in the last possible moment.

The shadows strained as the ghoul fought back. It began inching forward again.

But he bought himself a few precious seconds, enough for Kartall to finally arrive.

With a roar, he brought his axe down. The blow was shallow—but he struck again. And again.

An arrow slammed into the ghoul's eye.

Another villager rushed in, stabbing its back with a pitchfork.

More arrows followed.

The beast shrieked, staggering under the assault.

Kartall raised his axe one last time and hacked between spine and neck. Bone cracked. Flesh tore.

The ghoul collapsed.

Dead.

Chapter 23 - 22 - Dawn

Teclos was barely conscious.

He was slumped against the tree the ghoul had pinned him to moments earlier, his breath coming in wet, shallow gasps. Blood stained his lips, dripping down his chin as he coughed weakly.

'I barely made it...' He thought dimly.

Pain radiated through his body—broken ribs, shredded arms, muscles screaming in protest. He couldn't lift his hands anymore. Every breath felt like it might be his last.

The villagers gathered nearby, their faces tight with worry.

Even those who had cursed him earlier avoided his gaze now, shame written clearly across their features.

An old man stepped forward—the same grizzled, foul-mouthed elder who had spat insults at Teclos only minutes before. He frowned deeply as he approached.

Kartall tensed, opening his mouth to warn him—

—but the old man surprised everyone.

He crouched down in front of Teclos and pulled a small flask from the inner pocket of his jacket.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said gruffly, avoiding Teclos's eyes. "For my harsh words earlier."

He hesitated, then continued, voice quieter. "This is a potion. It's not much, but it should help with regeneration... stop the bleeding inside."

A murmur rippled through the group.

Everyone knew Old Pete. Stubborn. Mean-tempered. Proud to a fault. An apology from him was rarer than gold.

Kartall barked out a laugh. "Didn't think you had it in you, Old Pete. Thought you were made of rusted nails and bad mood."

Pete snorted. "And I thought you were made of greed, soft cotton, and cowardice. Yet here we are."

Kartall frowned. "No need to get grumpy again, old man."

Teclos tried to lift his arm—but it trembled uselessly and fell back to his side. He didn't have the strength.

Pete noticed and uncorked the flask. Carefully, he tipped it to Teclos's lips.

The potion burned slightly as it slid down his throat.

The effect was immediate—but modest.

Warmth spread through his chest, dulling the pain just enough for him to breathe easier. The internal bleeding slowed. Some of the smaller cuts sealed themselves shut.

But the deeper damage remained.

The broken ribs still screamed with every movement.

Pete sighed. "Sorry, boy. It's just a lesser potion—about all this old man can afford. But it should keep you alive long enough to get proper treatment."

Teclos managed a weak nod in thanks.

The villagers worked quickly after that, fashioning extra stretchers from cloaks, branches, and rope. Teclos was carefully laid onto one, his body jolting painfully with every movement.

They began the march back toward Kolma.

Teclos tried to protest.

He wanted to bring herbs to his father. Wanted to go to Ragla. Irrationally still wanted to help.

But he was in no condition to argue—and even if he tried, they wouldn't have let him go. He couldn't even stand on his own.

When they reached the main road, relief washed over the group. The worst was over. They were alive.

All except Teclos felt that relief.

Dread coiled tightly in his chest.

He'd failed to reach Talmir.

And worse—he knew exactly what awaited him back in Kolma.

A certain herbalist named Saldia.

A very angry one.

As they walked toward Kolma, he was strapped to a man's back, the stretcher swaying beneath him as the man helped carry his weight.

Teclos replayed the fight over and over in his mind.

What he'd done right.

What he'd done wrong.

The difference between the two moments was painfully clear—when he'd hunted and ambushed the first two ghouls... and when arrogance had nearly gotten him killed by the last.

He let out a weak, humorless chuckle.

That was stupid.

Kartall had called him talented—but talent alone meant nothing.

He wasn't some invincible protagonist cleaving mountains apart.

He was still weak.

And today, he had come terrifyingly close to dying because he forgot that.

Meanwhile, away from humanity's first small victory, Ragla still burned.

Only thirteen warriors were still left standing.

The rest—friends, hunters, guards—had fallen, and now their corpses turned back toward the living with hollow eyes and broken limbs, answering a darker call.

Those thirteen would not have survived this long without two men.

Talmir.

And Thomas.

Talmir was everywhere at once—his blade a silver blur as he carved through flesh and bone, cleaving zombies apart before they could even reach the line. He moved like the wind itself, appearing wherever the formation buckled, wherever fear threatened to freeze the last men alive. Every strike was lethal. Every step deliberate.

Thomas stood beside him, a pillar of fire and stubborn resolve.

His twin swords were long shattered, replaced now by a heavy mace ripped from a fallen guard. With one hand, he crushed skulls and shattered spines. With the other, he unleashed continuous torrents of flame, burning the undead to ash before they could rise again.

The others were barely holding on.

Mana reserves were nearly empty. Arms shook with exhaustion. The occasional earth spike or water slash still flew—but those were rare now. Most of the work fell to the two cornerstones holding the line together.

And still, it wasn't enough.

The zombies had mostly been dealt with—but ghouls were emerging now. Faster than before. The banshee had committed fully to summoning.

More of them poured in by the second.

It was clear she wanted to overwhelm them with a final push.

And then there was Joe.

His screams tore through the battlefield—disruptive wails that rattled the mind. Bone arrows. Skeletal hands clawing up from the ground. He hovered above the chaos like a curse given form.

Thomas felt hope slipping away.

"Talmir!" he shouted, crushing a ghoul's skull with his mace. Flames poured from his free hand like a living inferno, engulfing another undead mid-leap.

"What?!" Talmir roared back, spinning to bisect two ghouls at once while kicking a third away from a wounded hunter.

"Take the uninjured and run!" Thomas yelled. "I'll hold them off!"

"No, Chief! You can't!" a young hunter shouted—Bert, somehow still alive despite the carnage.

"He's right," Talmir growled. "I'm not leaving."

"Shut up, Bert!" Thomas snapped. "Listen to me, damn it! I'll hold them!"

Voices rose in protest—hunters, guards, desperate refusals shouted over the clash of steel and shrieks of the undead.

Thomas's voice broke through them all.

"I'm old, you stubborn fools," he said hoarsely. "And my wife died in the first attack."

Silence.

There wasn't a single person there who didn't understand that pain.

"Let me die a glorious death," Thomas continued. "So I can join her proudly—knowing I saved at least some of you."

Bert tilted his head. "But sir... you won't join her, though? The banshee will just raise you as one of them."

Thomas froze.

"...I didn't think of that."

A few strained chuckles escaped the group—thin, desperate laughter in the face of death.

"Just hold on," Talmir said. "I sent messengers to Kolma and Lupos."

"Like they'll make it in time," Irven muttered grimly.

"Way to ruin the mood, Irven," a guard snapped.

They fought on.

Together.

But Joe had other plans.

Bone needles—hundreds of them—tore free from the air above, raining down like death itself.

Irven looked up.

"ABOVE US!" he screamed, his voice cracking in terror.

If the spell landed, they were finished.

And Talmir knowing that, sprung to action without a second thought.

He pulled mana into his blade—everything he had left. There wasn't time for a wind barrier.

So he created something else.

He slashed diagonally through the ghouls in front of him, ripping them apart—and continued the motion, leaping into the air so he wouldn't decapitate his allies by mistake.

Then he spun.

Faster.

Faster still.

The wind followed.

A roaring vortex formed above the group.

A tornado.

And its name was Talmir.

Mana surged into the storm as he pulled the surrounding air with him. At the center, where the hunters stood, the winds were manageable—but beyond that?

Ghouls were ripped from the ground, shredded midair. Even thirty meters out, undead clawed desperately at the earth to keep from being dragged in.

Nearby houses collapsed.

Bone needles shattered, deflected, or were hurled harmlessly aside.

Joe stared in disbelief.

He had thought this spell would wipe them out—or at least cripple them.

He had been wrong.

Some bone needles slipped through, wounding a few hunters—but most survived.

What he had been right about was one thing:

He did not want to face Talmir.

The tornado didn't stop. It continued to rise, surging toward Joe and devouring the ground beneath it.

Joe retreated, spiraling downward in a wide arc, fleeing toward the ground as the storm chased him.

A bit later, Talmir descended back into the center of the formation, boots skidding across broken stone as the tornado unraveled above him. He bent forward slightly, hands on his knees, breath coming in heavy, ragged pulls.

The wraith escaped.

Too slippery to catch.

For a brief moment, the battlefield fell strangely quiet.

The surviving ghouls hesitated, circling at a distance, wary after witnessing the storm that had torn their kin apart. The banshee would correct that soon—Talmir knew it—but for now, they had a handful of precious seconds.

Maybe even a minute.

Thomas stepped closer, mace resting against his shoulder. "You alright there, chap?" he asked, eyeing Talmir's labored breathing.

Talmir huffed. "I'll admit... I've had better days."

Thomas let out a rough chuckle. "Oh? So you can still joke around, can ya?"

Around them, the hunters and guards stared in awe.

They had respected Talmir before—but now? Now they looked at him like a living legend. A man who had turned the battlefield into his playground.

—

Beneath the ground, far from their eyes, something answered the banshee's call.

Another presence arrived.

Another wraith.

One of her oldest servants.

With the summoning complete, the banshee extended her control outward—and the ghouls responded.

They surged forward once more.

The brief respite shattered.

Steel rang. Flames roared. Screams echoed.

Twenty minutes passed in a blur of blood and exhaustion.

Cracks began to show.

Even with perfect coordination, they were losing ground. Step by step, the formation was forced back. Arms grew heavy. Spells weakened. Every movement cost more energy than it should have.

Thomas burned through the last of his mana, fire sputtering instead of roaring.

Talmir pushed himself past his limits, vision blurring at the edges.

Finally, Thomas spoke again, his voice calm despite the carnage.

"Well," he said, swinging his mace one last time, "it was nice knowing you lads. And it's been an honor slaughtering these pests with you."

"Oh, come on, Chief!" Bert shouted. "Not the pessimism again—can't you maybe be optimistic for once?"

"Oh, for the love of the gods, shut up, Bert," Thomas snapped. "I'm having a moment here."

A few smirks appeared—strained and tired smirks.

No more words followed.

They tightened their grips.

Adjusted their stances.

Prepared for one final push.

Prepared to die.

...Well.

Everyone except Irven, who was very clearly panicking more than ever.

They pushed back.

With everything their battered bodies had left, they pushed forward one final time.

It wasn't much.

A few desperate steps. A handful of strikes that barely dented the tide of undead pressing against them. Still, for a brief moment, they weren't losing ground anymore.

But that pace came at a terrible cost.

Every swing burned. Every breath felt like it was their last. Muscles trembled violently, wrung dry of stamina they didn't truly have anymore.

Then the line broke.

They were forced back-to-back, surrounded on all sides. Ghouls lunged from every direction—claws tearing at armor, teeth sinking into exposed flesh. Blood sprayed across broken cobblestone. Screams of pain echoed through the ruined village.

Despair settled like a heavy weight on their chests.

And as if to put the final nail in to their coffin, the ground trembled.

From the shattered earth behind the undead ranks, something rose.

Irven saw it first.

"Oh gods..." he whispered, voice cracking. "I—I don't want to die!"

The new wraith emerged—larger, darker, its form more defined than Joe’s was. The air itself recoiled around it, mana warping unnaturally.

This thing didn’t posture.

It didn’t gloat.

The moment it revealed itself, the wraith screamed.

The sound tore through the battlefield like a blade—raw and hateful. A shockwave of corrupted mana surged outward, far stronger than Joe’s, bordering on the banshee’s initial cry.

Some warriors closed their eyes, prepared to die.

Others froze, wide-eyed with terror.

Irven screamed like a girl.

Talmir roared and forced himself forward, gathering wind mana into his blade. He slashed upward, trying to carve through the approaching wave—but—

Pain exploded in his chest.

Blood burst from his mouth as his body finally gave in, no more mana left to spend. The gathered wind slipped from his grasp and scattered uselessly into the air.

He staggered.

Fell to one knee.

'This is it,' he thought.

Faces flashed through his mind.

Saldia's smile.

Teclos's stubborn eyes.

'I'm sorry...'

Then—

Light.

From beyond the village, the night split apart.

A radiant beam of mana—green and gold, vast and overwhelming—crashed down like divine judgment. It tore through the earth, annihilating everything in its path.

Ghouls disintegrated instantly.

Stone shattered.

Houses collapsed into dust.

Trees were uprooted and vaporized.

The wraith's scream was erased mid-note.

Only silence remained.

For the first time since the attack on Ragla began, the banshee turned her head away from the ritual.

Her expression twisted—anger, disbelief, and something dangerously close to madness.

Joe shrieked and recoiled, sensing the power behind the strike. This was no hunter.

This was a force that directly countered them.

The newly summoned wraith hesitated—then plunged back into the ground, fleeing.

The battlefield fell quiet.

Those still standing stared in stunned silence.

Only Talmir smiled.

"Took you long enough, Pops," he muttered.

Then he collapsed.

Before his body hit the ground, a figure appeared beside him—moving faster than the eye could see.

White-silver armor gleamed faintly, etched with ancient runes. A single hand caught Talmir effortlessly.

Warmth surged.

Bones knit.

Wounds sealed.

Blood vanished.

Father Pella stood there, eyes blazing with fury as he looked toward the undead forces.

"You shouldn't be so reckless anymore, boy," he said coldly. "I won't be in this world much longer to pull your head out of the mess you insist on making."

Talmir laughed weakly.

And the undead—finally—began to retreat.

Chapter 24 - 23 - Clash of Titans

The hunters, guards, and Thomas stood frozen like statues.

Shock, disbelief and awe written all over their faces.

None of them had ever witnessed power like this. They had heard stories, legends whispered around campfires, fairy tales told to children before sleep. But seeing it with their own eyes was something else entirely.

A human was not supposed to command the world like that.

Father Pella extended his free arm.

Mana surged outward, forming a translucent bubble that engulfed the entire group. Warmth washed over them. Wounds closed almost instantly—bones knitting, torn muscles mending, pain dissolving into numb relief. Arms and legs straightened. Breathing became easier.

Within moments, they were basically whole again.

The only proof that a desperate battle had taken place were shredded armor plates, cracked shields, and deep claw marks carved into metal and stone.

"There," Pella said calmly. "You did well. Now rest. I'll take it from here."

The words carried authority—final and unquestionable.

Thomas stepped forward anyway, giving the old priest a respectful nod.

"Thanks for the help, sir. Before we go rest, though, I should tell you where that banshee—"

Pella turned his head slowly and met Thomas's gaze.

"I already know where it is," he said, voice low and edged with fury. "I can smell the stench of the undead from here."

He looked past Thomas, toward the ruined heart of the village.

"Go. Rest," Pella ordered. "Follow the path I made. You'll meet the others."

Thomas bowed without another word.

As the group began to turn away, Pella spoke again, almost absently.

"Oh. And take this idiot with you."

With that, he grabbed Talmir—fully healed now—and unceremoniously tossed him into Thomas's arms.

"Oi—!" Thomas grunted, barely catching him.

Pella was already walking away.

Step by steady step, he moved toward what remained of Ragla's center—toward the shattered guildhall, where the banshee waited.

Deep beneath the ruins, the banshee hissed.

Her grotesque face twisted with fury, the air around her vibrating with barely restrained malice. This was supposed to be a careful, controlled harvest—one meant to summon her master—she wasn't expecting a close battle.

Then the two wraiths emerged into the chamber.

Joe rose from the dungeon entrance, his form flickering erratically. The eldest wraith descended from the ceiling, shadows clinging to it like rotting veils.

Both bowed instinctively, seeking their masters guidance.

They knew.

Against that man, they stood no chance alone.

The banshee's claws dug into the stone beneath her. Rage pulsed through the chamber as she tightened her control over the remaining undead.

She hissed orders at her wraiths and servants.

Meanwhile, Father Pella walked on.

Leisurely.

As though he were strolling through a quiet village road instead of toward a nest of horrors.

Behind him, the last standing defenders of Ragla finally met up with Kolma's forces.

Relief spread instantly through the exhausted group.

Thomas let out a sigh he hadn't realized he was holding. "Gods, am I glad to see you lot. And your absurdly overpowered old man."

A few laughs broke out.

Many of Kolma's hunters had seen Father Pella fight before—some during their training years, others during hunting campaigns long past.

"That's because he's not just a priest," Kosak said. "Father Pella was once a commander of a Paladin Order from the Dawn Church."

That made the few of them wide-eyed.

Ulmak stepped forward then, scratching the back of his head. He saw the tired faces and thought it was a good idea to bring some laughter.

"Ah... sorry if Talmir's behavior caused any inconvenience during his stay. We'll be escorting you out shortly, after we wipe out a few undead...you can relax by the tree line and sip some tea, we'll show this dumb oaf of ours how it's really done if he wakes up."

Silence.

Long—uncomfortable—silence.

Ulmak coughed. "Khm. Tough crowd."

Obin chuckled. "Looks like you are the dumb one Ulmak."

Darnel snorted. "He's trying to compete for the title of stupid oaf, it seems."

Ulmak frowned. "Like you two are known for being the smart ones in any group you're part of."

Thomas stepped forward. "Thanks for trying to cheer us up lad, but next time don't try to put the one who almost scuffed himself, as a punch line."

Finally a few tired smirks appeared.

Kolma's hunters began tossing spare tents and supplies onto the ground.

Ulmak—who was beet red—gestured toward them. "Basic gear for you. You'll actually head toward Kolma now. Pella's magic healed your bodies, but mental fatigue and mana exhaustion don't vanish that easily. Right now, you're more of a liability than help."

Thomas nodded. "Understood. No worries—and thank you."

He hesitated, then asked quietly, "Did you... meet any other survivors on the way by chance?"

Confusion crossed Ulmak's face.

"No."

Thomas's expression fell.

Still, he forced a nod. "I see. Thank you again."

As they turned to leave, Thomas cast one last glance toward the village ruins.

He wanted to believe Father Pella had just missed them.

But deep down... he wasn't sure that man could miss anything.

"All right, where were we..." Ulmak said, his voice cutting through the lingering tension. "We'll go through the plan one last time. While Father Pella holds that abomination back, we support him from the outside with long-range spells—"

"Oh, come on," Darnel groaned. "We already know. It's the fifth time you and Pella explained it."

Sera shot him a sharp glare. "Could you just shut u—"

"Now, now, Sera," Ulmak interrupted calmly. "The man can apparently count—and even remember things on top of that—so don't yell at him."

Darnel opened his mouth to retort, but Kosak stepped in first, his tone suddenly serious.

"Enough. I don't want to stop your useless comedy act, but if Father Pella sees anyone not following the plan, he's going to rip your head off."

A brief silence followed.

"Khm... you're right," Ulmak cleared his throat.

"Yeah," Darnel muttered. "Sorry."

Ulmak nodded and continued. "As I was saying—long-range spells only. Two-man teams. Signal flares if anyone's in trouble. And retreat if it gets too much."

This was not a battle to the death.

Their objective wasn't heroic glory—it was stalling the enemy.

They only needed to contain the undead until reinforcements from Lupos arrived. Father Pella had reassured them that once the clergy learned undead were involved, even their corrupt asses would move in full force.

The goal was simple.

Prevent summoning. Prevent escape.

That was all.

Father Pella walked alone down the center of the road.

Ghouls lined the streets, crawling from alleys, rooftops, broken homes—but none dared approach. Even under the banshee’s forced control, fear rooted them in place.

He did not hurry.

Each step echoed like judgment.

When he reached roughly two hundred meters from the dungeon entrance, something changed.

The ghouls shuddered instinct was taking over.

Protect the master. And once one of them moved—their hesitation shattered—into a full onslaught.

Pella’s axe ignited in golden radiance.

With a single, effortless swing, he cleaved the first ghoul cleanly in half. Another step forward—another strike. Bodies fell apart as though made of paper, life mana tearing through corrupted flesh.

He didn't slow down

Each swing was precise.

Golden arcs flashed through the night as ghouls were reduced to ash and severed limbs, their screams drowned beneath the hum of his mana.

Around the village, the hunters and guards were already in position.

The encirclement wasn't perfect—they covered too much ground for that—but it didn't need to be.

As long as Father Pella reached the banshee, there would be nowhere left to run.

If the master fell—

Everything else would follow soon after.

Father Pella finally reached the dungeon entrance.

The ground around it was blackened, cracked, and steeped in death mana. Ghouls poured from the shadows, yet none could slow him. Each step forward was accompanied by the dull thud of his axe cleaving flesh and bone apart.

"Seems you have a master, you abomination," Pella said calmly as he split another ghoul in half. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have stayed after I unleashed the first strike."

He stopped.

Then released a pulse of pure life mana.

The air flashed green and gold.

Every ghoul within dozens of meters simply ceased to exist—their bodies unraveling into dust and light as the life mana erased the necromantic bindings holding them together.

Pella lifted his axe overhead.

Life mana surged into the weapon in violent waves. The blade blazed brighter and brighter, runes along its edge igniting like small suns. The earth beneath his feet cracked outward in a spiderweb pattern. Stone buckled. His muscles swelled, veins glowing faintly beneath his skin as the air itself began to tremble.

The banshee noticed immediately.

She hissed—long, shrill, furious.

Her skeletal arms spread wide as she gathered mana of her own. Death mana coalesced around one hand, black and roiling like a void. Sound mana formed in the other, dense and vibrating so violently that it warped the air around it. The spheres spun faster and faster, grinding the ground beneath her feet into decaying sludge.

Pebbles lifted into the air around both of them, shattering under the pressure of their condensed power.

The two wraiths fled instantly.

One retreated out of sheer terror, sensing the annihilation that was about to follow. The other obeyed the banshee's silent command—supporting from afar would be far more useful than being erased in the crossfire.

Then—

They released their attacks at the same time.

Life mana met death and sound.

The earth between them vanished.

A deafening explosion ripped through the village, a shockwave tearing outward in every direction. Buildings collapsed. Walls crumbled. The wraiths were ripped from the ground and hurled hundreds of meters away like discarded dolls. Hunters and guards were thrown off their feet, ears ringing, vision swimming as the world went white for a brief, terrifying moment.

When the dust settled—

Both were still standing.

Then they vanished.

Pella closed the distance in a single blur, his axe carving a golden arc through the air. The banshee shrieked, sound mana exploding outward to deflect the strike, but the impact still sent shockwaves rippling through the ground.

She countered instantly.

Her claws slashed forward, death mana trailing like black smoke. Pella twisted aside, the attack grazing his armor and leaving corrosion sizzling across the silver surface. He responded with a knee to her torso that sent her flying through what remained of a stone wall.

She recovered midair.

A scream tore from her throat—weaponized sound compressed into a focused lance. Pella planted his feet and raised his axe horizontally, life mana flaring as the scream shattered against his defense, splintering into destructive waves that flattened nearby ruins.

They clashed again.

And again.

Each collision shook the village.

Pella fought with terrifying efficiency—no wasted movement, no hesitation. Every swing of his axe carried overwhelming force, every step perfectly placed. He advanced relentlessly, forcing the banshee back inch by inch.

The banshee was faster.

More feral.

She darted around him, vanishing into the ground and reappearing at impossible angles, claws raking, screams bursting forth in concussive blasts. But each time she struck, Pella was there—blocking, countering, punishing.

Golden light and black decay tore chunks from the battlefield.

The fight became a storm of motion—high-speed exchanges where even brief contact sent shockwaves rolling outward. Windows shattered miles away. The ground split open repeatedly, swallowing corpses and rubble alike.

This was not a battle of attrition.

It was a collision between absolutes.

Life.

And undeath.

And slowly—inevitably—the balance began to tip.

The banshee adapted.

Her movements grew sharper, less erratic. Each scream was more focused, each burst of death mana heavier, denser. Where before she lashed out in fury, now she pressed forward with intent, chaining attacks together, forcing Pella to give ground step by step.

The earth beneath them sagged and decayed under her influence, patches of stone turning brittle and gray. Her shrieks no longer scattered uselessly—they struck like hammers, testing Pella's guard from every angle.

And beyond them, the battlefield stirred.

The wraiths tried to intervene.

They slipped through shadows, reached outward with spectral claws, summoned bone projectiles and waves of fear—but each attempt was met with disciplined resistance.

"Left flank—now!"

A flare shot into the sky.

Ulmak's voice cut through the chaos. Hunters unleashed coordinated volleys of spells and arrows, forcing one wraith back into the ground. Earth spikes ruptured beneath another, water blades carving through its incorporeal form just enough to disrupt its casting.

Ghouls surged forward, only to be cut down before they could close the distance.

The plan held.

Ulmak watched the battlefield with clenched fists, eyes darting between Pella and the undead reinforcements. "That old man really is terrifying," he muttered. "Predicting this far ahead..."

Despite the pressure mounting around him, Father Pella did not look discouraged.

If anything—he looked calmer than ever.

The banshee now clearly held the advantage in raw output. Her mana reserves were vast, her attacks relentless. If this continued without interruption, she would win eventually.

And Pella knew it.

Yet he did not push harder.

He retreated when needed. Deflected instead of overpowering. Let blows glance off his armor rather than meeting them head-on. Occasionally, he countered—never lethal, never reckless—just enough to remind the banshee that she could not overextend without consequence.

He was buying time.

The banshee mistook this for weakness.

Her movements grew feral again, intoxicated by the sensation of dominance. She pressed harder, screams overlapping, death mana surging wildly as she tried to break him outright.

Pella welcomed it.

Each reckless charge, each overcommitted strike, fed directly into his rhythm. He gave ground only where it suited him, keeping the battlefield shaped to his advantage, always centered, always aware.

'If I were in my prime,' he thought calmly, parrying a shriek with the haft of his axe, 'this creature wouldn't last a minute.'

Once, long ago, he had fought liches—true masters of undeath—on even footing. Compared to those days, this was nothing.

Age had dulled his body.

Around them, the hunters held firm.

The wraiths were stalled. The ghouls culled faster than they could regroup. The lock-down held. Unded were detained.

Everything was going exactly as planned.

Father Pella held the banshee.

The hunters held the field.

And somewhere beyond the horizon, reinforcements were already moving.

For now—

The world held its breath, watching it unfold.

Chapter 25 - 24 - Eyes upon Ragla

Far beyond Ragla, where no screams carried and no mana flares were visible to mortal eyes, the world still felt the clash.

It rippled outward like a stone dropped into a silent lake.

To the west, past the roaring waterfall and high above the clouds, something ancient stirred.

Golden fur rippled as a massive shape rose atop the mountain plateau. A great leonine body stretched lazily, bat-like wings unfurling as the wind combed through her immaculate fur. Her tail—long, powerful, ending in a scorpion's curved stinger—swung once, carving grooves into stone.

Her face, a regal blend of human intelligence and predatory grace, turned toward the distant horizon.

A ruby glinted from her ear. Obsidian ornaments hugged her claws.

The Queen exhaled softly, eyes narrowing.

"So..." she murmured, amused. "I suppose the humans still have some power left on their side." Her tone was confident yet cautious, the voice of a cunning predator that played her cards carefully.

To the north, among jagged cliffs where the wind screamed endlessly, the mountain itself seemed to breathe.

Stone cracked.

A massive reptilian head emerged from between broken peaks, scales the color of storm-dark steel catching the light. Deep blue eyes opened slowly—irritated, ancient, heavy with authority.

Great wings shifted behind him, dislodging snow and rock. A spiked tail scraped lazily against the cliffside, sending avalanches tumbling below.

Around him, smaller shapes stirred—his females—half-awake, restless.

The Emperor of the snowy peaks huffed, smoke curling from his nostrils.

"Damn humans," he growled, voice echoing across the range.

"Always interrupting my sleep."

Southward, where land drowned beneath black water and twisted reeds, the swamp churned.

Something enormous surfaced.

A bloated, titanic form rose from the murk—skin slick, mottled, and glistening with a venomous sheen. Toxic mist rolled endlessly from its body, a living fog that killed birds mid-flight and rotted trees where it lingered.

Its eyes opened—wide, bulging, yellow—and it continued chewing on something large and unrecognizable, bones crunching wetly.

The Gluttonous Poison King paused.

Its gaze drifted north.

"Hmmm," it croaked thoughtfully, tongue sliding back into its maw.

"I wonder how they would taste?"

The fog thickened, and it vanished back into the swamp.

And to the east—

A mountain split between seasons.

Above, life flourished. Warm winds. Bright skies. Singing birds circling flowering trees.

Below, eternal winter. Ice-coated stone. Howling cold. Snow that never melted.

At the peak, where warmth and life were abundant, fire suddenly ignited.

A great avian form lifted her head, flames cascading down vermilion feathers tipped in molten gold. Her eyes burned brighter still—twin suns filled with judgment.

She watched the distant horizon with clear disdain.

"Humans," she scoffed, embers drifting from her beak.

"Destroying nature again. How repulsive."

Her wings flexed once.

The sky shimmered.

None of them moved.

But all of them were watching.

And far below, unaware of the gazes now fixed upon him, Father Pella's axe met the banshee's scream—

and the world continued to tremble.

The banshee struck again.

She vanished.

Reappeared beneath Pella's feet.

Her claws erupted from the ground, death mana tearing upward in a spiraling gouge meant to rip him in half. Pella stepped through the attack instead of away from it—pivoting on his heel, twisting his hips, axe haft snapping downward to pin the claws into the earth before they could fully manifest.

He followed with a short, compact strike—no wasted motion—driving the axe's pommel toward her skull.

She flickered away an instant before impact.

Reappeared above him.

A shriek descended like a guillotine, sound compressed into a killing edge. Pella raised his axe diagonally, braced his stance, and let the scream crash against him. The force hurled him backward through the wall of a nearby building, stone and timber exploding outward.

He rolled once as he landed and rose back immediately.

Armor scratched and cloak torn. But not a scratch on his skin.

The banshee pressed harder.

She blinked in and out of space, attacking from impossible angles—below, behind, within the shadows of collapsing ruins. Death mana lashing out. Sound shockwaves tore through everything around them. Claws seeking Pella's throat.

Pella met it all with a calm confidence.

He fought with the experience of a war-hardened veteran paladin—precise footwork, perfect timing, controlled aggression. Each block was angled, never absorbing force directly. Each deflection redirected power into the ground, into walls, into empty air.

When she flung him into the sky with a concussive shriek, he twisted mid-flight, dug his axe into a bell tower, and used the momentum to swing back toward her—slamming into her with a shoulder charge reinforced by his life mana.

The impact cracked the street beneath them.

They separated in a violent clash—life and undeath colliding in a shockwave that flattened the remaining ruins within fifty meters.

For a moment, they stood still.

Then she lunged again.

Pella was driven through another building, stone collapsing atop him. Dust filled the air.

A heartbeat later, his axe burst through the rubble first—followed by him.

Calm.

Focused.

Practically unharmed.

Every few exchanges, their weapons met fully—life mana against death and sound. Those moments shook the village like thunder, pressure waves ripping outward and staggering even the distant hunters.

Behind him, the other side of the battlefield held the line.

Joe and the elder wraith unleashed spell after spell—bone lances, shrieking curses, waves of despair—but coordinated volleys from the hunters shattered them mid-cast. Arrows pierced their spectral forms. Earth and water spells disrupted summoning circles before they could stabilize.

The undead were being contained.

Bled dry.

Minute by minute.

Hour by hour.

The banshee noticed an abnormality.

She was winning.

And yet—

The human did not grow desperate.

He did not overextend. Did not burn his reserves. Did not change tactics.

He just endured the onslaught.

The realization crept into her mind like festering rot.

Her gaze swept the battlefield—minions falling, wraiths stalled, summoning failing. She could not spare the focus to reinforce them, not with this pest in front of her.

And then it dawned on her.

She wasn't hunting him.

She was being held here.

Her face twisted—skeletal features contorting in ugly fury. Teeth bared. Mana spiked violently around her form.

Pella chuckled.

"Oh," he said lightly, adjusting his grip on the axe.

"So you finally noticed, you filth."

He tilted his head.

"And here I thought you were more retarded than Talmir."

The banshee screamed.

Not a spell, just a pure sonic detonation.

The blast tore through the village like a hurricane, hurling Pella through the air and smashing him into the remains of the guildhall. Stone pulverized. The ground cratered beneath him.

For a moment, there was only silence.

Then—

Life mana flared.

Pella stepped out of the rubble, armor dented, cloak in tatters, but with his breathing still steady.

He raised his axe and blocked the follow-up shriek with a single, immovable stance.

Calm as ever.

Everything was still going according to plan.

—

Joe drifted above the edge of the forest, confidence slowly bleeding back into his movements as he saw his master holding the upper hand.

These hunters were better than the rabble at Ragla—he could feel it—but that realization only irritated him further. Preparation. Discipline. Formation. It didn't matter. Humans always broke in the end. Humans were lesser life forms now.

He gathered death mana carefully again, shaping it into barbed crescents of bone that hovered at his sides. They spun slowly, humming with restrained power.

With a sharp gesture, he sent them screaming toward the fort.

The hunters reacted instantly.

Wind surged upward from the barricade, twisting violently as it caught the incoming constructs and hurled them off course. Fire followed—controlled, precise bursts that detonated the bone crescents mid-air, scattering ash and fragments harmlessly across the hillside.

Joe's hollow eyes widened.

Before he could retreat, a second wave of fire struck, and compressed wind slammed into his side like a battering ram.

He hadn't gone ethereal in time, at least not fully.

The impact hurled him backward. He smashed into a tree with a brutal crack, bark exploding outward as his body embedded itself halfway into the trunk. Joe shrieked, clawing free as pieces of bone and shadow flaked away from his form.

"Persistent little bugs..." he hissed, fury replacing his earlier amusement.

He withdrew immediately, drifting lower and farther back, reassessing the situation.

At the center of the village, the duel worsened.

The banshee fought on—but something was off.

Her attention was divided.

Part of her will pressed relentlessly against Pella, hammering him with shrieking blasts and spatial distortions. The other half flicked outward, monitoring the battlefield, tracking her servants, judging whether they were still holding.

That hesitation—minute, fleeting—did not go unnoticed.

Pella stepped forward this time, into it.

As the banshee reappeared above him, claws descending, Pella shifted his stance with battle-hardened experience. He let the strike glance off his armor, then surged forward instead of back.

The pommel of his axe smashed into her face.

The impact rang like a hammer striking stone.

The banshee reeled, shrieking as her form destabilized for a split second—just long enough.

Pella pivoted, life mana flaring, and brought the axe down in a brutal vertical arc.

Her arm was severed at the shoulder.

The limb dissolved into black vapor before it hit the ground, but the banshee screamed—not in panic or fear, but in raw, unrestrained rage.

Death mana surged violently.

The arm regrew in seconds—jagged at first, twitching and malformed—before stabilizing completely.

She lunged at him again.

Harder and faster this time.

Relentless.

The pressure on Pella intensified immediately, forcing him back step by step as her full focus returned to the duel.

Still, that was exactly what Pella wanted.

The elder wraith stiffened, sensing its master's injury and fury.

Joe felt it too—not triumph or hope—only dread.

She can be hurt.

And if the human survives long enough...

Pella blocked another strike, boots carving trenches into the ground as he slid backward.

Still calm.

Still composed.

The blow hadn't turned the tide.

But it had proven something vital.

She wasn't untouchable.

And the clock was still ticking for the undead.

Joe didn't laugh anymore.

He hovered farther back now, half-shrouded in shadow, watching the fort with narrowed eyes. He slung spell after spell, but the defense was coordinated,

disciplined, and worst of all—adaptable. Every spell he cast was countered, twisted, or dismantled.

Fine.

If brute force alone failed, he would call in friends.

Joe raised his hands slowly, weaving death mana in layered, controlled patterns instead of raw blasts. The air grew heavy as skeletal hands clawed out of the earth—to stall, stop, or maim. To grab ankles. To drag shields down. To break formations.

To support the elder wraith and block the hunters.

At the same time, the elder wraith descended like a living calamity.

Its scream tore across the hill, a wave of distorted sound that slammed into the fortifications. Wood splintered. Men staggered. Several hunters dropped to one knee, blood trickling from ears and noses.

"Hold the line!" Ulmak roared.

"Wind teams, rotate! Earth, reinforce the left!"

They obeyed—but it was hard in the onslaught.

Joe followed up with precise strikes. Bone spikes targeted spellcasters. Death miasma flooded the low ground, forcing constant repositioning. He never overextended, never lingered in one place.

Every mistake he'd made earlier burned sharply in his mind.

Below, the duel escalated.

The banshee also pressed harder than before.

Her movements grew sharper, more feral, her shrieks cutting through space itself. She flickered around Pella in rapid succession—above, behind, beneath—forcing him to block, pivot, retreat.

One claw slipped through.

It raked across his side, tearing armor and flesh alike.

Blood spilled.

For the first time, the watching hunters felt their stomachs drop.

Pella didn't even flinch.

Life mana surged, sealing the wound almost instantly, but the message was clear.

She could hurt him as well.

The battlefield was ruined—collapsed buildings, scorched stone, cratered streets. Each clash sent shockwaves rolling outward, rattling the fort and shaking the forest's edge.

The humans were holding.

Barely.

Then—

The air split suddenly.

A massive golden-white portal tore open above the battlefield, radiating divine pressure so overwhelming that undead across the village froze mid-motion.

Silence fell.

From the light stepped a towering figure in radiant armor, etched with Dawn sigils and various runes. His presence scorched the ground beneath his boots.

Regulus.

Strongest Paladin of Lupos and High General of the army.

The banshee recoiled, her shriek warping into pure fury.

Her plan—layered, meticulous, perfect—had failed.

With a furious gesture, she released all control over the undead. Ghouls surged wildly, mindless now. They split their forces, colliding with hunters and paladins alike. She summoned a final cluster of them around herself and turned to flee.

Pella moved instantly, predicting her retreat.

Life mana erupted outward, forming a massive sphere that slammed shut around them both—cutting off escape, sound, and space itself.

The world outside blurred.

Inside the sphere, Pella met her gaze—calm, unyielding.

"No," he smiled at the banshee. "I insist you stay, the tea will be served shortly."

Chapter 26 - 25 - Like Father, Like Son

Teclos woke to the sound of muffled sobbing.

At first, he thought he was dreaming.

The world swayed beneath him, rocking gently with each step, and for a few heartbeats he couldn't tell whether he was lying down or falling. His body felt distant—heavy, numb—until a sharp jolt of pain surged through his chest and arms, dragging him fully awake.

He sucked in a breath and immediately regretted it.

Agony flared through his ribs, his lungs burning as if glass had been driven into them. His hands throbbed with every heartbeat, wrapped tight in bandages already stiff with dried blood.

Memories followed the pain vividly.

He remembered him slamming into the tree

The claws.

The foul-smelling breath from its mouth, smelling of death and rotten teeth.

The ghoul.

Teclos clenched his jaw and forced the thoughts away. He'd already relived that fight countless times before losing consciousness—every mistake, every arrogant assumption. Every time he closed his eyes now, he saw that exact scene.

When he looked ahead, he was stunned for a second.

It was Kolma.

The village was shrouded in mist—thick, rolling waves of it, as if a storm cloud had sunk down and swallowed the village whole. It churned unnaturally, swirling with visible tension, and along its outer edges frost clung to rooftops and fences, ice creeping across wood and stone alike.

The mist somehow felt... angry.

Teclos didn't know how he knew that.

But he knew who was causing it.

Mother.

They were barely five minutes from the gates.

Around him, the survivors trudged forward in silence. Children cried openly, clinging to parents or staring blankly ahead. Some adults whispered comfort they didn't fully believe themselves. Others walked with hollow eyes, too drained to speak.

Teclos realized he was being carried.

One man only—because there weren't enough left for two.

He shifted weakly, and the man grunted but didn't complain.

A few seconds later they reached the village. Kolma's gates opened as guards spotted them.

Inside the village, Brahm was doing his absolute best not to die.

"Saldia, please," he said, voice calm but strained, palms raised carefully. "I'm sure the hunters sent him back already. They must've noticed him and—"

Water lashed the air.

Her hair floated as if submerged, strands turned stark white, her eyes glowing a glassy blue. Mana pressure radiated from her in waves so intense that villagers were forced to retreat.

Water jets swirled around her, spinning wildly and fast, almost like a cocoon made of icy water.

Furious.

Brahm gulped.

The fury of a mother was terrifying enough.

The fury of a powerful mage mother?

That was something else entirely.

"You either shut up," Saldia said slowly, her voice shaking with barely restrained violence, "or you prove to me that he's okay."

She stepped closer.

"If not, I will rip your beard off and feed it to you."

A pause.

"...Respectfully, Chief."

Brahm took a full step back.

Then Elira stepped forward.

"Saldia," she said gently.

The pressure shifted.

Elira's mana rose—not violently, or forcefully—but vast and steady, like an immovable mountain. The mist recoiled slightly, trembling.

"I know how it feels not knowing if your close ones are alright, believe me," Elira continued. "But standing here threatening everyone will not bring your son back faster."

Saldia's jaw trembled.

"What you can do," Elira said, firm now, "is prepare properly. Go home. Calm yourself. Then come to me. I still have my old hunting gear—you may borrow it."

"But—"

"No buts."

Elira met her gaze without flinching.

"I won't stop you by force. But at least do me the courtesy of preparing correctly. And you will not go alone."

For a long moment, the village held its breath.

Then—

The mist thinned, the swirling water jets threatening to rip someone's arm out by getting close also died off slowly.

Saldia's hair settled. Its color returned. The glow faded from her eyes.

"...Okay," she said quietly. "I'll follow your words, teacher."

She turned and began walking toward her home.

Brahm collapsed to his knees the moment she was gone, exhaling shakily.

"Phew... I thought she'd kill me."

He looked up to thank Elira—

Only to find her staring at him with pure disappointment.

"Wimp," she said flatly, and walked away.

"Hey! Don't say that!" Brahm scrambled after her.

"People! Ahead!"

The shout snapped everyone to attention.

The two guards rushed to the gates, weapons raised—then slowly lowered them as figures emerged from the fog.

Exhausted.

Bloodied.

But alive.

Ragla's survivors.

As they approached, the mist parted around them, receding almost politely. Some of them glanced around nervously.

"What's with the fog?" someone muttered.

Teclos swallowed.

"It's... friendly mist," he said weakly. "Mostly. Just—troublesome for me."

The Ragla villagers didn't question it.

Their faces lit up when they saw Kolma's people—real people, not monsters. Relief crashed over them, and many simply collapsed where they stood.

Brahm stepped forward, greeting them warmly.

Kartall spoke for the group, exhaustion etched deep into his features. Words were exchanged, gratitude shared, grief acknowledged.

Then—

Saldia returned.

She went straight for Kartall.

"Do you know anything about my son?" she demanded.

Kartall blinked, then broke into a wide grin.

"Oh! So you're the boy's mother. No wonder he's got such dashing looks." He laughed. "Yes, we've seen him—and more than that, we brought him with us."

The temperature dropped instantly.

Mana surged again.

Kartall paled as the full weight of Saldia's presence pressed down on him.

"Where," she asked.

Just one word.

Said as calmly as possible.

Kartall stumbled back and pointed.

"There."

Teclos froze.

She marched toward him, fury in every step. Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

Kartall hurried after her. "Wait! He saved us! Don't hurt him—he's badly injured!"

That word was enough to stop Saldia in her tracks.

Her eyes locked onto Teclos—his pale face, his trembling body, the way he couldn't even stand.

The fury shattered, replaced by worry.

She reached him in an instant, her hands gentle beyond belief as water mana lifted him effortlessly into her arms.

She scolded him—harshly, fiercely—but her touch never hurt one bit. She carried him straight toward the church, where one exhausted priest still remained.

No one dared stop her.

—

Afterward, Brahm turned back to the survivors.

"You're welcome to stay," he said. "Guild hall. Tavern. Wherever you want. Warm beds and a proper meal will be prepared for all of you. It's on me."

They stared at him, stunned.

Elira smiled quietly behind his back.

And though she'd called him a wimp only moments before, it was Brahm's warm heart that made her walk just a little closer to him that night.

—

Saldia reached the church in moments.

Water gathered beneath her feet, lifting and carrying her forward in a smooth, controlled glide. Teclos barely shifted in her arms.

The chapel doors burst open.

Inside, a single priest knelt before a towering painting that dominated the far wall.

Praying.

To the Father of Dawn.

The High Sun King Aurelion.

He was depicted as a broad, muscular man, long blond hair flowing down his back, a toga wrapped loosely around his waist. In one hand, he held a radiant sun, its light spilling across the canvas. In the other, a book—symbol of law, order, and judgment.

The priest turned sharply.

"Priest Declaf!" Saldia called.

He took one look at the boy in her arms and was on his feet instantly.

"To the back room."

They moved quickly through the chapel, past shelves of candles and prayer scrolls, until Declaf threw open a door and gestured toward a sturdy wooden table.

"Lay him here. As gently as possible."

Saldia obeyed, lowering Teclos as if he were made of glass.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked, her voice barely holding together.

Declaf met her eyes, calm and steady.

"He will live. That much I can promise."

Her shoulders sagged, just a fraction.

"I have light mana affinity," Declaf continued, already preparing bottles and tools, "so I'll need potions to do most of the work. You're a herbalist—help me."

She hesitated, then nodded.

He knew what he was doing. Giving her something to focus on. Keeping her hands busy so her mind wouldn't spiral.

The last thing he needed was an anxious mother breathing down his neck.

They worked in practiced silence.

Brewing up the concoction made up of somewhat rare materials. Moon bloom resins, sunroot shavings, even the dangerous crimson marrow leaf.

They made no mistakes in the formula.

The potion shimmered faintly when finished—thick, pearlescent, almost alive.

Declaf nodded. "Lift him."

Saldia summoned water again, cradling Teclos just enough to tilt him upright.

Declaf poured the potion into his mouth while pressing a glowing hand to his chest, light mana flowing into him in steady pulses.

At first, the mana moved freely.

Then—

It recoiled.

Darkness surged instinctively from Teclos's core, rejecting the intrusion like a living thing.

Declaf grimaced. "Teclos," he said firmly. "Can you pull your mana away from this area?"

Teclos groaned faintly, but nodded.

With effort—slow, painful effort—the darkness receded. The absence of mana hurt immediately, but light rushed in to replace it, knitting bone, sealing fractures, mending what it could.

The potion did the rest.

Declaf exhaled in relief.

As the glow faded, he glanced at Saldia with a tired smile.

"Like father, like son," he said softly. "Both reckless, it seems."

She snorted, wiping her eyes.

"Tell me about it. Once they recover, they'll receive my anger in full."

Then her voice softened.

"But for now... I just want my baby to heal."

Declaf chuckled quietly. "I assume I should expect your husband soon?"

She stiffened.

"Gods, no. I hope not."

Then she frowned.

"...Though knowing him, it might happen anyway."

Her chest tightened again.

Why did the men in her life have such suicidal tendencies?

—

Brahm took command the moment the gates of Kolma opened.

"Alright, listen up!" his voice rang out, firm but not harsh. "Injured to the left—anyone bleeding, broken, or unable to walk properly. The rest of you, to the right. You'll be fed and given beds at the guild hall."

There was authority in his voice.

People obeyed him instinctively.

The injured were guided toward the church, some supported by guards, others carried on improvised stretchers. The less wounded—shaken, exhausted, but mobile—were ushered deeper into the village, where Kolma's residents were already clearing space and laying down blankets.

"Easy now," Brahm said, crouching beside a trembling man with a torn sleeve. "You're safe here. Eat soup first, then rest."

He rose and turned again, never still.

"Elira," he called, already thinking ahead. "Take one of the herbalists with you. Focus on the heavy cases—stabilize them. I'll ask Declaf to check on them once he's finished in the back room."

Elira nodded without question.

She moved immediately, gathering herbs, bandages, and tools as she went. Another herbalist from Kolma fell in beside her, mirroring her pace.

At the gates, Brahm knelt in front of a cluster of refugee children—mud-streaked, wide-eyed, clinging to one another.

"You're alright now," he said gently. "You can stay here as long as you need."

A small voice trembled. "Are...our parents coming here? Where are they?"

Brahm's mood instantly soured, knowing some of them had lost their parents already but still held on to hope.

He forced a smile, his expression softening.

"Don't worry children, we'll take care of you," he said. "We'll build a new home for you guys if we have to, so that you one day may laugh again."

The children stared at him, disbelief, grief, sorrow. He knew just words weren't enough, but he would do his damn best to make sure those words came true.

Behind him, Elira paused just long enough to watch.

A subtle smile touched her lips—brief, careful, unseen.

This was why she loved him.

She turned away before he could notice and led the wounded into the church.

Inside, the air filled quickly with murmured prayers and the scent of crushed herbs. Elira directed people into side rooms, assigning beds, calming people. She and the other herbalist began working methodically—brewing stabilizing draughts, mixing ointments, applying bandages infused with mild restorative magic.

No time was wasted.

By the time Brahm finally stepped into the church, the chaos had changed into controlled urgency.

He found Elira in the herbal room, grinding ingredients with practiced hands.

He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"Where do you need me?" he asked quietly.

She glanced up at him, eyes tired—but steady.

"Start with carrying supplies," she said. "Then help hold patients still. Some of them are in a lot of pain."

He smiled faintly.

"Got it."

And without another word, the chief of Kolma rolled up his sleeves and went to work beside his wife.

—

The bells at the gate rang again a few hours later.

Two sharp strikes.

Not an alarm—but urgent.

One of the guards on watch stiffened, peering into the thinning mist beyond the road. Faint silhouettes moved in the distance. Armed. Exhausted.

"Stay here!" he barked to his fellow guard, already turning.

He sprinted through the village, boots splashing through puddles and mud, straight for the church. He nearly collided with a pair of villagers at the entrance before pushing inside.

"Chief!" he called out. "Another group is approaching—armed and bearing Ragla's colors!"

Brahm looked up at once.

"Did you make sure?" he demanded.

The guard swallowed. "Yes, they are Ragla's warriors. And yes, they're alive."

Brahm made haste.

Minutes later, the gates of Kolma opened once more.

Torchlight spilled outward as battered figures emerged from the road—men and women leaning on spears, axes, and each other. Armor cracked. Faces pale. But alive.

At their center walked Talmir.

Supported.

Still standing, but pale as a ghost.

A murmur rippled through the village—relief, disbelief, quiet awe.

Brahm stopped at the edge of the road, staring for a long moment.

Then he let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"By the gods..." he muttered, voice low but heavy with feeling.

"At least some luck finally shined on us."

The gates closed behind them.

And under Kolma's watchful fires, all of the survivors were now safe.

Chapter 27 - 26 - Legends of two Eras

As the warriors of Ragla returned.

Brahm looked them over carefully as they passed through the gates—dust-covered, exhausted, but standing. Strangest of all, no visible wounds. No blood. That alone told him something was amiss—but in a good way, as he had expected them to be half dead.

Thomas noticed his expression and gave a tired chuckle.

"You can thank Father Pella for that," he said. "If not for him, we'd be corpses walking."

Brahm raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"So the old man still has some spunk left in him," he muttered. Then his brow furrowed. "Still... a banshee isn't something you brush aside so easily. Not at his age, at least."

His gaze drifted eastward for a moment.

He could only hope reinforcements had arrived in time.

He gathered the warriors and motioned them toward the guild hall. "Rest first. Food and shelter are ready. Some of your people are waiting already."

At the mention of the villagers, something broke.

Several of the hardened warriors faltered, shoulders trembling as the weight they had been carrying finally fell away and hopeful faces reignited among many of them. Tears flowed freely when Brahm confirmed that the people of Ragla had survived.

"They made it?" one of them whispered, disbelief thick in his voice.

"They fought their way here," Brahm replied honestly. "They're safe—but shaken, and some heavily injured."

That urgency snapped the warriors back into motion. Whatever strength they had left, they poured it into reaching the guild hall as quickly as possible.

Before parting ways, Brahm placed a hand on Talmir's shoulder.

"Brace yourself," he said quietly. "Saldia's been... waiting."

Talmir winced.

With a heavy heart—and the sinking certainty of what awaited him—he turned toward the church. Brahm walked alongside him, both men heading back inside. One to help where he could, and the other to get yelled at.

The moment Talmir stepped through the church doors, he saw her.

Saldia.

Her flowing hair, her luscious body, her beautiful eyes... her very, very angry eyes.

She froze for half a heartbeat—then crossed the distance between them in a flash.

Talmir managed a faint smile, exhaustion dragging at his limbs. "I'm sorry," he began. "I couldn't avoid getting hurt again—"

Then a slap echoed through the church.

His head snapped to the side.

Before he could even react, her voice came crashing down on him.

"Do you have any idea what you did?!" she screamed. "Do you ever think before you act?!"

Her words poured out, raw and unfiltered.

She spoke of Teclos—how worried he had been, how he had blamed himself, how he had run from Kolma believing his father was in danger. How leaving a child like that, burdened with guilt and fear, was cruelty no blade could match. How he had broken his promise again.

"You jump headfirst into death every time," she yelled, fists clenched, voice breaking. "Do you ever think about me? About coming home whole—just once?!"

Talmir stood there, silent.

Like a scolded child cornered by a furious parent.

When she finally paused to breathe, he seized the moment. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her despite the ache in his body.

"I'm sorry," he said again, voice hoarse. "I had to. I had to help them."

Her anger shattered.

She pressed her face into his chest, tears soaking into his armor. "I don't care why," she whispered. "I just want you to come back. Not broken or in pieces for once."

He held her tighter.

"I know," he said softly. "I'll try to be better."

After a moment, he added, almost helplessly, "But you know I can't stop myself from helping others."

She didn't answer.

She just held on to this stupid fool of hers.

—

Back on the battlefield, away from the "peaceful" reunion—

As Regulus stepped fully through the portal, the battlefield seemed to recoil.

Golden light mana surged around him—not gentle, nor healing, but scorching like the sun and absolute. It bent the air, warped perception, and made undeath instinctively recoil. Behind him, the army of the Dawn assembled in perfect formation, but Regulus' attention never left the battlefield ahead.

He smelled it immediately.

Undeath.

And besides it—he sensed strong life mana.

Father Pella, the living legend of the Dawn Order, he realized.

The banshee felt his presence as well.

The arrival of Regulus was hope—for the humans, and despair for her.

She screamed—not in panic, but in incandescent rage.

Escape was no longer possible.

So she chose to burn everything she had left.

With a shriek that cracked stone and shattered the remaining windows, she abandoned restraint entirely. Death and sound mana erupted from her form, no longer refined, no longer controlled—raw, violent and overwhelming.

She lunged for Pella, trying to kill him before that other paladin intervened.

Pella reacted quickly, dropping the life-mana sphere that held the banshee inside and braced himself.

He lifted his axe, lowered his stance, and aligned his body toward the ball of fury crashing down on him.

The impact was catastrophic.

Their clash obliterated what little remained of the street, shockwaves tearing outward in all directions. Pella slid backward, boots carving deep trenches through stone as he absorbed the brunt of her assault.

She pressed him as hard and fast as she could.

Her shrieks came in rapid succession now, layered attacks that tore through space itself. Pella blocked, redirected, endured with his body—but the damage was mounting. His armor rang like a bell under each strike.

Then—

She knocked his axe upward with a perfectly timed uppercut of condensed death mana and claws.

His guard opened.

She didn't miss this chance and struck in rapid succession with a descending strike, aimed to sever his arm completely—

At that moment light exploded from afar.

Regulus crossed the distance in an instant.

His form vanished from the portal and reappeared in front of the banshee.

His greatsword crashed into her with the flat of the blade, light mana detonating outward on impact. The blow struck like divine judgment itself, hurling her into the ground with enough force to crater the earth beneath her.

She did not phase in time.

She couldn't, and cracks appeared all over her body.

Pella exhaled sharply, rolling his shoulder.

"Thank you for the consideration, young lad," he muttered. "But I can heal an arm. You should've just finished her off."

Regulus planted his blade and bowed briefly.

"It's an honor to fight beside a legend of the Church."

Pella snorted.

"Save it for later, we have a duty to fulfill."

The banshee rose again.

Broken.

Burning from the lingering light mana.

She screamed again—but pure hatred given sound. Death mana surged wildly as she formed a layered barrier around herself, death and sound interwoven into a shrieking shell.

Regulus vanished in a flash of light again.

His sword came crashing down, enveloped in radiant brilliance, aimed to destroy the unclean one entirely.

The banshee barely raised her barrier in time.

Light collided with death.

And the barrier shattered like glass.

The banshee was flung backward, tearing through rubble, her form destabilizing. She managed to phase through some of the rubble, softening the blow somewhat.

The banshee rose back up, dust falling off of her.

Then she counterattacked right after, unleashing a storm of shrieking blades that tore through the air. Regulus deflected them easily, at blinding speed, each parry was precise. He didn't even move from his spot, his movements almost unreal.

Pella joined the assault.

Life mana flared as he struck low, then high, chaining brutal, experienced blows meant not to overwhelm—but to corner her. He forced her movement, dictated her angles, closed every escape. Making it easy for Regulus to follow up.

The banshee howled as she lashed out wildly, striking at both paladins—but Regulus was faster.

Light flashed.

He appeared at her flank, then behind, then above—each strike hammering her defenses, each blow shaking her form apart.

Together, they were merciless.

She attempted one final shriek—compressing all remaining power she had left—into a single, annihilating scream.

Pella stepped forward and took it head-on, axe raised, life mana flared into the shape of a shield, he absorbed the blast entirely.

Regulus didn't miss his opportunity.

He drove his greatsword straight through her core from behind, radiant sigils igniting along the blade as holy light pinned her in place.

The banshee convulsed, and her form was beginning to unravel, death mana tearing itself apart under the assault of life and light.

Pella raised his axe one final time.

"Disappear from this world, filth," he said calmly.

Then the axe fell.

Life mana detonated outward, erasing the banshee completely—nothing remained, not even ash.

Only silence.

Across the battlefield, the tide turned instantly with her death.

The army surged forward.

The elder wraith attempted to intercept, shrieking as it dove toward the priests—but it barely lasted seconds. A light-mana barrier snapped shut around it, trapping it in place, and coordinated bombardment reduced it to nothing more than scattered remnants.

Ghouls were cut down.

Zombies purified.

Undeath burned away beneath steel and prayers.

Only one lone wraith managed to flee.

Joe.

He felt his master fall—and terror seized him.

He hurled a desperate storm of bone spikes toward the hunters, buying himself precious seconds, then plunged into the earth, fleeing north toward the mountains.

Coward until the end.

After he left, the battlefield soon fell silent.

The undead were gone.

"Clean up the filth, and purify the corpses!"

Regulus raised his hand once, and the army moved.

Paladins and clerics advanced in disciplined lines, boots crunching over broken stone and blackened earth. Light mana flared in controlled pulses as purification teams swept the ruins—they were methodical, and thorough. Any corpse that twitched was reduced to ash. Any lingering miasma was burned away until the air itself felt lighter.

Orders rang out, crisp and practiced.

"Third cohort, sweep the eastern quarter! Clerics seal the corruption!"

"Leave no remnants behind!"

Regulus stood at the center of it all, blade grounded before him, helm tucked beneath his arm. One by one, captains approached and knelt.

"Sir. All ghouls neutralized. No undead activity remaining within the village perimeter."

"Sir. The elder wraith has been fully purified. No chance of reconstitution."

"Sir. Casualties minimal. No losses among the Dawn Knights. Injuries treated and stabilized."

Regulus nodded at each report, expression unreadable.

"Well done," he said calmly. "Begin withdrawal. Secure the perimeter until all units are accounted for, then return back through the portal."

"Yes, sir!"

He turned slightly, voice carrying across the ranks.

"Maintain formation. Remain alert. We depart in five."

The soldiers obeyed without question.

As they moved to regroup, Regulus' gaze drifted back to the ruined center of the village—where Father Pella stood amid the hunters of Kolma and Ragla.

There was no formation there.

No rigid discipline.

But there was respect.

Pella leaned on his axe as the hunters gathered around him—tired, battered, soot-stained, but standing. He looked over them slowly.

"All right," he said gruffly. "Report."

Ulmak stepped forward first.

"No dead among us," he said. "Several wounded—mostly minor injuries. Nothing serious, sir."

Another hunter followed.

"Undead fully destroyed in our sector. Ghouls didn't coordinate once their master fell."

A third and a fourth hunter spoke up, giving their own report.

Pella nodded at each one of them, listening carefully.

"And?" he prompted.

Ulmak hesitated, then exhaled.

"One wraith escaped."

The air seemed to tighten.

"Toward the northern mountains," Ulmak continued quickly. "It used bone-spike rain as cover—forced us to take shelter. We had no way to pursue without exposing the wounded."

Silence fell.

Pella's grip tightened on his axe.

Not at Ulmak but at the thought that one got away.

"That shit stain," he growled. "Persistent as rot."

Ulmak straightened.

"We did everything by the plan. Exactly as you laid it out, Father."

"I know," Pella said, his anger slowly cooling down. Then he looked at everyone. "You did well, boys. Better than I expected."

A few of them exchanged glances, surprised.

"You held the undead here, and kept this plague from spreading" Pella continued.
"You adapted. You trusted each other."

One of the younger hunters spoke up, voice earnest.

"I've learned more in this battle than in years of training."

Tolk nodded.

"Your foresight saved us. Every step of the way, sir."

Pella snorted.

"It's just experience," he muttered. "And a healthy dislike of dying."

Then Regulus approached.

The hunters instinctively straightened—but Pella waved them off.

Regulus stopped a few paces away and bowed deeply.

"It was an honor," he said sincerely, "to fight beside the war hero of the Dawn Church."

Pella grimaced.

"Don't start."

Regulus smiled faintly but continued.

"Your control of the battlefield... your prowess... I've read the accounts. They don't do you justice."

Pella stepped forward and clapped a heavy hand onto Regulus' shoulder.

"Well," he said gruffly, "if you're the future High Paladin, then the Church might just survive its own arrogance."

Regulus blinked—then laughed quietly.

"I'll take that as praise."

"Please do," Pella replied.

They stood there for a moment longer—two eras of the Dawn side by side—while the last traces of undeath were erased from the world.

Chapter 28 - 27 - Reforged

The army did not linger much longer after the job was done.

Golden light still clung faintly to the torn earth as Regulus turned back toward the waiting portal. He paused only once, meeting Father Pella's gaze again across the ruined village.

Regulus placed a fist over his chest—a salute of the Dawn Church—and nodded.

Pella inclined his head in return. Nothing ceremonial, nothing grand.

Just understanding and pride that came from fulfilling their duty.

With crisp, practiced efficiency, Regulus barked his final orders. The paladins moved as one, forming ranks like a well-oiled machine of war, armor gleaming even through grime and battle scars. Priests followed, chanting softly as the portal widened again.

As the last soldier stepped through, the light folded inward and vanished.

Silence returned.

Pella watched the empty space for a long moment before exhaling.

"...There might still be hope for the Church after all," he muttered.

Then he turned back toward the hunters.

"All right," he called out, his voice carrying easily. "Everyone, form up and let's head home."

They obeyed as usual, falling into lines of two. They were tired, battered, but alive, with smiles on their faces.

When they arrived, the village greeted them with relief bordering on disbelief—happy that no one had been badly hurt.

Brahm ordered a general check-up. Everyone looked exhausted and hungry, except Father Pella, who still appeared much the same as when he had left, aside from a few dents in his armor and a ripped cloak.

He went back home to change into his usual robes of the Dawn Church and help the injured.

Teclos was lying in the church when Saldia arrived again that evening.

She didn't speak at first. She simply sat beside him, her fingers lightly brushing his sleeve, as if reassuring herself that he was still there.

"...You scared me," she said finally, her voice quiet but heavy.

Teclos swallowed. "I know." By now, this had almost become a routine—him apologizing, Saldia fussing over him the whole day.

"You ran away," she continued. "You ran without telling anyone. Do you know what that does to a mother?"

"I didn't want you to stop me," he admitted. "And I didn't want you scared."

She laughed softly—broken, tired. "Oh, my poor idiot son. You think not knowing scares me less?"

She leaned forward and pressed her forehead to his.

"Don't ever disappear like that again," she said, wearing an eerie smile.

"I won't," he said quickly. "I promise."

'Who is scaring whom?' he thought.

She studied him for a long moment, then sighed. "Just like your father, you only give me gray hair... you're grounded."

Teclos blinked. "...I almost died."

"Yes," she replied calmly. "Which is exactly why you're grounded."

He despaired at the punishment. With no real entertainment in this world, being grounded was brutal for him. He still remembered not doing his homework and being grounded back then... those were the best days—he would just play games on his computer as punishment.

Of course, now that he thought about it, that was also the reason he couldn't find a better job than that damn factory.

The next morning, Talmir came by briefly as well.

He had returned home the same day the warriors did, thanks to Pella overdoing it with his high-level healing. He only needed rest and food to recover... as well as some dotting from his wife—but that would have to wait, as she was still mad.

Talmir leaned against the wall, arms crossed, studying Teclos like he was inspecting a blade for cracks.

Seeing that he was generally in good shape and not depressed, he finally spoke.

"...You did good."

Teclos frowned. "That's it?"

Talmir snorted. "You want more praise? You'll get it when you understand what you did wrong—and stop injuring yourself if you do it again."

'Coming from you, that's quite ironic,' Teclos thought.

Then, more quietly, "Still... you did well enough. Better than I expected, actually, and I'm proud of you for standing up for those people, son."

Teclos smiled faintly. "Thanks, that... means a lot."

Talmir nodded once. "Rest. We'll talk about training later, once we know what Father Pella allows us to do given your injuries."

Later that afternoon, Ralph and Gillard appeared at the church doorway as well.

"Oi," Ralph said. "You still alive?"

Teclos smirked weakly. "Unfortunately."

Gillard pulled up a chair. "Good. Then we can get an explanation from the man himself."

Teclos hesitated, then talked.

About fear. About guilt. About feeling small when people depended on him.

"I keep replaying it," he admitted. "Every mistake. Every second I hesitated."

He told them everything.

The successful ambush.

The fear of almost dying.

The moment he realized he couldn't win.

How helpless he felt in the face of the ghoul's raw power—and how the very people who depended on him ended up protecting him instead.

Ralph crossed his arms. "You're alive, aren't you?"

"That's not the point."

"It is, you dumbass," Ralph snapped. "Dead heroes don't save anyone. Besides, you killed two ghouls, didn't you? How many twelve-year-olds can brag about that, huh?!"

Gillard leaned forward, his voice calmer. "You didn't fail anyone. You survived and made it back. If you had died, then the story would be different."

"...Still," Teclos said quietly, staring at his hands, "I keep thinking... if I was stronger, faster, smarter—maybe none of it would've happened."

Silence stretched.

"...And," he added hesitantly, "...I know my parents have my back now. I just—"

He swallowed.

"I was wondering if you two still did as well?"

Teclos looked away. "With all the rumors... I thought maybe you'd think less of me."

Ralph stood abruptly. "Say that again, you punk!"

Teclos flinched.

Ralph raised his fist toward Teclos's gut—

—and Gillard caught it mid-air.

"Don't," Gillard said flatly. "He's still hurt. We can beat him up later, man."

Ralph exhaled sharply, then flicked Teclos's forehead instead.

"Is that all the faith you have in us as friends?" he said. "All right, then let me tell you this directly to your stupid face, so that you might finally get it through that thick skull of yours. We're friends, and we'll always have your back."

Gillard nodded. "And Ragla's people are singing your praises, by the way. They don't blame you at all."

"Thanks." He felt more than a tiny bit relieved at that. Then he realized what Gillard said, and he turned his head in disbelief. "What?"

"Yeah," Gillard continued. "Some trader named Kortull—or something like that—and an old man named Pete. They shut down anyone talking trash and told everyone what you did."

Ralph grinned. "We just wanted to hear it from you ourselves. You've got fans now. Shame you're such a gloomy goblin—we were expecting an epic fight story, not a sob tale."

Teclos laughed weakly, warmth settling in his chest.

"We'll grab some freshly baked bread from the festival," Ralph said. "Stay alive in the meantime, princess."

When they left, Teclos stared at the ceiling.

Just like with his parents, his friends also had his back.

After that, two weeks passed and Teclos recovered.

Healing was slow. They only fed him potions, and even Father Pella refused to fully heal him, always saying he would explain later.

Still, it was never boring, because Saldia visited daily, fussing constantly.

"Drink this." She handed him a green-colored potion.

"I already did, just an hour ago, Mom."

"Drink it again."

"It tastes awful."

"Good. That means it's working. I will get you some more."

He drank it and recoiled. It tasted like cow piss—but he kept that thought to himself unless he wanted another lecture.

Before leaving the church, Father Pella performed one final checkup and explained that Teclos should only do light workouts for at least a week or two.

When Teclos was finally cleared to leave, people greeted him openly—Kolma and Ragla alike.

Just before reaching home, Loric greeted him as well. It was barely a greeting: a quick nod and wave before running off. Still, it shocked Teclos enough that he froze in place.

At home, Saldia hugged him tightly.

"No lectures this time?" Teclos asked cautiously.

She shook her head. "Not today. Tomorrow is another matter."

Talmir ruffled his hair. "Proud of you—for surviving her potions," he whispered. "They're great for mana flow and regeneration... shame they taste like piss."

Saldia cleared her throat. "Did you say something about my potions, dear? Maybe you want to drink some?"

"N-no, honey. My mana is perfectly fine already," Talmir said quickly, and retreated.

Dinner was loud, warm, and full of laughter.

Eventually, Talmir got serious and asked,

"So... what did Pella say about training?"

"Light training only," Teclos answered.

"What kind? Never mind," Talmir nodded. "We'll test your limits tomorrow."

"Tomorrow he's mine," Saldia said, crossing her arms.

"...Mother—"

"No objections."

Teclos looked to Talmir for help, but his father only shook his head.

They compromised on the day after.

That day, Teclos was exhausted after a full day of chores with his mother—market trips, herbs, cleaning, studying—had drained him more than physical training ever did.

"Trust me when I say it was good you spent yesterday with your mother, even if you're tired now," Talmir said. "Anyway, let's start with a light jog to the waterfall."

"I know." He didn't need to see her anger anymore to understand.

Teclos ran. Slow and careful, so that he wouldn't hurt himself again.

Near the waterfall, Talmir stopped him. "How do you feel? Any pain?"

"No... actually, I feel like I have more stamina."

"Yeah," Talmir said dryly. "That'd be the cow piss. It's effective, if nothing else."

He pointed to a rock near the water. "Sit. Let's do some mana training."

Teclos did.

It hurt—but not the way he expected.

His mana flow felt larger and stronger somehow. So much so that his body needed to adapt to this flow.

"...What?" Teclos muttered.

Talmir smiled knowingly.

"Your body grew through the experience," he said. "It remembers what it lacked during the fight. That's why the priests—and Pella—didn't fully heal you. So your young body could grow."

It finally dawned on Teclos.

That was what Pella had meant to explain.

The sound of the waterfall filled the clearing, steady and relentless.

"Good," Talmir said after watching Teclos for a few hours. "Your mana is stable again."

Teclos opened his eyes slowly, sweat running down his temples. "It feels... different. Like it flows better, and that I have more mana than usual."

"That's because it's true," Talmir replied. "Your mana veins expanded, and the mana flow to your body is bigger and more stable."

He motioned for Teclos to stand. "All right. Let's see how just your body holds up now."

The exercises were simple—deliberately so.

Short sprints between marked stones, never long enough to strain. Controlled push-ups, stopping the moment Teclos's breathing faltered. Balance drills on wet rock near the riverbank, forcing him to stabilize both his body and coordination.

Whenever Teclos grimaced, Talmir stopped him immediately.

He warned, "Discomfort is fine, but pain means you're pushing yourself too much."

They tested reflexes and stances next—light sparring motions without impact. Talmir guided Teclos's arms, correcting posture, adjusting foot placement with taps from his staff.

"You rely too much on your instinct," Talmir said. "It's good, but you also need proper technique."

Teclos nodded, taking the lessons in.

They finished with breathing exercises beneath the waterfall's edge—not directly under it, but close enough that the spray chilled his skin.

"Control your breathing. Keep a steady rhythm."

Teclos clenched his teeth, then slowly relaxed.

With the overall check-up done, Talmir was satisfied and ended the training.
"That's enough for today."

On the walk back home, they chatted a bit.

"You were close," Talmir said suddenly.

Teclos looked up. "To dying?"

"To winning," Talmir corrected. "You recognized the danger. You adapted well. You just lacked the experience and technique to pull through."

Teclos frowned. "I feel like I should have waited, and found that ghoul first, from stealth, I mean."

"Yes," Talmir agreed. "See, experience. Next time you won't be doing that again, right?"

They walked in silence for a moment before Talmir continued.

"We'll proceed like this: light training for another week. Endurance mostly and reflexes."

"And after that?"

Talmir smiled faintly. "Then we build you up properly. We'll turn you into the best hunter this village has ever seen, and measly ghouls won't be able to touch you anymore."

Teclos nodded slowly, committing the words to memory.

Before they reached home, Talmir stopped him.

"One more thing," he said. "You don't need to dominate every enemy."

Teclos blinked in confusion.

"What you need right now is survival skills," Talmir finished. "So to simplify your training, we are going to strengthen your mental fortitude, reflexes, footwork, defense, and evasion."

—

That night, Teclos lay in bed, staring at the ceiling.

He replayed the fight with the ghouls again, this time with a clearer mind thanks to Talmir. His thoughts about being useless didn't crush him this time, but instead helped him look at the situation objectively.

He saw where he hesitated. Where he could've pushed once more. Where his fear stole his momentum and froze him in place.

It had been close, actually.

Not a frontal assault, but a dodge here, a slip there, and he could have won against a single ghoul.

Next time, he wouldn't freeze.

Next time, he wouldn't complain about the training.

He promised himself.

With that vow burning quietly in his chest, Teclos finally drifted into sleep.

Chapter 29 - 28 - Eager to Show Off

One morning, while it was still dark outside, Teclos woke up.

He lay there for a few seconds, staring at the faint outline of the ceiling, listening to the quiet of the house. He was like a half-dead zombie right now, barely alive and suppressing a groan.

Waking up was one thing—convincing his body to actually move was another. His muscles protested softly, remnants of yesterday's training still lingering in dull aches along his shoulders and back.

With a slow exhale, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

"Up you go," he muttered to himself. "No excuses."

Early spring clung to the world outside. It was still dark outside, but at least the lifeless and harsh dark of winter was gone. Snow had only recently thawed, leaving the ground damp and muddy. The air carried a strange in-between scent—cold and warmth mixed together, forming a fresh morning and a warm day.

Trees swayed gently beneath a quiet breeze, bare branches whispering secrets to one another. Birds still slept, tucked away in nests, unaware that dawn was already creeping closer.

It felt... almost sacred.

Teclos rose and stretched, joints popping softly, then moved through his morning routine. Washing his face in a basin near his bed. Yawning and stretching. By now it was automatic, waking up so early—so familiar it reminded him of his previous life, of mornings shaped by that noisy old clock he had since school days, obligation to work and a bland routine. Almost like having a job again, he mused faintly. Only the coffee was missing.

He crossed the room to where his gear rested neatly, always prepared the night before.

For his birthday, Talmir had given him a chest—solid oak reinforced with iron bands. Inside had been his first real armor: fitted leather, dark brown and well-oiled, reinforced at the chest and shoulders, flexible enough not to restrict movement but sturdy enough to take a blow. The belt that came with it was wide and practical, fitted with loops and small pouches, worn smooth in places from constant use.

He dressed carefully, buckling each strap with practiced hands.

The practice sword came next—a wooden blade, weighted properly, its grip wrapped in leather that had molded to his palm over countless hours of drills. Not a real weapon, but more than enough for sparring, for forms, for learning how to move and breathe in combat. He slid it into place, then checked his throwing daggers—also wooden, balanced well enough to punish poor technique but forgiving enough to train with daily.

Two years.

A little more than two years had passed since the ghoulish incident already.

Teclos was fourteen now, standing on the edge of adolescence. Hormones still proved to be a restless problem beneath the surface, but his mind—older,

tempered—could finally keep them mostly in check now. The emotional storms that once plagued him came less often now, and when they did, they passed quicker.

Now he could act like more of an adult again, without losing himself in his emotions like before.

His days had been filled with training, sparring, and learning now. Only coming home when there was time to eat.

He fought Talmir, Kosak, and Tolk almost daily. Of course, he lost every time—but losses felt different now. Against Tolk, he could last three full minutes before being overwhelmed. Three minutes that two years ago would have been unthinkable.

Knowing what he knew now—that Kolma's hunters were far from normal—made that achievement feel even better. Holding his ground against one of them, even briefly, was something to be proud of.

Kosak and Talmir were still leagues above him. If they fought seriously, the bout ended in seconds. But they rarely did. They held back, corrected him, forced him to think rather than simply react.

And Teclos learned.

Herbs and mixtures. Tracking and hunting. How to read terrain. How to fight opponents stronger than himself. His body had filled out more, muscle forming where there had once been only lean youth. His reflexes sharpened. His mana control steadied.

And still—he never grew arrogant again.

He knew better now.

These hunters were strong, yes. But they were not the strongest beings in the world. Not even close. Talmir had told him as much—promised, even—that sometime after his coming-of-age ceremony, once he became a hunter, he would introduce Teclos to a monster that was... friendly toward humans.

That thought alone kept his curiosity burning.

But today wasn't about monsters.

Today was different.

Today, he finally got to show Gillard and Ralph the results of his training.

The first time they would spar and train together.

Ralph had already made sure to complain—loudly—that it wasn't fair Teclos got to spar with adults while leaving them "out of the picture."

A faint smile tugged at Teclos's lips as he strapped on the last piece of his gear.

He picked up his practice sword and secured his throwing daggers, feeling their familiar weight settle against him.

"Alright," he murmured, standing tall.

Today, he'd finally shut Ralph up.

Teclos left his room quietly, closing the door behind him with silent care. The house was still asleep, wrapped in that fragile stillness that existed only before dawn fully claimed the sky.

He moved into the kitchen.

The kettle was filled, placed over the hearth, and coaxed to life. As the water began to heat, Teclos reached for the dried leaves Talmir favored—earthy, slightly bitter, with a calming aftertaste. He measured them carefully, dividing them between two cups. One for himself. One for his father.

Steam slowly curled upward, fogging the cool air. The faint scent of herbs spread through the room, calming and familiar.

Just as he poured the water and set the cups aside to steep, he heard footsteps.

Talmir entered the kitchen, already dressed for the day, hair still slightly disheveled from sleep. He paused when he saw Teclos standing there, hands wrapped loosely around his own cup.

A smile spread across his face.

"Morning," Talmir said, voice low but warm. He stretched once, joints popping audibly. "How is it that you're always the first one up?"

He shook his head with a faint chuckle.

"You never oversleep. Not once. When I was your age, my mother had to drag me out of bed by the ear."

Teclos shrugged, lifting his cup and taking a small sip. The tea was hot and calming.

"I just am," he replied simply.

Internally, he smirked.

'You're a few years too early to beat a factory worker at waking up,' he thought.

Decades of early shifts had carved that habit deep into his bones—something even reincarnation hadn't managed to erase yet.

Talmir took his own cup and leaned against the table, blowing lightly across the surface before drinking.

They stood there for a moment, sharing the quiet peace. The world outside was beginning to stir—animals were waking, the sun was starting to crest the horizon.

After a few sips, Talmir spoke again.

"Today's training will be a bit different," he said casually.

Teclos looked up.

"No mana," Talmir continued. "Just body work. Sprints. Bodyweight exercises. And sparring."

Teclos frowned immediately.

"What?" he said, a hint of protest creeping into his voice. "I wanted to show Gillard and Ralph my mana control today."

Talmir laughed, a deep, easy sound.

"Show off?" he teased. "You already have an unfair advantage over them."

Teclos opened his mouth to argue, but Talmir continued.

"Four circles," he said, tapping the table lightly for emphasis. "And that fourth one you formed in your core—your abdomen—strengthened your body far more than your mana."

He took another sip of tea, eyes serious.

"Given where you formed it, shouldn't brute force come easier than mana to you? Also, you trained with three hunters—they haven't. Show some class at least."

Teclos fell silent.

He knew it was true.

Still... he frowned faintly, staring into his cup.

Gillard had three circles, yes—but two of them were also in the core. When it came to raw physical power, Teclos wasn't overwhelmingly stronger than him. Not yet, at least. The difference wasn't as wide as Talmir made it sound.

What truly set him apart from both Ralph and Gillard was elsewhere.

His mind circle.

His sensory field enhancement.

That was where he surpassed both of them—clarity, perception, awareness. The ability to read the opponent's actions with the subtle movement of their muscles.

He exhaled softly.

"...Yeah," Teclos admitted at last. "Alright."

The conversation died down after that.

They drank their tea in companionable silence, the warmth spreading through Teclos's chest, preparing him for the day ahead. When the cups were empty, they set them down on the table, side by side.

Talmir straightened and rolled his shoulders.

"Alright," he said. "Shall we go?"

Teclos nodded, already reaching for the door.

"Yeah," he replied. "Some of them could be waiting for us already."

They stepped outside together, the cool early spring air brushing against their faces, and headed toward the gates—toward the others, and the day that awaited them.

As they reached the gates, the familiar shapes of two boys were already waiting for them.

Ralph stood with his arms crossed, shifting his weight from foot to foot, while Gillard leaned casually against the gates, eyes half-lidded as if conserving energy. Off to the side, unmistakable even at a glance, was Tolk—relaxed posture, confident stance, and that ever-present, infuriating smirk carved onto his face.

Teclos frowned immediately after seeing him.

"Well, well," Tolk said as they approached, straightening slightly. His gaze slid to Teclos with open amusement. "Ready to lose again today?"

Teclos felt his jaw tighten instinctively.

He ground his teeth, then shot back, voice light but edged with promise.

"One day, I'm going to erase that smirk off your face."

Tolk laughed, clearly enjoying himself. "I have a hunch it won't be today, so I'll be waiting."

Talmir cleared his throat, drawing their attention back to him. He glanced around the small gathering, counting heads.

"Where's Kosak?" he asked.

Ralph and Gillard exchanged a look, then shrugged almost in unison.

"No idea," Ralph said.

"Haven't seen him," Gillard added.

Talmir sighed deeply and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"That sloth..." he muttered.

He straightened and addressed the group.

"If Kosak doesn't show up in five minutes, we leave without him."

Neither surprise nor protest followed. This clearly wasn't the first time.

Ralph and Gillard stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

"Thank you for letting us train with you," Gillard said earnestly.

"Yeah," Ralph added quickly. "We won't waste the chance."

Talmir waved them off with one hand.

"It's no trouble. Don't make it sound so serious."

The tension eased after that. They fell into small talk—Ralph complaining about waking up early, Gillard asking Teclos about his gear, Tolk tossing in the occasional jab at Teclos, just to stir things up.

Five minutes quickly passed.

Kosak did not appear.

Talmir glanced once more down the road, then shook his head.

"Alright. Let's head out. Can't wait on him forever."

He turned and clapped his hands once.

"Line up at the front of the gate, I'll go get our training gear for today."

They formed a line without delay and waited for him.

Talmir stepped into the nearby guard station and emerged moments later carrying several heavy sand sacks, thick canvas reinforced with leather straps sewn along the sides.

He greeted the guard casually as he passed, then began handing the sacks out—one to Teclos, one to Tolk, one to Gillard, and finally one to Ralph.

"Put them on," Talmir said evenly. "It's time for a run."

The weight was hefty.

It wasn't unbearable—but would be quite noticeable during the run. Every step suddenly demanded more focus.

The sack settled heavily across Teclos's shoulders, the straps biting slightly into his armor as gravity tried to pull him down.

Ralph, on the other hand, staggered half a step as he adjusted his straps.

"By the gods—!" he hissed, legs trembling slightly as he straightened.

Tolk rolled his shoulders once and was unfazed. Teclos adjusted his stance and tested his balance, finding it manageable.

Gillard said nothing, but his jaw tightened subtly as he settled the load.

Teclos glanced at Ralph and grinned.

"Careful," he said. "Wouldn't want you collapsing before we even start."

Ralph shot him a glare.

"Laugh while you can. If you trip once, I'm not helping you back up."

Despite the words, his tone was light.

Tolk just laughed. "Like you were any different at the start."

Teclos coughed and looked away.

Meanwhile, Gillard exhaled slowly, steadying his breathing. Outwardly, he looked calm—but inside, concern was brewing in his mind. The sack was heavier than he'd expected. He doubted whether he could pull through.

Talmir watched them quietly, arms crossed, expression unreadable.

Once they were done, he spoke up.

"Check your straps again so the sacks can't fall, then we'll move. I'll set the pace, so keep up."

And with that, the training began.

Chapter 30 - 29 - That's a Warm-Up?

They ran northbound, away from the gates and toward a clearing above the waterfall, boots thudding against packed earth and scattered stone.

The road narrowed quickly, giving way to a winding forest path where early spring clung stubbornly to the land. Meltwater trickled through shallow grooves, and the air carried the damp, clean scent of thawing soil and pine sap. Branches swayed overhead, their buds only just beginning to swell, and the ground was soft enough to punish careless steps.

Talmir ran just behind them.

Close enough that none of them could forget he was there.

"Keep the pace," he called out evenly. "Don't shorten your stride."

They ran in a loose line, stretched out by differences in pace and endurance. There was no rhythm to it, no attempt at unity—only forward momentum.

Ralph was at the rear.

He was struggling.

His face had gone red within minutes, sweat pouring down his temples and soaking into his collar. Each breath came in loud, ragged pulls that scraped his throat raw. His shoulders sagged under the weight of the sand sack, legs burning as he forced one foot ahead of the other.

"Bloody... damn... sack..." he muttered between gasps.

More than once, a curse escaped him—aimed at the road, the forest, Talmir, and especially the smug figures ahead. But for all his misery, he didn't slow down.

Not even a little.

His jaw was clenched tight, eyes locked forward.

If he had to collapse, he would collapse running.

There was no way he was giving Teclos the satisfaction of seeing him quit.

Ahead of him ran Gillard.

At a glance, he looked composed. His expression was calm, lips pressed into a thin line, eyes focused on the path ahead. He didn't curse or complain.

But the illusion broke the moment one looked closer.

His breathing was heavy and uneven, chest rising and falling in sharp pulls that fought for air. Sweat poured off him in sheets, darkening his clothes and dripping from his chin. His pace had slowed slightly—just enough to conserve what little he could.

The sack dug into his shoulders with every step.

He endured it silently.

A few strides ahead of Gillard was Teclos.

He was sweating now too, dark strands of hair clinging to his forehead as his breath grew harsher. His legs burned, muscles screaming in protest as he pushed harder, trying—futilely—to close the distance ahead of him.

"Damn it..." he growled under his breath.

His eyes were fixed on Tolk's back.

Just a little closer.

Just once.

But no matter how much he strained, the gap refused to shrink.

At the front ran Tolk.

And he looked infuriatingly comfortable.

His pace was steady, almost relaxed, arms swinging loosely at his sides. His breathing remained even, his posture upright. Not a single bead of sweat marred his forehead yet.

He glanced back over his shoulder with a wide grin.

"Just a few more steps and you've got me!" he called cheerfully.

Teclos snarled in response.

Tolk laughed.

Another glance back.

"Already out of stamina?"

Teclos bit back a curse and forced his legs to keep moving.

Talmir, meanwhile, watched it all.

He simply stayed behind them, a heavy presence and unyielding steps, daring anyone to stop.

Time stretched. Muscles screamed. Breath burned.

Then, at last, the forest opened slightly.

They emerged onto a raised ledge overlooking the river, water rushing far below as sunlight filtered through thinning branches. The ground leveled out, wide enough for erratic movement, and scarred by old training marks worn into the earth.

Talmir finally slowed down.

The others followed—some stumbling, some steady, all breathing hard.

They had arrived.

The warm-up was over.

The real training was about to begin.

They dropped the sand sacks where they stood.

Ralph didn't even bother staying upright—he staggered two steps forward and collapsed flat onto his back, chest heaving violently as he dragged air into his lungs. His face was flushed deep red, sweat soaking through his clothes as if he'd been dunked in the river.

Gillard lowered himself more carefully, sitting on his sack with his elbows resting on his knees. His expression was unreadable, calm on the surface, though the steady rise and fall of his chest betrayed how hard the run had been.

Teclos let his sack fall and immediately cursed under his breath, bending forward with his hands on his knees.

"Damn it..."

Tolk, meanwhile, laughed openly.

"Careful there," he said, clapping Teclos on the shoulder. "Wouldn't want you to pass out before we even start."

Teclos shot him a glare sharp enough to cut.

Before he could respond—

"Silence."

Talmir's voice cracked through the clearing like a snapped whip.

Teclos and Tolk snapped to attention instantly, backs straight, eyes forward.

A heartbeat later, Gillard pushed himself up and followed suit, mirroring their posture as best he could.

Ralph remained on the ground.

"W-wait..." he panted, lifting one hand weakly. "Just... give me a—"

Talmir stepped forward, grabbed Ralph by the front of his tunic, and hauled him upright in one smooth, brutal motion. Before Ralph could protest further, Talmir deposited him beside the others and stepped back.

"There is no pause," Talmir said flatly. "And if I hear another complaint, I'll introduce you to punishment drills you'll remember for the rest of your life."

Ralph swallowed hard and stayed silent.

Grumbling under his breath, he straightened and forced himself to stand at attention, shoulders trembling, lungs still burning.

Talmir paced in front of them, assessing each one.

"Today," he began, "we will train the body. The only rule I'll set is that the usage of mana is not allowed."

He gestured toward the open ground.

"You'll start with sprints. Then bodyweight exercises. Push-ups. Squats. Lunges. Planks. Bear crawls. Mountain climbs. Burpees until your arms and legs stop listening to you."

Ralph's face drained of color.

He stared at Talmir as if the man had just announced a death sentence.

'They're insane,' he thought.

Beside him, Gillard felt much the same—but unlike Ralph, he kept his expression carefully neutral, eyes forward, jaw set.

Talmir wasn't finished.

"You'll move from one set to the next with no more than a minute of pause. If someone collapses, they get extra sets as punishment."

Tolk's grin widened.

Teclos's eyes lit up with a spark.

Competition flared between them instantly—silent and sharp.

Gillard noticed it from the start.

He glanced sideways at Ralph, who met his look with a tired, knowing expression.

It was becoming clear now.

Whether it had been Talmir or Kosak who planned it didn't matter—but Tolk was here for a reason. A living, breathing provocation for Teclos. A moving goalpost meant to drag him forward by his sheer stubbornness and pride.

And it was working.

"Positions," Talmir ordered.

They dropped to the ground.

The first set began.

And then another.

And another.

Time blurred.

Their arms shook, legs burned, and lungs almost gave out. Sweat soaked into the dirt beneath them as minutes stretched into hours. The brief rests between sets felt like cruel jokes—just long enough to barely pick themselves back up.

Two hours passed like that.

A slow, grinding torture of will.

By the end of it, none of them were thinking about pride, or competition, or even victory anymore.

They were thinking only about enduring this torture.

When it was finally over, Talmir raised his hand.

"Enough."

The word might as well have been a release spell.

Almost everyone collapsed where they stood.

Ralph dropped first, knees buckling as he slumped onto the ground, arms splayed out, chest rising and falling like a bellows on the verge of tearing itself apart.

Gillard followed him a second later, lowering himself to one knee before giving up and falling down on his ass heavily, head bowed in defeat.

Teclos tried to stay up, but his legs quit on him. He caught himself with his hands, then rolled onto his back, staring up at the canopy as his vision swam.

Only Tolk remained standing.

Barely.

He was bent forward with both hands braced on his knees, shoulders rising sharply with each breath. Sweat finally streamed down his face in earnest, dripping from his chin onto the dirt below.

Talmir designed a workout that would work on everyone.

He moved through them one by one, singling each out—correcting posture, barking commands, forcing extra repetitions where form had slipped. Even Tolk wasn't spared; Talmir stopped in front of him, pointed at the ground, and made him drop for another punishing set that wiped the grin clean off his face.

Only when he was satisfied did Talmir step back.

"Ten minutes," he said. "Rest."

A generous mercy... for his standard.

Teclos lay there, chest heaving, limbs trembling, and took note of it. Ten minutes... usually he'd be lucky to get five.

Half the rest for the same work.

'I guess it's because it's their first time?' Teclos thought.

As they struggled to recover, hurried footsteps approached from the trail.

Kosak came jogging into the clearing, a sand sack slung across his back.

He wasn't even winded.

"Morning," he said casually, straightening up as if he hadn't just run the entire way.

Talmir glanced at him flatly.

"You're late again."

Kosak shrugged. "Sorry. The kid didn't want to go to the market with her mother. Had to handle it, father style."

Tolk snorted. "You mean you promised her something if she behaved?"

Kosak grinned. "Hey. It is what it is."

A smirk escaped Talmir.

"You spoil her too much."

Once the ten minutes were up, Talmir clapped his hands sharply.

"On your feet."

Groans followed, but everyone obeyed.

"The next part is sparring," he said. "You'll rotate partners after each bout. For now, it'll be you four—Tolk, Gillard, Teclos, Ralph."

He paused, eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

"Later, Kosak and I will join in."

Ralph's stomach sank. 'More?! Holy hell, those guys are maniacs!'

"And," Talmir continued, a hint of interest creeping into his voice, "I've been thinking of something new."

The group stilled.

"Three versus one," he said. "Evade, reposition, survive. Training fit for being outnumbered."

Teclos felt a spark of excitement—and dread.

"That comes later," Talmir added. "For now, standard one-on-one. You'll fight until each of you has faced everyone else at least once."

He gestured toward the cleared ground.

"Form up."

After the rest period ended, Talmir's gaze settled on Gillard and Ralph.

"You two first," he said, jerking his chin toward the clearing. "Let's see what you've got."

Both straightened immediately.

Talmir stepped between them, holding out two wooden practice swords. They were balanced well, smooth, the edges dulled but the weight similar to real swords.

"Again, no mana," Talmir said evenly as he handed them over. "No eye gouging. No strikes below the belt. If your opponent surrenders, you stop immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Gillard replied without hesitation.

"Got it," Ralph said, rolling his shoulders as he took his sword.

They moved apart, facing each other across the trampled earth.

Ralph was the agile fighter type.

He bounced lightly on his feet, grip loose, sword held at an angle that shifted every few seconds as if he couldn't quite decide how he wanted to start.

Gillard, by contrast, settled into a clean, orthodox stance—knees bent, blade centered, tip steady, his breathing already slow and controlled.

Talmir raised his hand.

"Begin."

Ralph moved first.

He came in fast, not with a committed strike but a probing slash meant to test Gillard's reactions.

Gillard stepped back half a pace, blade snapping up to intercept with a clean parry that redirected the force away from his body.

Ralph grinned and pressed in, chaining his attacks together—an angled cut from the right, a quick feint to the shoulder, then a sudden kick aimed at Gillard's thigh.

Gillard caught the kick on his shin and shifted his weight, sword sliding into position to punish the opening. Ralph twisted away just in time, the wooden blade whistling past his ribs.

They circled.

Gillard advanced carefully, cutting off angles, sword always between himself and Ralph. His strikes were economical—straight thrusts, tight arcs, nothing wasted. Each one forced Ralph to move, to react, to stay light.

Ralph answered with creativity.

He ducked low under a swing and rolled past Gillard's flank, coming up with a backhand slash that nearly caught Gillard's shoulder. When Gillard blocked, Ralph stepped in close, shoulder-checking him before hopping back out of range.

"Quit dancing around like a girl..." Gillard muttered under his breath.

Ralph shot back. "Says the stationary rock with no finesse."

Ralph launched another attack—high slash, low kick, then a sudden spin that turned into a sweeping cut.

Gillard absorbed it all with disciplined defense, blade moving in precise lines, feet repositioning just enough to keep balance without overcommitting.

The rhythm shifted.

Gillard began to push forward, using his steadiness to force Ralph into narrower space. A well-timed parry opened Ralph's guard for a heartbeat, and Gillard capitalized, stepping in with a controlled strike aimed at the chest.

Ralph barely twisted aside, the sword scraping across his leather armor. He countered with a knee that Gillard blocked with his thigh, the impact echoing dully through the clearing.

They broke apart again, both breathing heavily, both from the training from before and from the strain now.

Ralph lunged once more, this time committing fully—slash, kick, slash in quick succession. Gillard met him head-on, wood cracking sharply as their blades locked for a moment.

Gillard tried to muscle through.

Ralph shifted, turned his wrist, and slipped free.

Both stepped back at the same time.

For a brief moment, they stood there, evenly matched—two different styles colliding without either giving ground.

Talmir watched closely, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

"They need work," he said finally. "But not bad."

'Yeah... they are pretty high level,' Teclos thought, surprised.

The bout wasn't over yet.