

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 31 - 30 - Stronger Each Day

Near the river bank, swords clashed.

Ralph gained the advantage with a sweep of Gillard's legs and pressed him, trying to end the bout quickly.

He came in faster now, confidence rising as he found his rhythm. His movements grew bolder, less restrained—angles shifting constantly, attacks flowing one into the next with barely a pause to breathe.

A slash from the left turned into a sudden feint. Gillard parried instinctively, only for Ralph to step inside his guard and snap a short kick toward his ribs. Gillard twisted, the blow glancing off his side, but Ralph was already moving again—ducking low, then surging up with an upward cut that forced Gillard to retreat two full steps.

Ralph didn't let him reset.

He chased, blade flickering in unpredictable patterns. A high strike became a sudden thrust. A retreat turned into a lunging sweep. Ralph even used the

terrain—kicking loose dirt toward Gillard as he advanced, trying to break his balance or vision for just a split second.

Gillard's defense tightened.

He gave ground steadily, his blade working overtime as he absorbed the storm. Each block rang through his arms. His breathing grew heavier, but his eyes never left Ralph's shoulders, hips, and wrists—tracking the tells beneath the chaos.

Ralph was smiling now.

"Come on," he taunted lightly, circling. "Don't just stand there, are you a training dummy?"

He lunged again, faster than before.

A spinning cut aimed for Gillard's neck flowed seamlessly into a low kick toward the knee. Gillard barely avoided the kick, hopping back and bringing his sword up just in time to deflect the follow-up strike.

The pressure was relentless.

Ralph stepped in close, shoulder-checking Gillard again, then snapped his pommel forward in a mock strike meant to rattle him. Gillard took the hit to the chest and staggered back a step, boots digging into the dirt.

From the sidelines, Teclos, Tolk, Kosak, and Talmir observed calmly.

"He's got him," Teclos muttered.

Even Tolk thought so.

But Talmir and Kosak were of a different opinion.

They saw that Gillard didn't rush anything, and his eyes were still focused, looking for an opportunity.

And indeed, the opportunity Gillard was waiting for came.

Ralph attacked again—overcommitting this time. A wide, powerful slash meant to break his guard.

Gillard saw it.

In that brief opening—no more than a heartbeat—Gillard moved in for the first time in this bout.

He stepped inside the arc of the swing instead of away from it, letting the blade pass just behind his back. At the same time, he twisted his torso and brought his sword up in a tight, controlled motion.

The wooden blade cracked against Ralph's temple with a dull, brutal thud.

The sound echoed through the clearing.

Ralph's momentum carried him forward, but his legs gave out mid-step. He stumbled, then collapsed to the ground, dropping his sword as both hands flew to his head.

"Ah—shit..." he groaned, curling slightly and clutching his skull.

Talmir appeared between them the next second.

"That's enough," he said simply. "Match over."

He raised Gillard's hand and announced the winner.

"Winner—Gillard."

Gillard froze, breathing hard, then lowered his sword slowly. He stared at Ralph on the ground, concern flickering across his face.

"Ralph?" he asked, kneeling beside him. "You good?"

Ralph cracked one eye open, wincing.

"...Yeah," he muttered. "Just... damn. Nice shot... I guess."

Talmir crouched briefly, checking Ralph's pupils, then gave a satisfied nod. "You'll live. Try not to get hit in the head next time."

Ralph groaned. "Great advice."

A few chuckles broke the tension, and the worry faded.

Gillard stood back up, rolling his shoulders, the adrenaline slowly draining from his limbs. He exhaled deeply, then offered Ralph a hand.

"Good fight," he said sincerely.

Ralph took it and allowed himself to be pulled upright, still rubbing his head. He smirked despite the pain.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Guess being flashy doesn't mean much if you hand someone a clean opening."

From the sidelines, Talmir nodded.

"Hmmm," he said, voice firm, "Well said. Creativity is good in battles—but technique wins wars."

Talmir didn't let the moment linger.

"Both of you—stand before me," he ordered.

Ralph straightened reluctantly, still rubbing his temple. Gillard stepped beside him, back straight, swords lowered. Teclos and the others fell silent when Talmir spoke in that tone; it wasn't a suggestion.

He paced in front of them slowly, hands clasped behind his back, eyes sharp and measuring.

"We'll start with your faults," he said flatly. "Because those get you killed out there."

His gaze settled on Ralph first.

"Stamina," Talmir said. "Your poor management of it was one of the deciding factors in your loss."

Ralph opened his mouth, then shut it again.

"You fight like a sprinter who thinks he's a long-distance runner," Talmir continued. "Explosive entries, layered feints, constant pressure. That's good—dangerous, even—but you burn out too fast. By the midpoint of that exchange, your breathing was already ragged."

He tapped Ralph's chest with two fingers.

"You overcommitted because you were chasing a finish. That wide slash at the end? That was fatigue talking. Against a real opponent, that opening would have cost you your life, not just the bout."

Ralph grimaced but nodded.

"Stance," Talmir went on. "You are doing too much. Your feet cross when you get excited. That's fine in a duel—fatal in uneven terrain. Mud, snow, rubble, roots. Hunters don't fight on clean floors."

He glanced at Ralph's legs.

"Your reflexes are good. You have a good feeling for timing. But your guard drops whenever you kick. You assume that initiative will protect you—it won't. If Gillard were more experienced, a few of those kicks would have cost you that leg."

Talmir shifted his attention to Gillard.

"Your faults are different," he said. "Subtle even, but definitely a problem."

Gillard stiffened.

"Your stamina is acceptable. Breathing is controlled. You could fight longer than Ralph—but only if the opponent lets you."

He stepped closer.

"You're reactive, and you wait for the opponent's move. You let the enemy dictate the tempo. That works against reckless and inexperienced fighters. It will fail if the opponent breaks your stance with throwing weapons, uses sweeps, and generally wears you down with no risk to them at all."

Talmir lifted Gillard's sword slightly with two fingers.

"Your stance is textbook. Stable. You plant your feet and trust your guard to hold. That's why you were pushed back and Ralph could toy with you. Remember—ground lost is opportunity lost."

Gillard swallowed.

"Your reflexes are sharp—but you don't trust them. You second-guess. You hesitate before committing to counters. That hesitation is the only reason Ralph pressured you as long as he did."

Talmir stepped back, letting the silence settle.

Then his tone shifted—not softer, but also not as sharp anymore.

"Now," he said, "let's see what you did right."

He turned back to Ralph first.

"Creativity," Talmir said. "Exceptional."

Ralph blinked.

"You don't just attack straight forward—you solve problems. You adapt mid-exchange. Feints, rhythm changes. That kind of mind is rare. Against monsters, your unpredictability will keep you alive."

He nodded once.

"With proper stamina control and tighter footwork, you'll be dangerous. Very dangerous. You're suited for skirmishing, disruption, hunting intelligent prey."

Then he turned toward Gillard.

"Discipline," Talmir said. "Outstanding."

Gillard straightened slightly.

"You didn't panic when pushed. You didn't break. You absorbed pressure and waited for certainty. That final strike wasn't luck—it was patience and correct reading of his sword path."

He met Gillard's eyes.

"You have the temperament of a frontline hunter. Shield wall that holds the line, buys time. With more aggression training, you'll become the kind of fighter others survive behind. A reliable cornerstone of the front line and a trusted ally to those beside you."

Talmir finally looked at both of them together.

"Your potential is high," he said plainly. "Different paths—but both viable. Ralph, you need restraint. Gillard, you need decisiveness. Oddly enough, together you would make a good team."

He gestured toward the clearing.

"Both of you need more training, which we'll provide."

Tolk snorted.

Teclos couldn't help smiling. This meant they had passed Talmir's test, and from now on they would train together.

Talmir turned away, already moving toward the next pairing.

"Drink water and rest now," he added over his shoulder. "You're not done yet, but you've earned that much."

Talmir gestured sharply.

"Teclos. Tolk. Forward."

Both stepped into the clearing.

Teclos rolled his shoulders once, jaw tight, eyes locked on Tolk. "This time I'll beat you."

Tolk's lips curved into an easy grin.

He enjoyed these moments more than he cared to admit.

He was the most talented hunter of his generation—everyone knew it. Most opponents burned bright for a while, then faded. They lost. After that, they made excuses and stopped pushing, stopped trying. That had always been fine with him—disappointing but alright.

But Teclos was different.

The boy never quit.

Even after losing again and again, even after being crushed, humiliated, mocked—he always stood back up. The complaining had stopped after Ragla... mostly. Only hard resolve remained, it seemed.

And worse—Teclos learned quickly.

Tolk had started to feel it lately. That pressure. That quiet sense that one day, if he wasn't careful, Teclos might actually catch up to him.

He laughed lightly. "You can try whenever you want."

Teclos ground his teeth. He hated when Tolk said that. It sounded like pity. Like he didn't take him seriously.

Talmir's voice cut through the tension.

"Enough," he said flatly. "Get ready."

They took their stances.

And when Talmir gave the signal—

They exploded.

Teclos moved first, surging forward with a sharp diagonal slash aimed at Tolk's shoulder. It wasn't meant to hit. It was a probe. The moment Tolk shifted to parry, Teclos twisted his wrist mid-swing, turning the strike into a feint and stepping inside.

A low sweep followed immediately.

Tolk lifted his leg without even looking, his blade snapping down to intercept Teclos's follow-up thrust.

Wood clacked.

Teclos flowed with the rebound, pivoting off his back foot and circling left, keeping constant motion. His attacks came in irregular rhythms—short jabs, half-committed slashes, sudden changes of angle. He mixed what Talmir had taught him with instincts from his past life—spacing, pressure, baiting reactions.

Tolk countered everything.

He was clean, efficient, and looked almost relaxed.

His swordsmanship was fluid but grounded—no wasted motion, no exaggerated swings. Each block transitioned naturally into a counter that forced Teclos to disengage or redirect. Where Teclos danced, Tolk anchored.

They were almost mirroring the fight from Gillard and Ralph, only more advanced.

But the gap was shrinking.

Teclos ducked under a horizontal cut, stepped in close, and rammed his shoulder forward—not to strike, but to break balance. Tolk slid back just enough, boots scraping dirt, and answered with a knee that Teclos barely avoided by twisting sideways.

Teclos grinned despite himself.

Again.

He pressed harder.

A sudden feint high—then a kick aimed at Tolk’s thigh. Tolk caught it on his shin, his sword flicking out in a lightning-fast riposte that forced Teclos to abandon the kick and roll away.

The observers were silent now.

Gillard’s eyes widened.

Ralph swallowed.

Teclos would wipe the floor with anyone in the village arena that was the same age, they realized. They could maybe hold out—but not for long. It seemed that the coming-of-age ceremony would have an upset, as Gillard and Loric had been the favorites to win it.

Teclos rushed in again, faster now. His breathing was steady, but sweat was starting to flow down his brow now. He tried something new—sliding past Tolk's lead side instead of retreating, rotating around him and attacking from an angle Tolk hadn't been facing yet.

For a split second—

Tolk's smile disappeared, the leisure vanished. But he adapted instantly.

Their blades met in a rapid exchange—clack, clack, clack—each strike faster than the last. Tolk's counters grew heavier, his steps more aggressive. He began pushing forward instead of holding ground, forcing Teclos back.

Teclos adjusted, parrying, retreating, circling—

And then he made a mistake.

Just a small one.

His weight shifted too far onto his front foot during a committed slash.

Tolk saw it.

He swept Teclos's leg clean out from under him.

Teclos stumbled, caught himself with one hand, rolling to his knees—

But the wooden blade was already there.

Resting lightly against his throat.

Teclos froze.

He exhaled, then gave a short, frustrated laugh. "I surrender."

Tolk stepped back and lowered his sword, breathing a little heavier now—but smiling wide.

"Damn," he said honestly. "You're getting scary."

Teclos lay back on the dirt, staring up at the sky, his chest rising and falling.

He hadn't won.

But he had shortened the gap between them again.

Chapter 32 - 31 - Bullying Builds Character

The clearing fell quiet once the wooden blade left Teclos's throat.

Dust still hung faintly in the air, disturbed by their spar. Teclos lay on his back, chest rising and falling, staring up at the pale sky as if measuring the distance between where he stood now and where he wanted to be.

Tolk stepped back, lowering his sword.

The match was over.

From the sidelines, Ralph let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

'So he lost...'

But that wasn't what unsettled him.

Ralph had watched Teclos close the distance—watched him force Tolk to adapt, watched that easy confidence change into a serious fight.

He thought he had been close behind or equal to Teclos, but he wasn't.

Ralph felt something twist uncomfortably in his chest.

'He's running ahead. All of them are running ahead of me.'

His fingers curled slowly at his sides.

Ralph had always laughed things off. Joked around. He pushed himself somewhat when no one was looking and it had worked—at least he thought it did.

Until today made it painfully clear that the effort he put in wasn't enough.

'If this keeps up... I'll be the weak link, I'll be left behind.'

The thought hurt him more than the hit to his head did, earlier.

He glanced at Gillard, then at Teclos on the ground, then at Tolk standing tall and breathing hard.

'I have to step it up....i gave to get better, fast...'

Ralph exhaled slowly.

Talmir was right. He needed to work on himself. Stamina and Control.

Of course the easy going side of him didn't disappear and the jokes would stay too, but a new resolve hardened in his heart.

Beside Ralph, Gillard watched in silence, hands resting loosely at his sides.

Where Ralph saw a widening gap, Gillard saw a future taking shape.

Three hunters.

Different strengths. Different paths.

But together...

His gaze drifted from Teclos to Tolk, then to Ralph rubbing his temple and Kosak standing with arms crossed. In his mind, the wooden swords faded—replaced by steel. Balanced blades, that were tempered just right.

'I will be the one to make them,' he thought.

Armor too. Not just borrowed scraps or hand-me-downs, but full sets. Etched. Reinforced. Gear worthy of his friends, of people the world would remember.

He imagined them standing at the gates in full hunter armor. Maybe even knighted one day. Not just surviving hunts—but leading expeditions... maybe, just maybe, even an army one day.

'The best knights of the region, no the world,' Gillard thought quietly. 'Why not us?'

His fingers twitched as if already gripping a hammer.

He would need to work harder to stay side by side with his friends, but he welcomed that challenge.

Meanwhile, Kosak scratched his beard thoughtfully, eyes never leaving Teclos.

The boy had spirit. Too much sometimes. But there was something steady beneath it—a kind of stubborn resolve that didn't break even when the ground was kicked out from under him.

Persistence that withstood everything life threw at him.

Kosak's thoughts drifted, to his daughter.

She was still a loud and reckless child. Still an everyday headache for him.

He snorted softly.

She'll need someone who can keep up with her... or rein her in.

Teclos wasn't there yet. Still too rough around the edges. But given time? Training? A few pointers on romance?

A capable hunter didn't just bring protection, but also brought stability to the household, like food and money.

'A cozy life for her, and finally off my hands,' Kosak mused. 'A safe home, Full pantry. That's more than most get.'

He crossed his arms again mumbled outloud.

"Maybe I should introduce them..."

Talmir watched it all with a keen eye.

The match between them and the reactions.

He had thought hundreds of young fighters stand where Teclos stood now. Most burned out before reaching their potential. A rare few endured like Tolk.

Teclos... Talmir believed that Teclos was one who endured—that he had what it took to be great.

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Talmir's mouth before he could stop it.

'You're not there yet,' he thought. 'Not even close.'

But the path was there.

And Talmir allowed himself to dream—

'One day... he will surpass me and achieve something great.'

The smirk lasted a second longer, then faded just as quickly. He turned back toward the clearing, with a commanding voice ordered for the next exercise.

"Alright, that's enough resting," he said. "Let's move on to the next exercise."

The group stood up and formed a line in front of Talmir.

"Three versus one," Talmir continued. "Order goes from last to first based on today's performance."

Ralph's brow furrowed.

Talmir pointed.

"Kosak. Teclos. Gillard."

Then his finger shifted.

"Against Ralph."

Ralph blinked, and then got ready

"Alright...I'll show you who's the best!"

The moment Talmir gave the signal, Ralph spun and ran.

"Hey—!" Gillard said, baffled.

While running, Ralph scooped three small stones from the ground and whipped them back without even slowing down.

One stone flew toward Gillard.

He barely had time to raise his sword. The stone cracked against the flat of the wooden blade, rattling his arms and forcing him to stumble back a step.

Another stone came for Teclos.

He ducked quickly, the stone whistling over his head, and surged forward immediately, boots pounding dirt as he closed the distance.

The third stone flew toward Kosak.

Kosak didn't dodge.

His sword flashed.

The stone struck the flat of the blade—and Kosak twisted his wrist, catching it cleanly before snapping his arm forward.

The stone flew back towards Ralph, twice as fast.

It smashed into Ralph's leg just above the knee.

"Shit—!"

His run broke. He stumbled, momentum carrying him forward and barrel rolled on to his feet, but teclos used that oportunity to catch up to him.

Ralph spun, bringing his sword up—

Teclos ducked under the swing, stepped in close, and drove forward. His shoulder slammed into Ralph's chest, knocking him down. Before Ralph could react, Teclos's forearm pressed across his throat, pinning him to the dirt.

Ralph froze.

"...I yield," he rasped.

Talmir didn't even nod.

"Next."

Ralph lay there for a second, staring at the sky, then let out a short, frustrated laugh.

"Gillard," Talmir said. "You're up."

This time, the teams shifted quickly.

"Kosak. Tolk. Ralph."

His eyes settled on Gillard.

"Against you."

Gillard tightened his grip. A man shouldn't run.

So he stepped forward, stance solid, blade centered.

The moment the signal was given, Talmir shook his head.

Kosak and Tolk moved together.

Slowly circling. No rush, as their prey stood still.

Tolk pressed from the left, blade probing and testing. Kosak moved from the right, cutting off retreat.

Gillard blocked Tolk's first strike cleanly—

But Ralph appeared behind him suddenly.

He didn't even see it coming.

"Sorry," Ralph muttered.

The wooden blade tapped sharply against Gillard's back.

The match was over almost before it had begun.

Gillard lowered his sword slowly, jaw tight.

Talmir's voice cut in.

"Head-on bravery is admirable," he said. "But stupidity is still stupidity."

Gillard swallowed and nodded.

"Next."

Talmir's gaze shifted.

"Teclos."

Teclos straightened.

His stomach sank when Talmir continued.

"Tolk. Kosak."

Then, without hesitation—

"And me."

Teclos stared.

"...Oi! That isn't fair at all!"

Kosak chuckled. Tolk smiled. Even Talmir's lips twitched.

"Begin," Talmir said.

Teclos didn't have time to argue and ran away.

'There's no way I fight that head-on,' he thought.

He bolted into the trees, weaving between trunks, breath steady but fast. He grabbed stones as he ran, flinging them backward blindly, copying Ralph.

Talmir laughed. "Throwing rocks now? Son, I know you aren't smart, but at least be more original. Besides your aim is awful."

Teclos spotted a split in a large rock—just enough to hide behind.

"You know, hiding's kind of pointless," Kosak called casually. "We already saw where you hid."

Teclos ran again, cursing in his mind.

He darted left, weaving behind trees.

"Really?" Tolk's voice came calmly from somewhere to his right. "All that zigzagging did was slow you down and help us catch you."

Teclos swore under his breath and sprinted onwards. 'Those assholes just keep harrassing me...where was this during Ralph's and Gillard's escape huh?!'

Footsteps and pressure was closing in from every direction.

He burst into a small clearing—and nearly collided with Tolk.

He barely twisted aside, sword flashing up as Tolk's blade came down. The impact rattled his arms. Kosak was already there, swinging low.

Teclos jumped back, rolled, scrambled up—

And ran again.

He bought himself seconds just a few seconds more.

Then they caught him again.

This time, he couldn't flee.

Teclos planted his feet and fought.

His blade moved fast—parries, short counters, quick footwork. He slipped past Kosak once, ducked under Tolk's swing, even forced Talmir to step back half a pace.

Thirty seconds.

That was all he got.

Kosak hooked his leg. Tolk struck his guard aside. Talmir stepped in and drove him to the ground.

Teclos hit the dirt hard, breath knocked from his lungs.

A wooden blade rested at his throat.

He laughed weakly.

"...shit..."

Talmir stepped back.

"That was a good attempt," he said. "But not a passing grade."

Tolk smirked—until Talmir's eyes slid to him.

"You're done for today," Talmir said. "Next time, we'll bring Obin just for you."

The smirk vanished.

"...You're joking," Tolk said slowly.

"I never joke about training."

Then he clapped his hands once more.

"Gather up," he ordered. "Ten minutes rest. It's late—we're returning after that."

The group obeyed without complaint.

Teclos layed back in to the dirt, chest heaving, staring at the darkening sky.

He was exhausted.

Bruised.

But smiling.

The rest sat down, scattered across the clearing while the last warmth of the day bled slowly from the air.

Ralph laid down near Teclos, with his arms behind his head.

"I swear," he groaned, "I'm going to die during your father's training. Not a glorious fight against monsters. Just... Talmir."

Gillard sat across from them, wiping sweat from his brow.

"You'll survive," he said huffing. "Don't worry."

Ralph turned his head toward Teclos. "Alright man, since when were you this strong huh?"

Teclos cracked one eye open. "What do you mean?"

"The way you moved," Ralph said immediately. "You didn't move like that before..."

Gillard nodded. "Yeah somewhere along the road you became stronger than me...don't think its gonna stay that way though."

Teclos exhaled and smiled. "I welcome the challenge, and well i guess being at deaths door does that to you."

They both nodded and then Teclos continued.

"Besides i'm almost at my second circle in my heart. Five in total."

Both of them were stunned.

"...what?" Ralph repeated.

Gillard's eyes widened slightly. "That's... faster than we expected."

Ralph let out a low whistle. "Damn. Guess you really are trying to leave everyone in the dust."

"I'm not," Teclos said flatly.

"Uh-huh," Ralph replied. "Sure."

A short silence followed as they drank water and let their fatigue recover.

Eventually, Gillard spoke again.

"After the coming-of-age ceremony," he said thoughtfully, "what will you two go for?"

Ralph didn't hesitate. "A hunter. No question."

Gillard nodded. "Same. I want to smash monsters. Have a place of my own one day. Forge armor worthy of real knights for us. And let our names be heard across the kingdom."

Ralph grinned. "Knights, huh? Fancy dream there pal...sounds nice though."

Gillard's eyes lit slightly. "We will rise high enough, so ofcourse we'll need proper gear. Weapons forged by my own hands. Armor handmade by yours truly."

Teclos listened quietly, a small smirk forming. 'It does sound nice.' He thought.

"And you?" Gillard asked. "You'll be a hunter with us too, right?"

Teclos nodded. "Yeah, don't worry. I am going nowhere."

Ralph stretched and smirked. "Well, you technically had no choice eitherway because of your father. Besides you have the talent for it."

Then his grin turned mischievous.

"By the way, speaking of the ceremony..." he said. "You two noticed the girls lately? I mean wow, some of them are real beautys now."

Gillard sighed, and rolled his eyes. "Here we go again."

"There are options now man!" Ralph continued proudly. "The ugly ducklings finally turned into swans, haha. And I bet they can't resist my charm."

Teclos rolled his eyes but didn't comment.

"...Teclos?" Ralph leaned closer. "Which one do you fancy? We need to know so we don't steal her from you."

"I don't care," Teclos said.

Ralph tilted his head. "What do you mean, you don't care?"

Teclos stayed silent.

"That confirms it," Ralph said. "I knew it. You swing the other way, don't you?"

Teclos's head snapped toward him. "What? No."

"Uh-huh," Ralph grinned. "Explains a lot actually."

"There's just no time," Teclos said sharply.

Gillard stared at him, baffled.

Then Ralph burst out laughing.

"You're serious?" Ralph said. "Either you swing the other way or you're a wuss."

Gillard nodded slowly. "Yeah there is no other explanation..."

Ralph wiped his eyes. "Even this never-smiling dumbass is better with girls than you, Teclos."

Gillard snorted. "You are one to talk, with your charm? You wouldn't get a girl—you'd get a slap to the face."

Ralph gasped. "Oh no! But still better than to piss my self and run away, too scared to talk with her."

Teclos shook his head and smiled, while those two bickered among themselves now.

Nearby, the other group was talking too.

Tolk leaned back on a tree. "I'm heading out with Darnel again next time."

Kosak glanced at him. "Good luck with his temper."

Tolk smirked. "Thanks, I'm gonna need it."

Talmir crossed his arms. "Kosak and I will handle our usual route."

Kosak sighed. "Hopefully there will be a good pray on our route this time."

Talmir nodded. "Don't worry, I'm sure we'll get something big this time."

"Sure hope so, i need fresh meat on the table for Marie's birth-day comming up..."

Teclos listened to both conversations, the atmosphere felt comfortable.

And he enjoyed the remainder of their rest.

Chapter 33 - 32 - Unforgettable Night

Talmir's voice cut through the clearing before anyone had fully recovered.

"Break's over."

A collective groan answered him.

But no one argued. They pushed themselves up from the dirt with slow, aching movements, limbs heavy and uncooperative. Sweat-soaked shirts clung to skin as they reached for the dreadful sacks piled nearby.

The weighted packs were unforgiving—lifting them alone felt like punishment. Straps dug into shoulders as they hauled them onto their backs, teeth clenched, breath already labored.

Then Talmir pointed toward the forest path.

"Let's return."

So they ran back toward Kolma.

The route back twisted through trees and uneven ground, a familiar path made cruel by exhaustion. Every step sent dull pain up their legs. Breath burned in their chests. The sacks bounced mercilessly against their backs.

Only Talmir and Kosak had a chat at the back, the rest were silent.

There was no room left for jokes. No energy for complaints.

By the time the village walls came into view, the sky had begun to dim, sunlight bleeding orange between rooftops. The sight should have been breathtaking.

But right now they just wanted to reach it, so they could drop these sacks down and rest.

They stumbled through the entrance and collapsed where they stood—backs hitting dirt, legs giving out, hands spread wide as if trying to anchor themselves to the ground.

Hungry.

Exhausted.

Completely spent.

For a long moment, only ragged breathing filled the air.

Talmir stood over them, arms crossed.

"Same time tomorrow," he said calmly. "Don't be late."

That was all.

With a short glance lingering on Kosak,

he turned and walked away.

"Hey! I told you why I was late, man... eh, whatever." Kosak then turned toward the tavern instead of home and disappeared.

Eventually, everyone else pushed themselves upright. No words were exchanged as they split apart—each heading home, shoulders slumped, bodies aching, minds already bracing for the next day.

After that, life continued peacefully.

Days blended into a steady flow. Training in the mornings and afternoons. Work in between. Evenings filled with quiet meals and rest. Bruises faded only to be replaced by new ones. Muscles adapted, and breathing during the training became easier.

Kolma grew a bit but otherwise remained unchanged.

The same dirt roads. The same wooden houses. The same people living their lives without urgency, unaware—or unconcerned—about what lay beyond the forest and mountains.

—

Teclos's day began early.

Morning light slipped through the windows as Saldia moved around the kitchen, already awake. The smell of bread and herbs filled the house, warm and delicious. Teclos washed his face, shook off lingering stiffness, and joined her at the table.

Breakfast was simple but filling.

They talked as they ate—about training, about small village matters, about nothing important at all. There was comfort in that. No expectations beyond the day ahead.

Afterward, Teclos grabbed his cloak and stepped outside.

The village was alive.

Merchants were setting up stalls in the small market square, laying out fruits, dried meats, and trinkets. Hunters checked bowstrings and blades before heading out. Children darted between adults, laughter echoing down the narrow paths.

Teclos greeted people as he passed. A nod here. A brief exchange there. Familiar faces that had known him since childhood.

Kolma wasn't that large—only a few hundred people, so almost everyone knew everyone here.

He reached the smithy before Ralph.

Inside, the steady clang of hammering steel rang out, echoing off stone walls. Heat rolled outward from the forge. Sparks danced in the air as Gillard worked, sleeves rolled up, expression focused.

Teclos leaned against the wall and watched.

Gillard finished shaping the blade, quenched it with a hiss of steam, then set it aside with the others. Only then did he look up.

"That's new... you're early," Gillard said.

"Yeah, I surprised myself too," Teclos replied.

Gillard laid the finished knives out on the table—neatly arranged, edges gleaming. Teclos picked one up carefully, testing the balance, examining the craftsmanship.

"Looks good," he said.

Gillard nodded, clearly pleased. "Father approved too."

A moment later, hurried footsteps approached.

Ralph burst through the door, slightly out of breath.

"You're late," Gillard said flatly.

Ralph waved him off, dropping onto a crate. "Had to help my father in the tanning shack."

He grimaced. "Leather work all morning. That shit smells awful."

"You complain too much," Gillard said.

"I mean, I have a life," Ralph shot back. "He could easily do it alone."

Teclos frowned.

"That's not a bad thing, that he's teaching you," he said. "It's a useful skill."

Ralph scoffed. "Still annoying that I have to do it whenever he feels like it."

Teclos met his gaze. "Look, man, not everyone gets a father who wants to teach them. Besides, he's not even strict with you."

The room went quiet for a moment.

Gillard nodded in agreement.

Ralph scratched the back of his head. "Yeah... I guess."

Then his expression brightened.

"Anyway," he said, leaning forward. "Festival's today."

Gillard raised an eyebrow. "Already?"

"Maybe if you went out sometimes you would know," Ralph said, rolling his eyes. "There has been a notice on the signboard all week already."

"Ah well, I have your big mouth to inform me of everything," Gillard muttered.

"So anyway, I've got plans," Ralph continued. "Big ones."

Teclos glanced at him. "I'm afraid to ask."

Ralph counted on his fingers. "First, I'll bring some alcohol. Then we hit the food stalls—lots of them. After that we could throw something at Loric for fun. And finally—"

He grinned.

"—getting Tessa to dance with me."

Gillard snorted. "I agree with the Loric part. The rest? Not happening."

"Come on, man! Where is the problem? It's a perfect plan."

"First of all, alcohol's a bad idea before the ceremony," Gillard added. "We'll get into trouble if someone sees us."

Ralph scoffed. "Relax, it's going to be fine."

Teclos shook his head, lips twitching into a faint smile.

The conversation was all over the place after that—Ralph's begging to follow his plans, mana, training, girls, everyday news, and food.

Outside, the village buzzed with quiet anticipation. Banners were being hung. Stalls expanded. Laughter grew louder as evening approached.

The festival was coming.

Eventually, Ralph pushed himself upright with a groan and stretched his arms overhead.

"So," he said, "before the festival starts, we should meet up somewhere. Otherwise, we'll lose each other in the crowd."

Gillard nodded. "Behind the guild hall," he suggested. "It's quiet there."

Ralph grinned. "Perfect. Bring a rope, Gillard, if Teclos doesn't show up because of his 'oh so precious' training, we'll have to drag him out."

"Got it," Gillard agreed.

Teclos rolled his eyes. "I'll be there this time."

"Sure you will," Ralph said sarcastically.

They parted not long after, the sun already beginning to dip. Teclos headed toward the market district, the dirt road slowly giving way to stone as the village grew livelier with each step.

Stalls would be open for the whole night that day. Lanterns flickered to life one by one, casting warm light over wooden counters stacked with produce, dried meats, breads, and cheap trinkets meant to catch a festival-goer's eye. The air was thick with overlapping scents—roasted nuts, fresh herbs, cured leather, and smoke from cooking fires.

Teclos moved with purpose, basket tucked under his arm as he stopped at familiar stands. A loaf of bread here. Dried fruit there. A small bundle of smoked meat that Saldia liked.

"Teclos!" someone called.

He looked up.

Behind a stall stacked with small wooden boxes and cloth-wrapped bundles stood Lala, hands planted on her hips, dark hair tied back loosely. Her sharp eyes softened immediately when she saw him.

"Well, if it isn't Saldia's favorite helper," she said warmly. "You've grown again, haven't you?"

Teclos shook his head. "You say that every time you see me."

"And every time I'm right," Lala replied with a grin. "Buying food for home?"

He nodded.

"Good boy." She leaned forward slightly. "Tell Saldia I said hello. And tell her she needs to visit soon—I got my hands on new tea leaves. From the south this time. Completely different aroma."

Teclos nodded. "Alright, I'll tell her."

"Of course," Lala said. "She has to actually sit and drink them. So tell her to make time for at least half a day."

Already knowing how that would go, he laughed and simply said, "Okay."

Lala chuckled as she wrapped his purchase. "Take care of yourself, Teclos. And don't forget to enjoy the festival. You're allowed to be young, you know."

He wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he nodded and took the basket.

The walk home was quieter.

Lantern light followed him through familiar streets, the hum of voices fading as houses replaced stalls.

He ate lightly—bread, dried fruit, a few bites of meat—then washed his hands and stepped into the back room.

Sitting down on the floor, he crossed his legs and straightened his back, settling into a lotus position. His breathing slowed naturally.

'A quick training session before I go,' he thought.

Mana stirred.

He guided it carefully, gathering it toward his heart, reinforcing the pathways he had carved through countless repetitions. The familiar warmth spread through his chest, steady and controlled.

Time slipped by unnoticed.

When he finally opened his eyes, Saldia was standing in the doorway, arms crossed.

"You're still meditating?" she asked. "The festival won't wait for you."

Teclos blinked, then nodded. "Sorry."

She sighed, but there was fondness in it. "Go change. And hurry up or you'll be late."

He stood and went to change. The clothes were cleaner, finer than his usual attire—simple but well-kept. A fitted tunic, dark trousers, polished boots.

When he stepped outside again, the village was already alive with celebration.

Music drifted through the streets. Laughter echoed between buildings. The whole village was decorated with banners and lanterns glowing bright in the night.

Teclos headed toward the guild hall.

Behind it, just as planned, he spotted them.

Ralph leaned against the wall, already in a festive mood, while Gillard stood nearby with folded arms, his eyes scanning the crowd with awe.

"You're late, we were almost ready to come and get you," Gillard noted.

Ralph smirked. "Yeah, you're lucky."

Teclos stopped in front of them. "I said I would come, so here I am."

The sounds of celebration swelled around them as they stepped forward together, the night opening up ahead.

And the festival had only just begun.

They hadn't even taken their first steps into the crowd before Ralph made good on his promise.

"Alright," he said suddenly, stopping short and glancing around like a criminal about to commit something sacredly stupid. "Since we're all here... I might as well start."

"Start what?" Gillard asked warily.

Ralph grinned and reached inside his jacket.

When he pulled out the bottle, Gillard froze.

Teclos blinked once—then laughed.

Ralph stared. "What's so funny?"

Teclos shook his head, still smiling faintly. "You're going to regret that tomorrow."

That only made Ralph puff his chest out. "Please. I stole this fair and square from my old man. He won't even notice that it's gone."

"You stole it?" Gillard asked flatly. "Are you mad?!"

Ralph ignored him and held the bottle up. "So. Are you in or are you out?"

Gillard didn't hesitate. "Out. Completely. Absolutely out."

Ralph turned to Teclos, already expecting the same answer.

"I'm in," Teclos said, and both of them froze.

"...You're what?" Gillard asked, baffled.

Ralph squinted. "Are you feeling alright? Did Talmir hit you harder than we thought?"

Teclos shrugged.

Inside of him, something stirred—an odd mix of curiosity and quiet excitement.

'Finally,' he thought. 'My first drink this life.'

Ralph uncorked the bottle with a smile that bordered on insane. "Fine by me! I present to you, a fancy herbal liquor Dad bought from the trader," he announced. "It's a strong one, too."

Gillard groaned. "This is a bad idea, guys."

"It'll be fine," Teclos said calmly. "One or two cups won't kill us."

Ralph poured generously, sloshing the dark liquid into two cups. He shoved one into Teclos's hand, then raised his own.

"To an unforgettable night!" Ralph said.

And downed it in one go.

His face twisted instantly.

"Oh—gods—!"

He doubled over, coughing hard, eyes watering as he slapped his chest. "That's—by the hells—that burns!"

Teclos and Gillard both laughed so hard they had tears in their eyes.

Teclos lifted his cup and took a careful sip.

The liquor was strong—heat spread down his throat immediately—but it wasn't unbearable. There was a strange sweetness beneath its bite, herbal and earthy, lingering on his tongue.

He swallowed, expression unchanged.

Ralph looked up, red-faced. "Wait... you're okay?"

Teclos nodded. "It's fine."

"...No," Ralph muttered. "No, that can't be right."

Competitive fire lit in his eyes.

He poured another cup for himself and drank again, slower this time, jaw clenched. He managed not to cough, though his face went stiff and pale.

For several seconds, he stood completely still.

Then he pointed at Teclos. "Drink."

Teclos shook his head. "Later."

"What?" Ralph protested. "Come on, ma—"

"I said later."

Ralph stared at him, betrayed, then shoved the bottle back into his jacket with a huff. "Coward."

"You're the one shaking with a pale face," Gillard said dryly.

"I am fine," Ralph snapped, swaying slightly.

They moved on after that, weaving through the stalls as the festival grew louder around them. Merchants called out deals, musicians played lively tunes, and laughter spilled freely into the night.

Teclos walked between them, warmth still lingering in his chest, and his eyes leisurely took in the lights and festive atmosphere.

Ralph, as promised, was already becoming a headache.

And the night promised to be fun.

Chapter 34 - 33 - I Regret Everything

Birdsong sang lazily through the forest.

A soft breeze moved between tall trees, rustling leaves that caught the morning light and scattered it in shifting patterns across moss and roots down below.

Sunbeams filtered down in pale gold shafts, illuminating drifting motes of pollen and dust. Somewhere in the distance, water flowed—unbothered by the world.

It was a peaceful place. The kind of forest bards sang about and travelers trusted.

But something was out of place.

High above the ground, cradled awkwardly across a thick tree branch, a boy lay sprawled in a way no sane person ever should.

It was Teclos.

His body rested half on his side, one arm dangling limply while the other clutched at the rough branch even in his sleep.

His clothes were crumpled, stained with dirt and dried mud, the fabric stiff in places as if it had been soaked and left to dry without care. Leaves were tangled in his hair. A faint smear of something dark—sap or old blood—marked his sleeve.

He looked like a painfully beaten-up homeless person.

Teclos stirred.

At first, awareness came slowly, muddled and heavy, like wading through thick fog. The world felt wrong—it was too bright. The surface beneath him was hard and uneven, nothing like his familiar bed.

'Huh? This isn't... right.'

He shifted instinctively—

And pain exploded through him.

A sharp, blinding ache tore through his skull, radiating down his neck and shoulders. His ribs screamed in protest, his chest tightening as if something heavy pressed down on it. Every muscle in his upper body throbbed, bruised, like he'd been beaten with clubs and then politely asked to sleep it off.

Teclos sucked in a breath—and immediately regretted it.

A groan escaped his throat as his eyes snapped open.

White light flooded his vision.

"Ah—!"

The sun burned overhead, unobstructed, stabbing straight into his eyes. He squeezed them shut again, his head pounding harder with every heartbeat.

Stars danced behind his eyelids.

'What... happened...?'

He blinked a few times, forcing his eyes open again, squinting through the glare. Blue sky greeted him. Leaves. Branches.

Branches?

Confusion cut through the pain.

Slowly—very slowly—Teclos tilted his head downward.

The ground was way too far below him for comfort.

His breath caught in his throat.

The realization hit all at once.

"I—what the hell?!" he blurted out.

Panic surged through him like ice water.

He grabbed the branch instinctively, arms tightening as he hugged it with everything he had.

The pain from his bruised ribs flared, sharp and unforgiving, sending another groan tearing out of him as he clenched his jaw and pressed his forehead against the bark.

"Ah—dammit...!"

He froze there for a long second, clinging to the branch, heart hammering wildly as the tree swayed almost imperceptibly beneath him.

'Okay. Okay. Don't move. Don't fall.'

He forced himself to breathe—slow, shallow breaths—until the pounding in his chest eased enough for him to think.

Carefully, inch by inch, Teclos shifted his weight closer to the trunk. His movements were stiff and uncoordinated, like his body was lagging behind his thoughts. He wrapped one arm around the thick core of the tree, pressing his shoulder against it until he felt marginally safer.

Only then did he dare to look around.

The forest stretched endlessly in every direction. No paths. No familiar landmarks. Just trees, undergrowth, and distant birdsong that suddenly felt like it was mocking him.

'Where the hell am I?'

His brow furrowed.

'Why am I here?'

He tried to remember.

The effort sent a dull throb through his head, as if his thoughts were grinding against a rusty knife. Images refused to form—only fragments surfaced, slippery and incomplete.

'Last thing I remember is the festival... Wasn't I with Ralph and Gillard?'

He swallowed.

His gaze drifted upward, trying to remember.

Then above him, the canopy of the trees was... strange.

Branches were snapped and bent at unnatural angles, leaves torn away in wide swaths. The damage wasn't random—it cut through the foliage in a rough, linear path, as if something had slammed through the tree from one side and continued on without stopping.

Dark stains marked the bark. Wet ones.

Water dripped lazily from broken leaves, pattering softly as it fell.

Teclos stared.

And suddenly—

A memory surfaced.

Ralph's voice, loud and reckless, shouting with excitement.

"Oi! Haha, you dumb ass, we're here!"

Gillard's laughter, slightly slurred, carried on the night air.

Then—a sudden pressure.

A deafening roar of water.

A massive stream rushing toward him, unstoppable, overwhelming—

Teclos sucked in a sharp breath and blinked hard.

The forest snapped back into focus.

His heart raced.

"...Oh," he muttered hoarsely.

The branch creaked beneath him as he tightened his grip on the trunk.

Something very stupid had happened.

And judging by where he'd woken up—

It wasn't over yet.

Teclos stayed pressed against the trunk for a long moment, breathing carefully, waiting for the tremor in his limbs to settle.

The ground looked impossibly far away from up here.

Too far to jump, and a hell of a fall should he slip.

He tested the bark with one foot, grimacing as his muscles protested the movement. His arms shook as he shifted his weight, carefully wrapping his legs around the trunk and inching downward. Each movement was slow and deliberate, nails scraping against rough bark, skin burning...

His coordination felt off.

It wasn't weak—just... delayed. Like his body and mind weren't quite in agreement.

"Easy... easy..." he muttered under his breath.

Branch by branch, he descended.

The forest floor grew closer.

Relief loosened his chest slightly.

Then his foot slipped.

"Shit—!"

His grip failed for just a second—only a second—but it was enough.

Teclos dropped.

The impact wasn't high enough to break anything, but it was hard enough to hurt his already battered body.

He hit the ground on his back with a heavy thud, air bursting from his lungs as pain flared across his shoulders and spine. Something wet splashed beneath him, cold seeping instantly through his clothes.

"Ugh—!"

He lay there, stunned, staring up at the leaves swaying gently above him.

Everything hurt.

After a few seconds of wheezing breaths, he rolled onto his side and pushed himself upright, wincing as pain flared all around his body. His palm pressed into the ground—

The ground was soaked and muddy.

A big, dark puddle lay beneath the tree, mixed with crushed leaves and trampled grass. It smelled faintly of river water—fishy, cold, unmistakable.

His fingers trembled.

The moment his skin touched it—

His vision blurred.

He was standing by the gates.

The night air was fresh and cool, firelight flickering nearby. A cup was shoved into his hand, sloshing with a dark, pale liquid that smelled sweet and herbal.

"Two more," Ralph said, grinning wide. "If you're really that confident."

Teclos laughed—loudly.

"Please," he scoffed, tipping the cup back. The liquor burned down his throat, fire blooming in his chest. He barely flinched.

"I can definitely hold more liquor than you, Ralph."

Ralph blinked. "Oh? Is that a challenge?"

Teclos was already pouring another cup.

Gillard hesitated nearby, arms crossed.

"You don't have to—"

"Oh come on," Teclos interrupted, slinging an arm around his shoulders.

"You're really going to let us have all the fun?"

Gillard wavered as they both hounded him.

Ralph smirked and poured another cup, pressing it into Gillard's hand.

"Fine! Just one then," Gillard muttered.

Laughter echoed into the trees.

Teclos gasped and staggered back, nearly slipping in the mud as the memory tore away.

His head pounded.

"...damn," he whispered hoarsely.

He wiped his hand on his pants, only smearing the wetness further, and took an unsteady step back.

His gaze lifted again toward the river beyond the trees.

The sound of flowing water seemed louder now.

Another flashback—

Moonlight reflected off rippling water.

Something massive stood at the river's edge.

Teclos held a knife in his hand—short, simple, far too small for what he was facing.

The water bull snorted, muscles coiling beneath its thick hide. Its head was lowered slightly, and its eyes were fixed on him.

The water around it began to move, to coil.

Bending into a sphere.

The sphere rose in a smooth, unnatural arc above the beast's horns, swelling, gathering more pressure—

Teclos staggered forward a step, pointing the knife at it.

"Hey—!" he shouted, voice thick, unsteady.

"Yeah, you! Have you seen my friends, by chance?"

The bull snorted again.

"Oh, you want to be rude? You four-legged steak, huh?" Teclos laughed, spreading his arms.

"You think you're intimidating to me? I've fought worse than a wet cow."

Ralph's laughter echoed from behind him.

"Teclos, we are he—"

"Hold on!" Teclos waved them off, nearly losing his balance.

"I just wanna talk. Man to bull... wait, Ralph? Oh, Ralph! Come here, I made a new friend!"

Teclos turned around—and the bull's stance shifted.

The water surged forward.

"Teclos, wait—!"

Ralph's voice suddenly sounded far away.

Teclos sucked in a breath and stumbled back another step, his spine cold despite the morning sun.

"...haha...this is beyond stupid," he said aloud, disbelief thick in his voice.

His gaze dropped to his hands.

They were shaking.

And then he noticed something else.

His clothes.

They were damp—not from dew, not entirely from mud. The fabric was stiff in places, dried after being soaked through completely.

A knot tightened in his stomach as he remembered something else.

Slowly, dreadfully, another image clawed its way forward.

A room, dimly lit.

It was familiar.

Talmir's and Saldia's bedroom.

Teclos stood beside the bed, swaying slightly, holding a bottle in his hands. The chest near the bed was open, its lid pushed back carelessly.

He lifted the bottle, squinting at it, then grinned wide.

"Oh yaaaah," he whispered reverently, holding the bottle high.

"Baby... that's the stuff we need."

Outside the window, Ralph was doubled over laughing, Gillard trying—and failing—to stand still.

"You're insane," Gillard hissed, barely containing a smile.

Ralph wiped tears from his eyes. "Legend."

Glass clinked softly as Teclos hugged the bottle to his chest.

The door creaked.

The memory shattered.

Teclos froze.

"Holy shit... what have I done?!"

His shoulders slumped as the full weight of it began to sink in.

He had a very bad feeling he was about to remember something even worse.

Teclos moved as fast as his battered body would allow.

Every step sent dull aches through his ribs and shoulders, and his head still throbbed like something was trying to claw its way out from the inside. He half-jogged, half-staggered through the forest path leading back toward Kolma.

The farther he went, the heavier his chest felt.

By the time the village gate came into view, his breath was ragged—not from the run, but from the growing certainty that whatever had happened last night... it had been bad.

Very bad.

The guard on duty was Tom.

Same spot as always. Same spear leaning against the wall. Same weathered face.

Teclos raised a hand weakly. "Morning."

Tom didn't smile. He just shook his head slowly, lips pressed into a thin line.

"You're in trouble, kiddo," Tom said. "Go to the chief's house. Your little buddies are already there."

Teclos blinked. "W-what happened?"

Tom waved him off. "Don't play dumb. And don't make it worse. Go."

The gate creaked open behind him.

Teclos swallowed and stepped through.

The village square hit him like a punch.

Tables were overturned. Broken decorations lay scattered across the dirt. Strips of colored cloth hung torn from poles, fluttering weakly in the breeze. Almost all stalls had been collapsed, their wooden frames splintered and bent. People moved through the mess with grim expressions—sweeping, lifting, repairing.

And when they saw him—

Their faces hardened and murmurs followed.

"That's one of them..."

"Unbelievable..."

"My stall—completely gone."

Teclos slowed, dread curling tighter in his gut.

Then he saw the churned-up ground.

Deep hoof marks.

Dozens of them.

The sight dragged another memory to the surface.

Gillard stood unsteadily in the square, arms spread wide, face flushed and determined.

"Alright, he-here is an idea," he said, slurring just a little. "Let's see who's the better rider..."

Ralph barked out a laugh. "Y-you're on! But where we g-gonna get horses?"

Teclos squinted, then snapped his fingers. "The cows."

Both of them stared at him.

"...Cows?" Gillard repeated, confused.

"Well, it's close enough," Teclos declared proudly.

The pasture gate burst open moments later.

More than thirty cows bolted out.

Three figures rode in the front of the stampede—Teclos gripping horns with wild laughter, Ralph whooping like a madman, Gillard yelling something that might've been a prayer.

They thundered straight through the square.

Stalls shattered. Tables flipped. Decorations were obliterated.

It was proper chaos.

The memory slammed into place, and Teclos stopped walking.

"H-holy shit," he whispered. "It gets worse the more I remember."

The rest came back in fragments as he moved again, head down.

Challenges that had started harmlessly.

Who could get a dance with a girl.

Who could drink more.

Who could run faster.

Silly things, really, and each dare had pushed the next one further.

Dumber and more dangerous.

Until everything tipped over into chaos.

By the time he reached the chief's house, his stomach felt hollow.

Yelling echoed from inside.

Angry.

Loud.

Furious.

Teclos hesitated at the door, took a deep breath, and stepped in.

The room was tense.

The chief stood near the center, hands planted on the table, face red with rage.

Ralph was off to one side, shoulders slumped.

A massive red handprint was visible across the side of his head.

Teclos stared at it—

And remembered.

A girl's face twisted in fury last night.

Ralph's grin vanishing mid-sentence.

Smack.

Gillard stood nearby, clothes torn at the shoulder and sleeve, a faint bruise darkening his jaw.

Another memory surfaced.

A fistfight between him and Loric.

Gillard hitting the dirt.

The chief's voice snapped Teclos back to the present.

"Do you have any idea," the chief thundered, "what kind of damage you caused?!"

No one answered.

"Festival property destroyed. Livestock panicked. People injured. Guards dragged out of bed in the middle of the night!"

Ralph winced.

Gillard stared at the floor.

Teclos didn't move.

"This village finally returned to peaceful days after that incident, and you just had to destroy that, didn't you?!" the chief continued, pacing. "Hunters-in-training. Future defenders? I just see ungrateful brats!"

The lecture went on.

And on.

By the time the chief finally stopped, the room felt drained of air.

That was when the door opened again.

Parents flooded in.

Voices rose.

Anger multiplied.

And then—

"Teclos."

Saldia's voice.

It was calm and icy.

She stood there with sharp eyes, and a nonexistent smile.

She didn't say another word and grabbed him by the ear.

"Ow—!" Teclos yelped.

"Home now," she simply said.

She dragged him out of the chief's house without ceremony, ignoring the looks, the whispers, the sympathetic grimaces.

Teclos stumbled along beside her, every step a reminder that whatever punishment he'd imagined—

This was only the beginning.

Chapter 35 - 34 - Mud Riders

A week later, Kolma had mostly recovered from the initial shock.

The broken stalls were being repaired. The churned mud in the square had to be shoveled away and packed down again. The last of the festival banners were taken down, their bright colors folded and stored; at least some were still intact. But they still had a lot of community work left to do.

People... people were very angry.

Teclos felt it the moment he stepped outside every day.

Eyes lingered on him for a long time. Whispers followed him like a second skin. Somewhere down the street, someone snorted and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "look there's one of them, bloody rascals."

Younger kids were teasing him and calling him names from far away.

He held his head down and kept walking.

His body still ached. Yellow and blue bruises bloomed along his ribs and shoulders, reminders of the poor decisions he had made that night. His head was finally clear again—but the memories were not kind.

He went to meet up with Gillard and Ralph behind the guild hall, the agreed meeting spot so that they could start working, and Ralph was already there.

He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and an expression of exaggerated boredom. The massive, faintly yellow handprint still lingered on the side of his head like a badge of honor.

The moment he saw Teclos, his grin stretched wide.

"Well well," Ralph said. "The legendary Water Bull Slayer arrived at last."

"Oh, shut it, man," Teclos said. "Like you were any better that night..."

Ralph laughed. "Hah! Better than you, most certainly. When I saw you walk in all banged up, I almost pissed my pants."

Teclos smirked. "Yeah? I also have to say that the handprint is looking good on your face."

Gillard arrived a moment later, walking stiffly. His clothes were repaired now, but poorly—patched seams and mismatched thread made it obvious he had fixed them himself. His expression was calm, but his eyes carried a tired look, still full of embarrassment.

They stood there for a second in awkward silence once they saw him.

Then Ralph broke it.

"So," he said brightly, trying to lighten the mood. "Anyone else still grounded?"

Gillard sighed. "I'm not allowed near the forge for another three days."

Teclos rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm on double chores for the rest of the month. And I'm banned from festivals until I'm an adult."

Ralph blinked. "Wait—all festivals?"

"Yes."

Ralph winced. "Damn. That one's harsh."

"You're one to talk," Teclos said flatly. "Your father almost kicked you out."

Ralph shrugged. "If you ask me, it was worth it."

It hadn't felt "worth it" at all.

Teclos still remembered being dragged out of the chief's house by the ear. Saldia's grip was unrelenting, and her face was like the calm before the storm. He'd survived the chief's yelling and even that, barely. But Mom? Her fury was a new trauma he would like to forget.

Besides, he had not survived Saldia yet; that storm was a gift that just kept on giving.

A flash of memory surfaced uninvited.

Gillard, swaying slightly, pointing at the pasture and slurring, "hey, look it's our ride!...w-whoever stays on the cow the longest wins."

Ralph halfway over the fence and stuck, but still laughing like a madman.

The ground shaking beneath him as he rode one of the cows. More than thirty terrified cows surging forward.

He clung to its horns, screaming something heroic like he was riding into battle. Stalls collapsed and people dove for cover all around them.

Teclos exhaled sharply.

"Huff,"

"What?" Ralph asked.

"Nothing," Teclos said. "Just...I remembered some things."

Gillard folded his arms. "The challenges got out of hand."

Teclos turned toward him. "You don't say..."

"Ah, whatever, it was fun, and when we are old it's going to be a funny story," Ralph said cheerfully.

Teclos glanced at him. "You started this mess, man."

Ralph didn't deny it.

"At first it was harmless," Gillard continued. "Whoever has the best dance moves, who can drink more, who could pull a girl to dance."

"And then," Teclos said dryly, "we decided to prove who was the better hunter while drunk."

Ralph beamed. "Yeah, that was awesome."

Teclos shot him a look. "Dude, I almost died challenging that water bull with a knife."

"Hah! Yeah, that was legendary," Ralph repeated.

"I got blasted into a tree."

"That part was less legendary..."

Teclos snorted, a smile tugging at the ends of his lips.

People passed by the alley entrance, some slowing just enough to stare. A group of younger teens whispered openly, one of them pointing.

"See?" Ralph said under his breath. "We became famous overnight."

"Infamous, you mean," Gillard corrected.

Then a pair of hunters walked past, one of them smirking.

"Hey," the man called. "Look, it's the Mud Riders."

They even got a nickname now.

Ralph pushed off the wall. "So. Grounded or not, we're still us. Nothing is really going to change that, and after a while everyone will forget about this."

Gillard nodded slowly. "But next time... no liquor, Ralph, or I swear to God I'm going to punch you."

Teclos raised an eyebrow. "Next time?"

Ralph laughed. "Oh come on. You don't nearly die to a water bull and not do something stupid again eventually."

Teclos shook his head.

"...Next time," he said, "I'm drinking less."

Ralph clapped him on the shoulder. "We'll see about that, haha."

They stood there lingering for a while longer before they started working.

They were the village's black sheep now, but at least they were in this together, and... it wasn't going to be boring going forward; they were sure of it.

They went on to the grounds where all the chaos happened. They had work to do, repairs to do.

It looked worse than they remembered—ripped-up soil, destroyed patches of grass, broken fence posts, and wide streaks of dried mud mixed with cow droppings. The ground was uneven where hooves had torn it apart, shallow ruts crisscrossing the whole area like scars.

Ralph stared at it, hands on his hips.

"...So," he said slowly, "hear me out. We start with something easy."

Gillard turned to him. "No."

Ralph scowled. "I haven't even said what I had in mind yet."

"You were about to say banners, sweeping, or something that lets you lean on a shovel for half the time," Gillard replied.

Ralph opened his mouth, then shut it again. "Okay, rude. But accurate."

Teclos looked between them and then to the destroyed land.

Ralph gestured at the ground. "Look at this. That's a full day of misery. We could do something lighter first, warm up, ease into it."

"And then what?" Gillard asked. "We're exhausted, fed up, and then we still have this shit waiting for us?"

Ralph shrugged. "No...we could do this tomorrow, you know?"

Gillard rolled his eyes and shook his head. "That's not how this works."

They both turned to Teclos.

"Well?" Ralph pressed. "You're the tie-breaker."

Teclos exhaled and glanced back at the mess.

"Gillard's right," he said.

Ralph groaned loudly. "Of course you side with him."

Teclos ignored him. "If we do the hard work first, then once we're tired and sick of it, only the easy tasks will be left. If we follow your "plan," we'll end up stuck doing the worst part when we're dead tired."

Ralph grimaced. "You know, I hate your logic."

"We also already handled most of the banners this week," Teclos added. "That was the light work."

Gillard nodded. "And that was while we were still hungover."

Teclos smirked faintly. "Now that we're all good again, it'll be more efficient."

Ralph stared at them both, then looked back at the ground.

"...I hate you guys."

Gillard tapped him on the shoulder. "Grow a pair and let's go."

Teclos lightly tapped him on the shoulder. "And stop whining already, it's gonna be a fun memory."

"Don't touch me," Ralph muttered.

They fetched a cart from the storage shed, the wooden wheels creaking in protest as they dragged it out. It was full of tools, prepared for the cleanup work.

The work was exactly as awful as it looked.

They shoveled dried mud, clumps of trampled earth, and far too much cow waste into the cart, scraping and leveling the ground inch by inch. The smell was god-awful. Sweat soaked into their clothes quickly under the sun, dirt clinging to their boots and hands.

Ralph complained the entire time.

"I would prefer fighting a monster," he grumbled, shoveling half-heartedly.

"Yeah, yeah, just shut up and work," Gillard said, not looking up.

Teclos just snorted.

Ralph straightened, leaning on his shovel. "You're both heartless. Absolutely cruel."

"You're still talking," Gillard replied. "That means you have enough energy to carry this bag full of shit into the cart...go."

Ralph sighed dramatically and went back to work.

Hours passed slowly.

They spoke less as the day wore on, saving air for the work. Once the cart was filled, it was pushed away to the waste pits beyond the village and unloaded, then brought back again. By the time the sun dipped lower, they'd managed to clear and level about half the area.

Ralph dropped his shovel and bent over, hands on his knees.

"I'm done," he said. "Physically. Spiritually. Emotionally."

"You're right," Teclos said. "For today, that is."

Ralph looked up. "Wait, really?"

Gillard wiped sweat from his brow and nodded. "That's enough for today."

Ralph collapsed onto the ground. "Finally! Some goddamn rest!"

"You'll survive," Teclos said. "Unfortunately, that means your mouth will too."

They cleaned the tools, rinsing mud and filth from the blades, then returned the cart to the storage shed.

The last task was pushing the collected waste to the designated disposal pits outside the village, where it would be used later.

When they finally parted ways, the sun was low and their bodies exhausted and heavy.

Ralph stretched as he walked off. "Tomorrow better be easier."

Gillard glanced back at the half-cleared ground. "Well... it probably won't be."

By the time Teclos reached home, the sky had already begun to darken.

The house was quiet in the way that made his shoulders tense the moment he stepped inside.

Saldia stood in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, hands moving methodically as she worked. The scent of herbs and warm broth hung in the air. At the table, Talmir sat with his back straight, a cloth in one hand and his sword resting across his knees as he cleaned it with care.

Teclos swallowed.

"...I'm back," he said.

But no one answered.

The silence stretched long enough to be uncomfortable.

Saldia didn't look at him when she spoke.

"You'll clean the herbal room," she said evenly. "Everything I used today will be cleaned spotless. After that, eat and go to your room."

Teclos opened his mouth. "I already worked all day, I—"

He stopped mid-sentence as Saldia turned her head.

There was no yelling, nor did she raise her voice.

Just a look was enough for Teclos to shut his mouth immediately.

"...Yes, ma'am," he said.

She turned back to the stove as if the matter was settled.

Teclos slipped past them and into the herbal room, exhaustion tugging at his body.

The space was a mess too—shelves lined with opened jars, bundles of dried leaves hanging from hooks, the workbench cluttered with open containers, ampules, and scattered herbs.

He sighed quietly and got to work.

He washed every container, wiped down the bench, re-corked ampules, and sorted the herbs with care. He even went a step further—organizing everything alphabetically, labels turned outward, stacks neat and even.

If he was going to be punished, he might as well earn some mercy points.

By the time he finished, his hands ached and his back screamed in protest.

The door closed behind him suddenly, and Teclos stiffened.

Talmir stood there, arms crossed.

"Boy," he began, voice calm but heavy, "you start making it up to her."

Teclos lowered his gaze.

"I can forgive a lot," Talmir continued. "But Saldia isn't so lenient."

He stepped closer, resting a hand against the shelf.

"First," he said, "that was one of our last bottles from our wedding. Her father gave it to us. She guarded that liquor like a hellhound, for special occasions."

Teclos felt his stomach drop.

Cold sweat trickled down his forehead.

"Second," Talmir went on, "you drank before your coming-of-age ceremony."

Teclos winced.

"And last," Talmir said quietly, "you brought shame to our house."

Teclos turned toward him, voice low. "I'm sorry. I truly am."

Talmir studied him for a moment, then sighed.

"Like I said, you'll have to make it up to her," he said. "And no—community work isn't going to cut it."

Teclos nodded slowly.

"I always told you that actions have consequences," Talmir continued. "I get it. You're young. You're stupid right now."

Teclos almost smiled at that—almost.

"But you have to set your mistakes straight," Talmir said firmly. "You own them. If you don't... you become scum in this world. And that," he added, "is something that would truly disappoint me, son."

"I understand," Teclos said.

Talmir gave a short nod and opened the door. "Go eat."

Dinner passed quietly.

Teclos ate while watching Saldia from the corner of his eye. She moved with the same steady efficiency as always, but the warmth was gone. Every idea he came up with to make it up to her fell flat.

Nothing could replace his grandfather's wedding gift he thought.

When he finished, he cleaned his plate and retreated to his room.

He laid back in his bed, staring at the ceiling, mind churning and thinking of new ideas.

He was ashamed.

And fully aware that fixing this would take more than just words, so he'll take action just like Talmir told him to.

Chapter 36 - 35 - Solving One Problem at a Time

Teclos didn't sleep well.

At first, he tossed and turned, new ideas cycling endlessly through his thoughts. Plans formed, unraveled, and reformed again as he stared into the darkness, chasing solutions that slipped through his fingers the moment he reached for them.

When sleep finally claimed him, it was shallow and restless.

He drifted in and out, caught between memories and worries that refused to stay silent. Each time his eyes closed, his mind returned to the same images—

It was a constant nightmare of shame, fear, and regret, one that had plagued him for the entire week already.

Morning eventually crept in through the window, pale and quiet.

Teclos lay there for a long moment, exhausted despite the hours spent in bed, staring at the ceiling again as the house slowly woke around him. Somewhere down the hall, Saldia moved softly toward the kitchen.

He heard a pot being set down, then the soft rustle of bundled herbs as pots and cups were pulled from the cabinets.

Normal sounds, everyday noise one would expect in the morning.

And yet, nothing felt normal.

He sat up and rubbed his face. His aching body had refreshed overnight, leaving him physically rested, but his mind was still dead tired.

But his sleepless night hadn't been wasted, at least. He had a plan. A complicated one, perhaps, but a plan nonetheless. A three-part apology, each piece demanding time, effort, and no small amount of humility—and a sprinkle of luck.

He dressed, ate quickly, and left the house before Saldia could say anything—not to avoid her, but because he couldn't afford to waste time.

Talmir was right. He had to own his mistakes, so he would do just that.

He would make things right with his mother.

Then... the village.

'I'll figure that part out later,' he thought.

Behind the guild hall, Ralph and Gillard were already waiting.

They weren't joking today.

Ralph sat on a crate, absently turning a small stone over in his fingers. Gillard leaned against the wall, arms folded, gaze distant. Whatever conversations they'd weathered at home clearly hadn't been pleasant—but that wasn't Teclos' concern right now.

He joined them in silence.

After a moment, Ralph glanced up.

"You look like hell. Rough night? My old man chewed me out. I'm guessing yours did too?"

Teclos exhaled.

"Yeah... I need to fix something."

"Hah! That goes for me too, man," Ralph said lightly.

Gillard studied Teclos more closely.

"You don't mean the repair work, do you?"

"No... it's worse..." Teclos said, his head hanging low. "I mean my mother."

Ralph chuckled and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good luck with that. And if you succeed, share some of that luck with me, please... I really need it with the old man."

Then Ralph turned and started working without complaint.

Teclos blinked.

"...And I thought I would be the downer today. What's with him?"

Gillard hesitated.

"His father actually threw him out last night. Not permanently—yet. But until Ralph 'sets his ways straight,' he's not welcome home."

A cold knot twisted in Teclos' chest.

'Uff... that sucks.'

That could've been him.

He now also had to check on Ralph later.

They worked through the morning in near silence, finishing smaller assigned tasks: resetting fence posts, hauling debris, tamping down earth, repairing what could be salvaged. Their movements were mechanical now, bodies remembering the work even as their minds wandered off to other matters.

Near the end of the day, Teclos noticed someone near the merchant stalls.

At one of them stood a woman who seemed almost untouched by the chaos around her.

Her head was wrapped in a finely embroidered cloth of deep indigo, silver thread woven into delicate patterns that caught the light as she moved. A few dark curls escaped the wrap, framing her face and softening the sharp intelligence in her eyes. Thick, naturally curly hair spilled down her back in a glossy cascade—well cared for, despite the road-worn life of a traveling merchant.

She wore a flowing silk dress in warm earth tones, layered and practical yet undeniably elegant. The sleeves were rolled just enough to reveal strong wrists adorned with simple bangles, hands marked by honest labor rather than vanity.

Her posture was relaxed but assured—the confidence of someone who had bargained across cities and knew the worth of every coin. When she spoke, her voice carried warmth, but beneath it lay a keen sharpness.

Lala.

Merchant, traveler, and one of the few people Saldia trusted enough to share tea—and secrets—with.

She appeared to be assessing the damage to her stall, calculating repairs and losses with a keen eye.

When the workday ended, Teclos wiped his hands on his trousers and glanced toward the square.

"I'm heading that way," he said.

Ralph groaned, exhausted. "Yeah... I'll go..." He couldn't finish the sentence and just walked away.

"...keep an eye out for him, Gillard," Teclos said, worried.

Gillard nodded once.

"Good luck with your mother."

Teclos smirked.

"Yeah. That won't be easy."

Lala's stall stood near the edge of the square, visibly scarred despite ongoing repairs. One support beam had been replaced with lighter wood. The roof fabric had been carefully stitched. Broken jars still littered the ground nearby.

Lala was arranging the jars that had survived when Teclos approached.

She saw him, but didn't yell or frown.

She simply waited.

"Hey, Lala," Teclos started.

"You've got nerve," she replied calmly.

"I know. I'm sorry."

She tilted her head.

"You already said that. All of you did, in fact. But the damage doesn't disappear with words alone."

"I'm not asking for free forgiveness," Teclos said carefully. "And I want to help you rebuild it."

Her gaze flicked briefly to the damaged beam, then back to him.

"...Alright," she said. "If you're serious."

She put him to work immediately.

He hauled planks, sanded edges, secured shelves. When customers arrived, he stepped aside, holding boards steady while Lala worked around him. It was slow, meticulous labor—nothing groundbreaking.

Just honest work and effort.

As night fell, Lala's gaze landed on him.

"You look exhausted."

"Haha, that's because I am..." Teclos replied.

That earned him a faint huff of amusement, and by the time they finished, the stall stood straighter and almost fully repaired.

"There's something else I have to ask of you," Teclos said during a short break.

Lala raised an eyebrow.

"Of course there is."

"I need a bottle of liquor. It's not for me, and it needs to be something special."

Her expression sharpened.

"Not for you?"

"No."

She was quiet for a long moment.

"I have something," she said at last. "But it isn't free. And helping repair my stall won't cover it."

"How much?"

She told him.

Teclos barely swallowed his saliva, and his heart sank a tiny bit.

"...I don't have that much."

"You can earn it," Lala said calmly. "Work for me until you have enough."

So he did.

Five long days.

He cleaned jars until his fingers pruned. Carried heavy crates until his shoulders burned. Labeled and sorted spirits by their value, and helped her sell them to customers.

On the fifth and final day, Lala watched him count out the last coin.

"I'm surprised you didn't complain," she said.

"Well, I would be lying if I said I didn't want to," Teclos admitted.

She handed him the bottle—made of dark glass, wax-sealed and decorated, etched with delicate markings.

"For what it's worth," Lala added, "I think she'll understand."

He opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"How did you know?"

She patted his head.

"It wasn't hard to guess, kiddo."

Teclos bowed deeply in thanks as he headed home.

That evening, he hid the bottle beneath his bed and finally slept like a log, getting his first proper rest after many days.

The following afternoon, once work slowed, Teclos left the village.

He headed inland—toward Lupos.

After a while, the path through the forest rose gently until it opened up into a sunlit clearing on a small hill.

Radiance blossoms grew there in abundance.

They resembled sunflowers at a glance, but up close their petals glimmered with faint veins of light. Their centers glowed warmly, releasing gentle heat into the air.

Saldia loved them.

So he gathered some of them.

At home, he hid them in the ceiling and wrote his apology letter—it was short, honest, and unadorned.

"This should do it... hopefully." He was nervous, to say the least.

Then, finally, he was ready.

When he found Saldia in the herbal room, he asked her to come to the kitchen, where he prepared the bottle, the flowers, and the letter.

Her eyes widened in shock.

"...Where did you get this?" she asked.

"...Well..." At first, he had a hard time speaking, but Saldia was patient and let him continue in his own time.

"I got the liquor from Lala. Of course, it wasn't free, and I had to work for it. Then I went to the clearing we saw a while back when you showed me your favorite flowers, so I picked a few of them, and the letter... the letter sums up my honest thoughts about what I did and that I am sorry."

She was impressed but didn't let it show on her face.

Saldia sat down and read the letter. It was neatly written, and the contents spoke about how sorry he was about the liquor and everything—how it tore him up not to see her smile at him anymore, how he wouldn't repeat the same mistake, and how he loved her.

A tear slipped free.

Then she hugged him.

"Don't ever do something like this again, Teclos," she said softly. "And I forgive you."

Teclos exhaled.

They stayed like that a little longer, until she finally pulled away. If she was honest with herself, the silence had hurt her more than she wanted to admit.

All the help, the smiles, the bond they had built—it felt like she was the one tearing it apart.

After the hugging, she stored the letter in her drawer for memories and then looked at the bottle.

The name etched into the bottle was Aurelion Sunspirit.

The bottle itself was a work of quiet luxury.

Its glass was thick and dark, blown by hand rather than molded, carrying faint ripples that caught the light like still water. The color was a deep amber-black,

almost opaque at a distance, but when held to the sun, it revealed a warm, honeyed glow within—gold layered over gold, as if liquid sunlight had been sealed inside.

The neck was sealed with aged red wax, cracked slightly at the edges where time had worked its slow magic. Pressed into the wax was an old sigil: a stylized sun encircled by grain and vine, the mark of a long-established distillery whose name had been passed down by good reputation and record.

A narrow label of cured parchment was bound around the bottle with twine instead of glue. The ink had faded to a soft bronze-brown, but the lettering was still elegant—flowing script penned by a steady hand. Beneath the name Aurelion Sunspirit were the words "First Press, High Summer Batch," followed by a small handwritten mark denoting its year.

When the bottle was tilted, the liquor moved slowly inside, clinging to the glass in thick, deliberate trails. Even unopened, it carried a scent—subtle but unmistakable—warm grain, sun-dried fruit, and a whisper of spice that spoke of careful aging in decades rather than just seasons.

This was not a drink meant for celebration alone.

It was a liquor saved for grand balls, for moments that marked the endings and beginnings in life. Even royalty and nobles enjoyed this liquor.

Of course, Teclos didn't have any clue how valuable it was, but Saldia knew instantly. It was also a quiet message from Lala—that Teclos had worked hard for it and that they should reconcile already.

A small smirk escaped Saldia as she thought of how cheeky Lala was, giving this liquor to Teclos.

"Thank you, honey, for the gifts. Now go wash up and eat your dinner."

And just like that, one of the most nervous days of his life finally came to an end.

Lying there in bed, he now had another problem to deal with—Ralph.

'How can I help that dumbass out?' he asked himself. Getting kicked out of the house was a pretty harsh punishment. Speaking of which... where would he even sleep tonight?

Teclos almost got up to go find him, but stopped midway. They'd see each other tomorrow anyway, and since Gillard had been with him when they split up, Ralph was probably with him.

So after grueling weeks of worries, hard work, and long days, he finally closed his eyes in peace.

Today, he would get the best sleep of his life, and tomorrow he would help out a friend in need. How he would do that, he didn't know yet, though.

Chapter 37 - 36 - A Friend in Need

Teclos woke up, only this time it wasn't abrupt, because he was plagued by nightmares.

It was a strange feeling. One day he was so nervous that he thought his heart was going to rip out of his chest, now he was at peace again—he got the sense that the whole house was at ease again.

He blinked, then smiled.

When he finally rose from his bed and washed his face, the knot that had lived in his chest for weeks felt... significantly lighter.

He stepped into the kitchen and cleared his throat.

"Good morning."

Saldia looked up from the table first. Her expression shifted instantly—no guarded distance, no tight jaw. Just a small, genuine smile that reached her eyes. Talmir followed a heartbeat later, giving Teclos a firm nod and a faint smirk that carried his unmistakable approval.

"Morning," Saldia said warmly. "Sit and eat while it's hot."

That simple sentence filled Teclos with quiet relief and a warm, fuzzy feeling in his heart.

He sat down at the table, accepted the bowl placed in front of him, and ate with an appetite he didn't realize he had. Across from him, Saldia hummed softly as she moved about the kitchen.

Talmir sipped his drink, watching Teclos over the rim of his cup, satisfied.

Breakfast felt like home again, normal again since that incident.

When he left the house, that happy feeling stayed with him.

—

Ralph and Gillard were already waiting at their usual spot near the guild hall.

Nothing about the scene had changed—the same crates, the same tools stacked nearby—but Teclos approached them differently today. His steps had more spring to them, and his shoulders weren't stiff anymore.

"Morning," he said brightly.

Both of them looked up at once, sensing that change.

Gillard squinted. "You're in a good mood..."

Ralph raised an eyebrow. "Seems like something good happened?"

Teclos grinned. "Something good happened, indeed."

"Oh?" Gillard prompted, clearly curious. "Care to share, or are you just going to stand there glowing annoyingly?"

Teclos hesitated for half a second. "I made up with my parents and well now everything's—better."

"That so?" Gillard said with a nod. "I'm glad. Took you long enough to apologize."

Ralph chuckled. "I guess miracles do happen."

Teclos laughed, warmth bubbling up in his chest—and before he realized it, he talked a bit too much about this happy ending. Until he glanced at Ralph.

Only then did he notice him.

The laughter was still there, but it was... forced. His shoulders had drawn in slightly, posture curling inward as if he were trying to take up less space.

Teclos faltered.

Ralph caught the look and quickly forced a grin. "Hey, maybe if my old man finally pulls his head out of his ass, I'll get a happy ending too, huh?"

He laughed, loud and careless.

But neither Teclos nor Gillard missed the tightness in his jaw.

They didn't push him—not yet.

They walked together to the tool shed, grabbed the cart and shovels, and headed out to work. As they moved, Teclos fell into step beside Ralph.

"So... you stayed with Gillard last night?" he asked carefully.

Ralph nodded. "Yeah."

Gillard glanced over his shoulder. "Barn's warm enough. Plenty of hay and beats sleeping outside."

Teclos reached out and gave Ralph's shoulder a firm pat. "Hey—after today, let's all go there. We'll figure something out together, man. A plan for you and your father to get along again."

Ralph slowed for half a step, then nodded.

This time, the smile that crossed his face was finally genuine.

"Thanks... guys."

But first they had work to do now.

They worked steadily through the morning, falling into a rhythm. Shovels dug into the dirt and broken boards were hauled aside.

The sun climbed higher.

While the sweat piled up and the work progressed fairly quickly, that was when Loric suddenly showed up.

He didn't come alone, and clearly, they were looking for trouble.

The two other boys flanking him—Kross and Tony—hovered just behind him like two shadows, dumb and incapable of their own thoughts.

"Well, well," Loric grinned, leaning against a post. "Look who's hard at work. The cow shit rider crew."

Teclos rolled his eyes. "Wow, that's pathetic."

Ralph snorted. "An original thought. Bravo, Loric, I didn't know you could even form thoughts."

Loric smirked, emboldened by the silence of the other two. "Heard you boys are real outcasts now. Fixing this shit to maybe change that... Must feel great."

Teclos and Gillard said nothing, trying not to escalate things and just return back to work.

That only seemed to please Loric more.

"Oh yes, the usual loudmouth can't keep his trap shut," Loric continued, and then feigned concern. "I heard your daddy finally had enough and threw you out."

Ralph froze. He tried to brush it off, but he was clearly hurt by that.

"How does it feel," Loric pressed, seeing that, his voice sharp as a blade, "to be a homeless orphan now? To not be loved anymore. Guess it's good you've got your little cow shit crew with you in these hard times, huh? Outcasts should stick together."

Ralph wore a smirk, but inside, those words stung badly.

His smile fell with his eyes glassing over. He clenched his fists so hard that his knuckles turned white.

Seeing him like that, they couldn't be silent anymore.

Teclos and Gillard moved as one, both seeing red.

Kicking Ralph while he was already down was something they would not tolerate.

Gillard's fist crashed into Loric's face before he could react. Teclos spun and drove a hard side kick into Kross's solar plexus. The air exploded from Kross's lungs as he doubled over.

Tony staggered back, startled, while Ralph stood frozen.

Loric hit the ground hard with Gillard on top of him. Elbows, knees, dust—all flew around as they beat each other bloody.

Teclos didn't stop his assault either.

He surged forward, grabbed Kross by the collar as he hunched over, and drove a knee into his face. Kross hit the ground and went limp instantly.

Tony saw that, hesitated—then raised his fists. He didn't want to abandon his friends at least.

Teclos closed the distance in a heartbeat. With a flurry of blows, he overwhelmed Tony as well. He couldn't defend against the feints, sweeps, and onslaught of jabs.

Tony fell back, bruised and beaten, but still conscious.

The fight ended when Gillard and Loric tore free of each other.

Gillard had some bruises but Loric was beaten blue and yellow, with a half-shut eye and blood running from his nose.

Loric saw then that Kross and Tony were beaten too, so he scrambled away, shouting curses as he ran.

"This isn't over, you maggots!"

Tony dragged the unconscious Kross away after him.

Then silence fell.

Ralph finally overcame his shock and helped Gillard to his feet. Gillard wiped blood from his nose, grinning crookedly.

"See that bitch running away? Ha! I got him good this time."

"My question is, are you good?" Teclos asked.

"Eh, I've had worse," Gillard shrugged.

Teclos turned to Ralph. "You okay?"

Ralph tried to shrug it off as well, but Teclos didn't let him. "Come on, man. You literally froze."

"...Was it that obvious?" Ralph muttered.

"You almost cried," Gillard said flatly.

"I did not!"

Teclos laughed—and after a moment, Ralph and Gillard did too.

"Thanks... again," Ralph said quietly.

"That's what friends are for," Teclos replied, slapping him on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get back to work."

By the end of the day, the streets finally looked cleaner. The stalls were almost repaired.

And little by little, their reputation wasn't being dragged through the 'mud' anymore.

Slowly, trust was returning.

That evening, when they finished working and cleaned up the tools, they gathered in Gillard's barn.

They sat down in the hay, and after a long stretch of silence, Ralph finally spoke.

"So..." He scratched the back of his neck, eyes fixed on the wooden wall. "What did you guys have in mind?"

Teclos didn't answer right away. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

"Before we talk about ideas," he said carefully, "you need to tell us exactly what went wrong. Not the shortened version but what actually happened. Why your dad threw you out."

Ralph let out a breath through his nose. "Figures."

Gillard nodded.

Ralph stared at the hay beneath his boots, then kicked at it lightly.

"He'd been on my case for weeks," he began. "About the festival. About my attitude. About... everything, really."

Teclos stayed quiet, letting him talk.

"He kept saying a tanner needs a good name. Respect. That people don't buy boots or armor from someone they don't trust." Ralph's jaw tightened. "Then he said that with how I act—how I joke around, how I get into trouble—no one would ever take me seriously."

Gillard frowned. "That's not exactly wrong."

"I know," Ralph snapped, then immediately winced. "I know. That's the worst part."

Teclos didn't interrupt.

"He said if I kept acting like a clown, I'd ruin the business before I ever inherited it. That a son like me would never sell a single piece of leather." Ralph swallowed. "Basically called me incompetent."

Gillard sighed quietly.

"And then?" Teclos prompted.

Ralph laughed once, sharp and bitter. "Then I lost it."

He looked up at them for the first time.

"I told him his work was miserable. That I didn't want his 'rotting trade.' That I wasn't going to spend my life scraping hides and smelling piss and blood just to make belts for hunters who barely remember his name." His voice cracked. "I told him he could rot in hell if he thought I'd take over."

The barn fell silent.

"And then he told you to leave," Gillard said.

"Yeah," Ralph muttered. "Didn't even shout. Just pointed at the door."

Teclos exhaled slowly. "Alright."

Ralph blinked. "What about this is 'alright'?"

"No," Teclos said. "That's me saying we won't pretend this didn't hurt your dad as well."

Ralph grimaced. "I... I know."

Gillard leaned back against a beam. "You basically told him his life's work was worthless to his face."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"But that's how it sounded, man..." Gillard said flatly.

Silence again.

"So," Ralph said after a moment, his voice rough, "what now? I apologize and crawl back? He'll just laugh at me and throw me back out on the street."

Teclos shook his head. "No."

"Then what?"

"You are half right, you need to apologize but also show him... not just with words," Teclos said.

Ralph frowned. "What's the difference?"

"The difference," Gillard said, "is between 'sorry I yelled at you' and 'I'll show you I'm sorry and apologize on top of it.'"

Ralph went quiet.

Teclos continued, "Your dad doesn't just see the leatherwork. He sees years of experience. Clients he fought to keep. Mistakes he paid for. A reputation and a life he built piece by piece for himself."

"And he saw you as the one who was supposed to carry that legacy on," Gillard added.

Ralph scowled. "But I don't want to be a tanner."

"That's fine," Teclos said. "But instead of yelling at him, telling him that it's never going to happen while dragging his life's work through shit." He paused for a second. "Maybe a calm conversation with you saying that you'll still help out but it won't be your profession in life would help?"

Ralph opened his mouth, then closed it.

"...sure."

Ralph rubbed his face. "So what, I walk in and say what? Try to explain what my dreams are?"

"Not at first," Teclos replied. "First, you fix the relationship you broke."

"How?"

"Apologize. Work hard. Don't complain," Gillard said immediately.

Ralph looked at him. "Huh?"

"After you apologize at the door, help him. For real. No jokes. No complaints. You show up, shut up, and do exactly what he tells you to," Gillard shrugged. "That's how my father forgives me most of the time."

Teclos nodded.

"That sounds... miserable." Ralph looked worried.

"Yeah, it does," Gillard said flatly. "You did this to yourself."

Teclos softened it slightly. "You're not asking him to take you back unconditionally. And you will show him that you'll still respect his craft—even if it's not your future."

Ralph swallowed. "And if he still kicks me out?"

Teclos met his eyes. "We've got your back. Don't worry."

Gillard nodded. "Besides, my father could use an extra hand at the smithy."

Ralph leaned back into the hay, staring up at the rafters.

"...I really messed this up, didn't I?"

Teclos snorted softly. "Yeah."

Gillard smirked. "Spectacularly."

Ralph huffed a weak laugh.

"But," Teclos said, clapping him lightly on the shoulder, "it's not unfixable. You just have to swallow that massive pride of yours and work hard for once in your life," he said, laughing.

Ralph closed his eyes with a smirk.

"Eat shit, man... but... alright," he said. "I'll try."

Chapter 38 - 37 - What Lies Ahead

Summer had arrived in Kolma.

The sun rose high and clear above the village, bathing the dirt roads and wooden rooftops in warm gold. A gentle breeze carried the scent of fresh grass from the

pastures and the faint tang of resin from newly repaired beams. Chickens wandered freely again, no longer startled by the clatter of constant construction and repairs, and children's laughter echoed between the houses as if the village itself had finally exhaled.

Where broken stalls once stood crooked and destroyed, sturdy frames now held firm. Fresh planks gleamed pale beneath the sun, their edges still sharp, their supports driven deep and true. Cloth roofs fluttered softly, with mended seams holding fast. It was not perfect—but it was whole again, sturdy again.

At the far end of the square, three boys stood drenched in sweat and smeared with dust, staring up at their final task.

They slammed the last support beam into place with a grunt and stepped back to admire it.

"Finally, god damn it," Ralph said, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "If I see another plank today, I'm setting it on fire."

Teclos laughed, breathless, and tossed the hammer up into the air before catching it clumsily.

"Yeah, repairing the whole damn village took us a lot of time..." he said, grinning wide. "But we're finally free!"

Gillard snorted and shook his head.

"Don't be too happy yet," he said calmly. "We still have to show it to the village chief for inspection."

The grin slid right off Teclos' face.

Ralph winced. "...Why would you say that out loud?"

They stood there for a moment, the weight of that reminder settling in.

Then, with shared resignation, they gathered their things and started walking towards the chief's house.

The walk was quieter than usual at first. Teclos broke the silence.

"So," he said, glancing between them, "what do you think? Any chance he doesn't find something wrong?"

Ralph scoffed. "There is a chance, but I wouldn't count on it."

"That's his job," Gillard replied. "And honestly? I'd be more worried if he was silent during that inspection."

Teclos exhaled slowly. "Still... once this is done, that's it. No more repairs. No more hauling carts."

Ralph stretched his arms over his head. "You have no idea how much I'm looking forward to doing absolutely nothing for a few days."

Gillard glanced at him. "You've been spending more time at home lately."

Ralph hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. At first it was rough. Real rough." He shrugged. "But... we argue less now. He yells less. I listen more. Turns out not snapping back helped like you said, and now we're back to normal."

Teclos smiled faintly. "I'm glad."

Ralph huffed, his face turning red. "Don't get all proud about it."

They reached the chief's house soon after—a solid, well-kept structure near the heart of the village. Before they could knock, the door opened.

Elira stood there, her expression warm and welcoming.

"Well, if it isn't Kolma's hardest workers," she said kindly.

They greeted her politely, each a bit stiff with nerves. She listened as they explained, then nodded.

"I'll get my husband," she said. "Wait here."

Moments later, a set of heavy footsteps approached.

Brahm stepped into the doorway.

He crossed his arms and fixed them with a deep frown that made all three straighten unconsciously.

"So," he said gruffly, "what do you boys want?"

Elira slapped him on the shoulder. "Don't be too hard on them."

He flinched but managed to stay composed.

"Well?"

Ralph swallowed. "Sir—we finished the repairs. All of them. We'd like you to inspect the work."

Brahm's eyes narrowed. He studied them for a long moment, then huffed.

"Fine. Let's start at the pastures then, hope you did a decent job."

He turned without another word, closed the door, and started walking straight towards the pastures.

They followed him through the village, nervously anticipating his critique.

Once there, Brahm moved slowly, deliberately, inspecting every beam, every joint, every brace.

He found flaws—but they were small ones. A support that could've been angled better. A seam that might loosen over time. A post that sat a finger's width off-center.

He listed them all in the notes he brought with him.

That notebook was torture for those three, as they didn't know what he was writing.

They moved along the road. He scribbled something down every few metres, and lastly, they made it to the stalls.

Again, he checked everything and started writing it all down. Then he looked at the stalls one last time and nodded.

"...Good job," he muttered. "Could've been cleaner. But it'll hold."

Relief washed over them like rain.

But Teclos had to ask, "What about the notes, sir?"

"I'll give those to the merchants and landowners of the damaged properties so there won't be any surprise waiting for them."

They all nodded and then bowed their heads in thanks, stored the last of the tools, and finally—finally—stood free of work.

Ralph clapped his hands together.

"This calls for a celebration. What do you say we grab a pie at my place?"

Teclos raised a finger immediately. "As long as it's just pie. No alcohol."

Gillard nodded. "Yeah. No more liquor."

Ralph laughed. "You two seriously have no faith in me, but don't worry, it's just pie."

They headed off together.

At Ralph's house, his parents greeted them without any tension, and soon they were seated at a picnic table behind his home, the smell of warm pie filling the air.

As they dug in, the stress of the past weeks was finally lifting—

The conversation shifted.

"...So," Gillard said after a bite, "have you heard about the coming-of-age ceremony?"

"No, not really. I was preoccupied with everything going on," replied Teclos.

Gillard also nodded his head. "Yeah, me too."

Ralph wiped his fingers on a cloth and leaned back against the bench, his eyes drifting toward the gates beyond the fence.

"You two knuckleheads are in luck," he said. "I asked around. A lot."

Gillard raised an eyebrow. "How many people is 'a lot'?"

Ralph smirked. "Enough that my mother told me to stop bothering people."

Teclos shook his head, scoffing. "Alright, I guess that means you're going to brag about what you know."

Ralph nodded. "Yes, I am. It wasn't easy to gather all this information, you know? Anyways, it's done over three days. First day's the written tests."

"What kind of written tests?" Teclos repeated. "And what about those that can't write?"

"They immediately fail the written tests, obviously, and their paths for the future shrink. Anyways, there are five topics," Ralph said. "And they're not light either."

Gillard folded his arms, concern written on his face. "Go on."

"First is monster knowledge. Tracks, habitats, weak points, what you run from and what you can fight. Mostly regional stuff—wolves, boars, low-grade beasts, that kind of thing. But they throw in trick questions. Like monsters that look harmless but aren't."

Teclos nodded slowly. "I guess that makes sense for a village like this."

"Second is basic math," Ralph continued. "Counting, measurements, trade calculations. If you can't figure out how much leather you're selling or how much grain you owe in tax, you fail."

Gillard hummed. "I guess I should try to learn math for a change?"

Ralph rolled his eyes and continued.

"Third is herbal knowledge. Which plants heal, which kill, which only look useful. Drying methods, mixing, storage. Apparently a lot of kids mess this one up."

Teclos smiled. "Alright, I guess I have an advantage here."

Ralph chuckled. "Fourth is knowledge of nobles."

That got both of them confused—why would they need to know that?

"What to do, what not to do," Ralph said. "How to speak, when to bow, when to keep your mouth shut. What gets you fined. What gets you imprisoned."

"...And what gets you killed?" Teclos asked lightly, guessing something.

Ralph nodded. "That too, yes... mostly that."

Gillard exhaled through his nose. "Uncomfortable, but nobles can be stuck up and a pain in the ass. My dad told me that."

"And the last one," Ralph said, his voice turning more serious, "is knowledge of the kingdom. Borders. Enemies. Allies. The ruler, his family, and the basic laws that've been passed down. Stuff like conscription rights, taxes, land ownership."

Teclos leaned back slowly. "That's... a lot for a backwater village ceremony and fourteen-year-olds... do you guys even know how to read?"

Both of them nodded.

"It's not really about being smart," Ralph said. "It's about not being ignorant. It was apparently made by the elders and Brahm to help us survive."

There was a brief silence as that settled.

"And the next day after that?" Gillard asked.

Ralph straightened. "Second day's physical tests."

Teclos blinked. "Physical? As in sword fights?"

"No, just endurance tests," Ralph said. "No mana allowed. They have hunters watching for it."

"...Why no mana?" Teclos repeated, incredulous.

"I don't really know that part, but if you use it, you fail immediately," Ralph confirmed. "The tests are hanging from a bar, long jump, flexibility tests, sprinting, breathing endurance. Stuff like that."

Teclos stared at him. "That's—" He stopped, frowning. "That's almost exactly like school tests from my old world," he said quietly.

Gillard glanced at him. "Your what?"

"Never mind," Teclos muttered, shaken.

"And the third day," Ralph continued, "is the Rune Stone of Truth."

"What's that?" Gillard asked.

"The rune stone," Ralph said. "Big slab. Carved runes all over it. You place your palm in the center, push your mana through."

"So?" Gillard was confused.

"And it checks everything," Ralph said. "How many circles you have. Where they are. Whether they're stable. If they're functioning properly or under strain."

Teclos leaned forward. "Like a... health check?"

"Exactly," Ralph said. "It also reads affinity. Fire, earth, light—whatever you've got. Most people here already know theirs; the stone just confirms it."

"What happens if someone has unstable circles?" Gillard asked.

Ralph's expression tightened. "They get flagged, apparently. The elders talk to you privately. Sometimes you're told to slow down. Sometimes you're told to stop pushing altogether."

Silence fell over the table, each of them hoping that this wouldn't be them.

"Anything else?" Teclos asked.

Ralph's tone softened. "Yeah. The elders sit you down. They look at your results and tell you what paths you'd probably excel in."

"Like hunting, trading, and farming?" Gillard listed.

"Yeah, and crafting. Guard work. Even scholar tracks if you're weird enough," Ralph added. "You usually get three options. Sometimes more. Sometimes less."

"And you have to pick one of them?" Teclos asked.

"No," Ralph said. "Nothing's set in stone. It's advice, not an order. But... they do know their stuff."

Gillard nodded slowly. "Enough that ignoring it would make life harder, I guess."

"Yeah," Ralph said. "But in the end, you are free to choose."

They sat there for a moment longer, excited for what their future could hold.

Teclos finally broke the silence.

"...Guess we'll find out soon, huh?"

Ralph smirked faintly. "One way or another. Anyways, there's still some time until then. You two should study the stuff we talked about today."

"Thanks, Ralph. This was surprisingly a lot of information..." Teclos said honestly, surprised by the intel he gathered... maybe Ralph had a talent for that kind of stuff.

The pie on the table didn't survive for long.

By the time the plates were scraped clean and pushed aside, the sun had begun its slow descent, casting long shadows across the yard. The conversation drifted to smaller things after that—idle jokes, speculation about which elder would scowl the hardest, and half-serious bets about who would embarrass themselves first during the ceremony.

Eventually, Gillard stood up and stretched. "I should head back. Father'll have work waiting even this late."

Ralph nodded. "Same. I've got chores if I don't want another lecture."

They parted ways near the road, exchanging quick goodbyes.

Teclos reached home just as the lamps were being lit.

He found Saldia in the kitchen and Talmir by the hearth, and for a moment hesitated—

"I... need help," he said.

Saldia turned so fast her chair scraped the floor. "Help?"

"For the coming-of-age ceremony," Teclos continued. "I want to do well. Better than average."

Her face lit up instantly. "Oh! Oh, that's wonderful." She was already moving. "Wait here."

She disappeared down the hall, returning moments later with a stack of worn books and bundled notes. "Herbal knowledge first," she declared proudly. "If they're going to test you, we'll make sure you don't miss a single plant."

Talmir watched quietly, then asked, "And me?"

Teclos met his gaze. "I need more training, I guess. They check your physical condition apparently."

A slow smile tugged at Talmir's mouth. "Alright, we'll do it in the morning."

Dinner passed quickly that evening. Later, Teclos sat on his bed, hands on his knees, breathing steady as he slipped into meditation.

His focus was sharp and clear.

The fifth circle in his heart was drawing close—just one more step and he would reach it.

And when he did, the village wouldn't know what hit it during the ceremony.

Chapter 39 - 38 - Getting Stronger

Teclos could barely wait for the morning.

As the first rays of sunshine slipped through his shutters, he got up and moved quickly through his familiar routine—far quicker than usual. He was eager to begin. The sun had only just risen over the crest of the treeline, painting the village roofs in pale gold, and already his mind was racing ahead.

He still had one month left, he thought as he stretched his arms overhead. One month was plenty of time to prepare for the ceremony—if he used it well.

Talmir was already outside, standing with his arms crossed. His eyes betrayed the heavy sleepiness still lingering in him.

"I'll ask you again—do you really want to do this in just a month?" his father asked, yawning.

Teclos nodded without hesitation. "Yeah. I'm close to my next circle, so I might as well push myself a bit more."

Talmir studied him for a moment longer.

"Okay then. I won't waste a single day, then. Instead of normal training, we'll get you to hunt some beasts."

Teclos blinked, confused for a second. "Why hunt beasts all of a sudden?"

"Well, it's dangerous," Talmir said evenly, "but killing beasts will increase your mana quicker. Of course, weaker beasts yield less mana."

Teclos slowed slightly, trying to process that. This was his first time hearing of something like this.

"You gain mana by... killing beasts?"

"Sort of," Talmir replied. "Once a life fades, it releases pure mana. It is attributeless—meaning you can take that mana into your body. Sometimes, depending on how potent it is, you can directly try to circle up."

Teclos felt a spark of excitement run through him. The concept felt strangely familiar—almost like gaining experience in a game, only far more real... and far more gruesome.

Talmir had prepared some gear for him, hanging neatly over the fence. He walked Teclos through it step by step—how to strap the leather armor tight, how to secure the belt properly so the sword wouldn't shift mid-run.

Once Teclos was ready, they made their way to the gates and out into the forest.

"We'll start with easy prey," Talmir said as they walked beneath the shade of the trees. "I'll stay behind you and watch your back. Just focus, stay calm, and try to kill a few beasts that I point out."

Teclos nodded, as his heart began beating faster with excitement.

He had killed a ghoul before—but he hadn't known there was a method like this, a way to actually gain from it. If he had known... maybe he would have already reached a higher circle.

"Why didn't you teach me that sooner?" he asked, glancing back.

"For one, it's dangerous," Talmir said without missing a beat. "If you get greedy and challenge something you can't beat, you die. And believe me, people were stupid enough to try."

He paused briefly, then continued.

"Secondly, it's generally frowned upon. Some fanatics or cultists stop at nothing to gain strength... even murder. That's why you need a permit like a hunter's license—to hunt and to be vetted."

Teclos frowned slightly.

"And lastly," Talmir added, his tone sharpening just a little, "if you somehow manage to kill something far above your level and take in its mana forcefully, your body won't handle it. You'll get mana poisoning. Best case—you die. Worst case... you turn into a monster."

Teclos swallowed, more cautious now.

As they walked deeper into the forest, Talmir continued explaining—what kinds of beasts they would be looking for today, what to do after a kill. His instructions were precise, practical, and experienced.

Eventually, they reached a small cave at the base of the mountain range. The entrance was dark, jagged, and quiet.

Talmir stopped and gestured forward.

"Get ready."

Teclos tightened his grip on his sword.

"We're hunting sonic bats in there," Talmir said. "They have four wings, move fast, and have an annoying sonic attack. Low-level beasts—but good for reflex training and mana siphoning."

From his pouch, Talmir pulled out a pair of strange earplugs—cone-shaped, with a leather-like exterior and soft fabric lining inside. Tiny runes were etched faintly along their surface.

"Is this standard hunter gear, Dad?" Teclos asked, taking a pair.

Talmir snorted. "No. I had those made after dealing with that banshee. Now if something screams that loudly again, it can suck my ass... and don't tell your mother I said that."

Teclos almost laughed, despite the tension, as he fitted them into his ears.

They stepped into the cave together.

The darkness swallowed them quickly, the air turning damp and cold. A faint, high-pitched chittering echoed somewhere deeper inside.

Talmir's voice dropped low. "Simple strategy. I'll keep them from escaping with a wind barrier. You focus on dodging and striking. Don't rush—watch their movement calmly. After you kill them, siphon the mana immediately."

Teclos nodded, his body already tensing.

A sudden screech cut through the cave.

Shapes burst from the ceiling—fast, erratic, wings slicing through the air as the sonic bats dove toward the intruder in a chaotic swarm.

Teclos reacted instinctively, ducking as one shot past his head, the air around it vibrating with a sharp, piercing hum. Another came from the side—he twisted, barely avoiding it, feeling the vibration ripple through his body even with the earplugs in.

"Focus!" Talmir called from behind.

Teclos steadied himself and watched them.

Their flight wasn't random—it looped, curved, dipped in patterns, avoiding the cave walls and their kin.

One bat lunged straight at him.

He stepped aside at the last possible moment and swung his blade.

It cut the bat in half, and its body dropped to the ground.

Teclos focused on the corpse's mana—a faint, almost invisible surge of energy leaking from it.

Without hesitation, he reached for it, and the mana slipped into him like a breath of cold air, merging with him and becoming part of him.

His heart raced with excitement.

More bats dove.

This time, Teclos moved with more confidence—ducking, weaving, striking when openings appeared. Each kill came quicker than the last, each movement less wasteful.

The cave filled with echoes of wings, steel, and sharp impacts as he fought—learning, adapting, improving with every exchange.

And with every fallen beast, he reached out again—pulling that faint, fleeting energy into himself.

It wasn't much.

But it was enough.

Enough to feel the mana rising in his heart, kill by kill.

This continued on for the whole day, and by the end of it Teclos was so exhausted that Talmir had to carry him home.

He was sleeping on Talmir's back.

'Haha, it's like he was possessed by something.'

And he was, as he felt tangible growth in his mana. He was currently speed-running his way up to the second circle.

As Talmir stepped through the door, Saldia got worried for a second after seeing Teclos knocked out cold. But Talmir's genuine smile immediately stopped her worries.

"What happened?" she asked, unable to help her curiosity.

"You should've seen my boy, he was determined and fierce, haha! Even I wasn't like that when I was young... he swung his sword until he literally couldn't stand anymore."

It warmed Saldia's heart as Talmir got fully animated, talking about Teclos and their outing.

Once they put Teclos to bed, they had a passionate night together.

After the sunshine greeted Teclos through the shutters again, he quickly opened his eyes, startled and disoriented. He didn't know where he was for a second.

'I guess Dad carried me here...'

He focused inward and felt the thick stream of his new mana. He'd likely need some more days, but he was on the right track to gain his second circle in his heart.

He quickly got up and washed himself, scrambling to gear up and go outside, expecting to see Talmir.

But he was nowhere to be found. Now, although Talmir was late sometimes, it was very rare. So Teclos went back into the house and noticed that even dinner plates were left on the table...

"Huh?"

That was highly unusual for Saldia to leave them, since no one was up yet. He decided to wait at the kitchen table and eat some fruit that was still there.

After about an hour, Talmir finally got up. He looked disheveled, with heavy eye bags. His gear was sloppily put on, and in some places even put on wrong.

"Wow.... what happened to you?" Teclos wondered.

Talmir noticed him and tried to think of an excuse. "A beast attacked me last night... had to fend it off, you know..."

He thought it was strange, but what the hell—as long as they were going on a hunt again today.

This hunting and training continued on for a whole two weeks, and Teclos finally drew close to making his second heart circle.

Still, when he sat down one night to meditate, he didn't expect anything. The mana he gathered was anything but subtle—roaring with power as it coiled around his heart faster than ever before.

With unnatural smoothness, the heavy, rapid flow began to transform, merging with him. Teclos was surprised but didn't stop. He guided it carefully.

The rotation accelerated.

He pushed it into place, and the mana spun tighter and condensed.

His breath escaped in a hiss.

'It's now or never,' he thought, opening his eyes.

Focused entirely on the task at hand, Teclos began to change.

Mana flooded in—and his veins darkened beneath his skin as thick black mana surged through them. The room dimmed, as the darkness and pressure spread.

A black haze bled outward, heavy and suffocating. The floor beneath him groaned, hairline cracks spreading as the pressure doubled.

His eyes turned pitch black once more.

The pressure mounted—then the spinning mass condensed further, locked, and snapped into place.

A second dark ring formed, rotating in perfect harmony with the existing one.

The backlash was instant.

Teclos' head snapped back as a scream tore from his throat. Power detonated outward. The haze exploded.

Walls split with sharp cracking sounds. The door was ripped from its hinges and slammed into the kitchen table hard enough to splinter the wood.

Black sludge poured from his nose, ears, and mouth—thick, foul-smelling mana waste. He gagged violently, spitting and retching as his lungs burned.

Footsteps thundered down the hall.

Saldia and Talmir burst into the doorway, both having been thrown from their beds. They recoiled from the stench and lingering pressure.

"Teclos!" Saldia cried.

"I'm okay," he rasped. "I did it!" he claimed, even as he vomited up his dinner.

"Did what?" Saldia asked, concern still clear in her eyes.

"Cough... I made my second circle in my Heart."

Talmir noted the smoother flow through Teclos' body, more condensed now, the Heart bleeding power into his Core like a living circuit.

"...Another Heart circle?" Saldia whispered, incredulous.

Teclos nodded weakly. "I knew I was close. Just... didn't think it would happen tonight."

A smirk tugged at Talmir's lips, subtle but proud.

"...That's my boy," he said slowly. "At your age, that's quite an achievement."

Teclos swallowed, slightly nervous that he'd gone overboard and would stand out too much. "Is it... that good?"

Talmir was silent for a moment.

Finally, he said, "It means the coming-of-age ceremony will surprise everyone. Envy and awe will probably be waiting there. But no matter what, you can always lean on us."

He smiled as he knew that his parents had his back.

It washed away his worry and nervousness.

Although this new circle might get him into trouble during the ceremony, he steadied his resolve and decided to face whatever came together with his family and friends.

Looking onward, next time would be the Mind circle again, which was worrisome, but Father Pella had assured him it wouldn't be as bad as before.

As he smiled, he stepped toward his parents for a group hug.

Instead, a small wind blast and a jet of water hit him simultaneously.

Holding her nose with one hand while a stream of water poured from the other, Saldia spoke. "Go wash up first. You stink."

Talmir nodded. "Yeah. Don't even think about coming near us in that state."

"Oi! Isn't that a bit too much?! How—" He tried to complain, but the water jet targeted his mouth mid-sentence.

"Ugh... it's even worse when you talk. Go brush your teeth too."

Teclos stared at them, dumbfounded by the complete lack of empathy. He'd thought they were having a moment.

Like a wet, dirty dog, he was herded toward the bath and forced to scrub himself thoroughly.

While he washed up, Talmir began repairing his room and the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Saldia cleaned up the foul mana residue and vomit Teclos had left behind. Then she prepared a light snack for him, knowing he had quite literally thrown everything up.

After that fiasco, a week passed.

That morning, Teclos was halfway through breakfast when a knock came at the door.

He stayed silent and continued eating quietly.

The door rattled as someone knocked again, louder this time.

And again.

Finally rolling his eyes, Teclos answered.

"Alright, alright!" he shouted, standing up from the table and opening the door.

Ralph stood there, bow slung over his shoulder, grin wide enough to be suspicious.

"Morning," Ralph said cheerfully. "You busy today?"

Teclos blinked. "That depends. Why?"

Ralph leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice like he was sharing a great secret. "Because if you are, you shouldn't be. Trust me. I've got some big news."

Intrigued, Teclos raised an eyebrow. "And what is this big news?"

"I'll tell you when we arrive at Gillard's," Ralph answered. "So? You free?"

Teclos hesitated, glancing back toward the table. Normally, mornings after training were reserved for reading, chores, or Saldia's relentless study sessions. But with his goal already achieved, he could afford a day or two of rest.

A second later, he made up his mind. One day wouldn't hurt, right?

"I guess I can spare a day," he said. "What do you have planned?"

Ralph's grin widened. "Haha, I'm not telling you, man. You'll see when we get there."

Rolling his eyes, Teclos sighed. "Okay, I guess." And followed Ralph.

They walked through the village at an easy pace, the morning sun already warming the dirt paths. Ralph was practically bouncing beside him, humming to himself, occasionally letting out a quiet laugh for no apparent reason.

Teclos eyed him sideways. "Must be good news, judging by the way you're prancing around."

"You could say that."

Teclos snorted. "You're usually terrible at keeping secrets."

"Yeah, well, not this time. My lips are sealed until we arrive."

"Fine, I guess. You've made me quite curious."

Ralph only laughed, refusing to elaborate further no matter how much Teclos pressed him. By the time the forge came into view, the anticipation had started to grate on his nerves.

Gillard was hard at work, hammer rising and falling in a steady rhythm as sparks danced across the stone floor. The heat from the forge washed over them as they approached.

You could find him there every day.

Ralph cupped his hands around his mouth. "Oi! Stop working already!"

Gillard didn't look up and continued hammering. "Finally. Took you long enough, Ralph."

Teclos smirked. "I heard you two had a big secret to share? Maybe I should give you some privacy—wouldn't want to interrupt whatever intense 'thing' you were doing here."

"Funny," Gillard said. "Real funny. Let's just get to it."

"Alright," Ralph said proudly.

Gillard set the hammer aside and wiped his hands on a rag. "Father!" he called toward the inner room. "Mind if I take a short break?"

A gruff voice answered from inside. "Don't wander off too long."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

They slipped around the back of the forge, past stacked wood and cooling ingots, toward the small barn behind it.

Both of them looked at Teclos with a mischievous grin, and Teclos finally stopped walking.

"...Alright," he said flatly. "What is this about?"

They turned to face him, still grinning like children who had just pulled off something impressive.

Gillard spoke first. "We figured we'd tell you together."

Ralph nodded eagerly. "Yeah. Seemed right."

Teclos folded his arms. "Tell me what?"

They straightened—just a little.

"We both completed our fourth circle," Gillard said.

For a moment, Teclos simply stared in shock. Then his expression softened into a genuine smile.

"...Really?" he said. "That's great. Both of you?"

Ralph puffed up slightly. "Took some effort."

Gillard nodded. "Wasn't easy."

Teclos stepped forward and clapped each of them on the shoulder. "I was expecting a prank, but this is a welcome surprise. Congrats. That's seriously awesome, guys."

Ralph frowned. "That's it?"

Teclos tilted his head. "What, did you want fireworks?"

Gillard squinted at him. "You're not shocked? Or mad?"

"We thought you'd freak out," Ralph added. "You know—now that we've caught up."

Teclos blinked, then laughed.

"What, you thought I'd be angry? Idiots—I'm happy for you."

Chapter 40 - 39 - Ceremony Day 1

Saldia called out to Teclos in the morning. "Breakfast!"

Teclos' eyes snapped open.

Today was the day that would change his life.

No more boring day-to-day routine, always staying in the small town, either training or learning. Sure, sometimes he would hang out with Ralph and Gillard, but without Talmir accompanying him, he would never have been allowed to leave the village on his own. He even had to bribe the guard just to go out and pick flowers for Saldia.

A rush of excitement surged through his chest. After these three days, he would finally be allowed to explore more of the world.

He threw the blanket aside, dressed quickly, and ran a hand through his hair before stepping out of his room.

His parents were already seated.

"Morning," he said, unable to suppress the brightness in his voice as he sat down.

Talmir glanced at him over his cup.

Smiling warmly, Saldia placed a plate in front of her son. "It's not every day someone steps into adulthood, but do be careful not to let it go to your head and give it your all."

Teclos chuckled. "Don't worry, it'll be easy for me."

Talmir snorted lightly. "What a very arrogant fourteen-year-old."

As they ate together, the conversation was light. Saldia asked if he'd slept well. Talmir reminded him not to rush through the written tests and to properly pay attention. Teclos reassured them both that he was prepared enough.

The whole village had three days off for the ceremony. Shops were closed. Even most hunters stayed in town. There were exceptions, of course—livestock still needed tending, and someone always had to stand watch—but those were few.

This tradition had begun after Chief Brahm took leadership.

The previous chief had been corrupt and distant, hoarding influence and favor. Festivals like these were rare, and gatherings even rarer.

Brahm had changed that.

He believed that the youth should at least get a chance to survive in this cruel world.

And because of that, for three days, Kolma belonged to its youth.

Once Talmir and Saldia finished eating, they changed into their better clothes—nothing extravagant, but well-kept and presentable. Talmir wore a darker tunic trimmed with silver-thread embroidery along the collar. Saldia had braided her hair neatly and wore a pale blue dress that subtly matched her affinity.

Teclos stepped outside first and held the door open for them.

Summer air greeted him—warm and alive, carrying the scent of flowers.

Kolma was no longer the quiet village it had once been.

Dirt roads still ran between the homes, but they were wider now. Instead of simple timber huts, there now stood houses with stone foundations and wooden tops, some even reinforced with clay tiles near the center.

A few buildings had grown taller, boasting partial second floors that overlooked the streets.

Wooden fences marked clear property lines, with small gardens thriving behind them. Drying racks for herbs and strips of salted meat stood beside nearly every home, swaying gently in the breeze. The market square had expanded as well—its stalls were bigger, permanent, and offered more choices.

There were still no paved streets, no grand walls or towers.

But Kolma had grown bit by bit every year.

People filled the streets.

Families walked together toward the village center, children running ahead before being called back by laughing parents. Hunters who normally carried stern expressions wore relaxed smiles and chatted among themselves.

Even the older folk had stepped outside early, leaning on canes or resting on benches to watch the younger generation gather.

A quiet hum of anticipation hung in the air.

Teclos walked between his parents, hands clasped behind his head, chatting about everyday stuff.

They continued walking, passing neighbors who greeted them warmly. The conversation drifted toward the past.

"It wasn't like this before," Talmir said quietly. "When I came of age, it was a small village. How time flies..."

"It means that we are moving in the right direction," Saldia added.

They fell silent for a moment.

Teclos glanced at them. "Was it really that different for you?"

"Yes," Saldia said gently. "But that's a good thing."

They slowed down slightly as they approached the town square because of the crowd.

Just before they reached it, familiar voices called out.

"Teclos!"

Ralph jogged toward them, dressed cleaner than usual, his hair tied back properly for once, and just behind him were his parents.

Gillard approached from the other side with his mother; his father seemed to be absent, no doubt at the forge hammering despite the celebration.

The adults greeted each other first.

"Talmir," Ralph's father said with a nod. "When are you planning to pick up your boots?"

"After the ceremony," Talmir replied. "I've been too busy lately."

Saldia exchanged polite conversation with Gillard's mother—health updates, small talk, light laughter. The customary greetings.

Meanwhile, the three boys grew competitive again.

"You ready to lose?" Gillard asked casually.

Teclos scoffed. "Lose? To you?"

Ralph folded his arms. "Hah! Both of you have no chance against me."

"Yeah, yeah," Teclos said dryly. "We'll see about that."

Gillard smirked.

"What are you smiling about, Gillard? Huh? I bet your score on the written test will be zero," quipped Ralph.

"Shut up before I stomp you in the physical test," replied Gillard.

They continued forward while bickering, and the square came into full view.

It was packed.

Nearly the entire village had gathered. People stood shoulder to shoulder around the square, some even sat on crates or low stone borders. Children had been lifted onto shoulders for a better view.

At the center stood ten elders in a half-circle formation, their robes simple but dignified. Their presence was restrained yet overflowing with power. Beside them stood Chief Brahm—broad-shouldered, stern, and dressed for the occasion.

They were waiting for the final stragglers.

The murmur of conversation slowly faded as more people arrived.

Then, after several minutes, Brahm stepped forward onto a raised wooden platform built specifically for the ceremony. It wasn't ornate—just sturdy, reinforced wood—but it elevated him above the crowd.

The square grew quiet.

Chief Brahm stood tall upon the wooden platform, hands clasped behind his back. His presence alone was enough to silence the murmurs.

He scanned the gathered villagers slowly, with sharp yet warm eyes.

When he spoke, his voice carried through the whole town square.

"People of Kolma."

The square fell fully silent.

"Today, we gather not merely for tradition. Not merely for celebration. We gather because we have successfully brought another generation to stand at the gates of adulthood."

He turned slightly, gesturing toward the youths assembled near the front.

"For fourteen years, you have grown under our roofs, eaten from our harvests, trained in our fields, studied in our homes. You have stumbled and argued with us along the way."

The crowd listened to his speech without even a cough.

"And now," he continued, "you are finally ready to take the first step into your new lives."

His expression hardened slightly.

"The coming-of-age ceremony is a festival for us old folk, but for you it is a test and proof of your diligence and life."

A pause.

"For three days, you will be tested—your strengths, your weaknesses, your knowledge. The paths you can take will become clearer at the end of those days."

He raised his left hand, his index finger extended, counting deliberately.

"The first day will test your minds. Your knowledge of the monsters that prowl beyond our borders. Your understanding of trade and numbers. Your grasp of herbs. Your awareness of nobles and the dangers of missteps in their presence.

And your knowledge of the kingdom that shields us—and sometimes demands from us. After all, a fool is the most dangerous person to be around and the one that dies first."

Then he raised his middle finger.

"The second day will test your bodies. Without mana. You will rely only on the strength you have built with your sweat and tears. After all, a healthy body is a basic need to survive in this world."

A few hunters nodded approvingly.

And the final raised finger.

"And on the third day, the Stone of Truth will measure your mana itself—your circles, their stability, and your affinity. It will examine your mana veins—to see if

they are healthy. After all, mana is everywhere, and you must learn how to adapt and live with yours."

His voice softened slightly.

"Lastly, the elders will guide you. Don't worry, we will not force you to choose a certain path. But we will offer counsel based on what we see during the tests. The decision is yours to make."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"When I was your age," he said slowly, "we had a harder time growing up."

A few older villagers exchanged knowing looks.

"The villages out here were not safe, and more than a few got erased from history. There were no tests to prepare us. One day, we were children. The next, we had to be adults, and we had no choice in that matter... some didn't even make it that far."

His jaw tightened faintly.

"We had to give our lives and endure those hardships. Bleeding."

The square grew quiet.

"I do not regret the life I've lived. It made me strong. But I will not pretend it was kind."

He looked at the youths again, warmth in his eyes.

"You deserve a better life than we had, at least a better starting point."

His voice, still deep and steady, carried compassion and care for the youths.

"This world beyond Kolma is not gentle. It will not care about your dreams or your struggles. It will test you far more harshly than we ever could."

He inhaled slowly.

Everyone listened to his speech.

"My dream," Brahm said after a moment, "is simple."

He looked almost embarrassed admitting it.

"I want to build a safe home for all of you, while also giving those who crave freedom a fighting chance."

A murmur moved gently through the crowd.

"A chance to prosper. A chance to bloom in whatever soil suits you best. Hunter, trader, crafter, scholar—whatever path you choose."

His voice grew quieter, but it carried stronger emotion and passion than before.

"I want you to build our future together with me. Build lives that are happier than ours were and kinder than ours were."

His throat tightened, so he cleared it once.

"And maybe... maybe if we do this right, the next generation after you will have it even better."

A faint sheen appeared in his eyes. He blinked quickly, pretending it was the sunlight.

From somewhere in the crowd, a child's voice piped up loudly—

"Look! Grandpa Brahm is crying again!"

Laughter burst across the square.

Brahm stiffened immediately. "I am not—" He coughed. "It's dust."

A few villagers wiped their own eyes from his speech and clapped softly.

Brahm straightened his back, regaining his composure.

"Khm... A-anyways..."

He adjusted his stance.

"Young men and women of Kolma—step forward with courage. Show us who you are. Show the world how strong and resilient you are!"

He raised his hand high.

"Let the coming-of-age ceremony begin!"

For a heartbeat, there was silence—

Then the entire square erupted.

Hundreds of voices roared with pride and joy. Cheers rose into the summer sky, echoing against the timber walls and fluttering banners.

Kolma was alive.

The cheers had not yet fully settled when Chief Brahm raised his hand once more.

Gradually, the square quieted again.

He turned to address the wider crowd.

"Those not of age—children, parents, grandparents—remain here in the square. Today is yours as well. There will be music. There will be food, so celebrate and dance to your hearts' content."

Drums, lutes, and fiddles began playing as soon as he finished speaking.

Warm laughter rolled through the villagers.

"As for you," he said, his eyes settling on the gathered youths, "step forward."

Nearly sixty of them did.

Teclos felt his mother squeeze his hand once before letting go. Talmir gave him a firm nod.

The heavy doors of the guild hall were pulled open.

He stepped forward, confident and excited.

Inside, the main chamber had been transformed.

Long wooden tables and benches filled the center of the vast hall in neat rows. Sunlight filtered through high windows, illuminating polished wood and drifting dust motes. The space felt larger than usual.

The elders were already seated—ten of them—positioned along the edges and corners of the hall. From where they sat, every table in the center was visible. Hunters stood near the back wall, arms crossed, silent and watchful.

The youths were guided to sit in the middle rows only, clustered where they could be seen from every angle. It felt less like a village ceremony and more like an academy examination—orderly and intimidating.

Brahm stepped forward once they were seated.

"You will have three hours," he announced. "No speaking. No standing without permission. No mana of any kind."

His gaze swept the hall.

"If you are caught cheating or if you don't know how to read, you fail this portion entirely."

The warning was stern.

"This is not a race," he continued. "Read carefully and think clearly before you answer."

Then he stepped aside.

His wife, Elira, rose from her seat.

In her arms was a tall stack of parchment bundles, each tied neatly with cord. She began distributing them down the rows.

When one landed before Teclos, he felt his confidence dip for the briefest moment.

The stack of parchment was thick.

Beside him, Ralph stared at his own bundle and muttered under his breath, "...That's a damn whole book."

Gillard was so nervous he froze.

The three exchanged brief glances—a nod.

Good luck.

Elira returned to the front.

"You may untie the cord," she said. "Do not turn the page until instructed."

The hall fell into complete silence.

Elira lifted a small brass bell.

"When it rings, you may begin."

She explained a few more rules, then rang the bell—a clear and sharp sound escaped from it.

"Begin."

Pages flipped in unison.

And the first test began.