

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 51 - 50 - Taking Command

The forest grew quieter the deeper they walked.

Snow blanketed the northern path in an unbroken sheet of white, disturbed only by the narrow trail Ulmak had chosen. The mountains loomed ahead, distant and pale beneath the winter sky, their peaks veiled in drifting mist.

After several minutes, Ulmak slowed down.

Then stopped.

The four trainees halted with him.

He turned, his expression calm but firm.

"Before we proceed further," he said, "there are basic rules."

Cold air drifted between them, carrying the faint scent of pine.

"I will remain within a fifty-meter radius of your group at all times. You will not necessarily see me. That is intentional." His gaze swept across each of them in turn. "As stated before, I will not interfere unless absolutely necessary."

He let the words settle.

"If I step in, you should assume one of two things: either you are about to die... or you have already failed."

Silence followed.

"You are operating as a group in this test," Ulmak continued. "Groups require structure, so for this examination, you will appoint a leader."

Samara's brows lifted slightly.

"A leader's decisions will influence your evaluation. Strong coordination and efficient command will benefit your overall score." His voice remained even.

"However, your mistakes will also be judged more harshly. Leadership is a double-edged sword."

He folded his arms.

"Vote. If the chosen one declines, you will move to the next best pick. If no one accepts, I will appoint one myself."

The snow shifted faintly beneath their boots, and Gillard spoke first.

"I vote Teclos."

There was no hesitation in his tone.

"He's trained outside longer than most of us," Gillard added. "He's also fought real beasts. And his father trained him personally."

Samara glanced at Teclos, thinking.

After a while, she responded. "Alright," she said. "I agree."

Eldric scratched the back of his head, eyes flicking briefly toward the trees before returning to the group.

"Yeah. Uhh, me too... I vote Teclos as well."

Ulmak looked at Teclos.

"Well?"

Teclos held their gazes for a moment. The weight of responsibility pressed lightly against his thoughts—he was fairly confident he could pull it off.

He nodded once and said, "I'll take it," in a calm tone.

"But if I am to lead, we move as one. No reckless actions without asking me first."

No one objected.

Ulmak inclined his head. "Very well, the stage is yours then."

Teclos glanced toward him. "Can we begin hunting?"

Ulmak tilted his head. "I mean, what part of 'the stage is yours' don't you understand?"

Teclos turned back to the others—and did not move forward.

Instead, he exhaled slowly.

"Before we start," he said, "let's reintroduce ourselves properly. The better we know each other, the better our teamwork."

Samara gave a faint smirk. "What kind of questions are we talking about?"

"I... nothing too personal... it's just that I don't know what you guys can do, well besides Gillard," Teclos corrected.

He scratched the back of his head and faced them fully.

"Here, I'll start. I'm Teclos, and you probably know, but I have darkness affinity."

The words lingered between them.

"I can sense shadows within a certain range. If they're 'dense' enough, I can see through them as well." He paused briefly. "I can also bind targets using shadow constructs—arms or tendrils. It's only temporary, sadly. Stronger beasts won't stay restrained for long."

He did not elaborate further and then gestured toward Gillard.

Gillard shifted slightly, surprisingly shy. He was clearly uncomfortable with talking in front of more people.

"Hi... I'm, uh, my name is Gillard. I have fire affinity," he said. "I specialize in close to mid-range combat."

He lifted his bow slightly.

"I can ignite my arrows. Heat my sword until it burns through almost anything. And... propel myself forward using bursts of flame from my feet."

He said the last part quickly, as if reluctant to dwell on it.

Teclos nodded, then looked at Eldric.

The boy scratched the back of his head again—it seemed he was in a similar situation to Gillard.

"I'm Eldric and have wind affinity," he began. "I focus on speed and range. I can enhance arrows with wind—they are faster and fly for a longer distance." He glanced at his boots. "I can also dash using wind bursts from my legs."

He hesitated.

"And I can sense disturbances in the air. Not clearly—just... shifts. Movement."

"A danger sense?" Samara asked.

"Something like that," Eldric admitted.

Finally, all eyes shifted to her.

Samara rested a hand lightly on the hilt of her sword.

"I'm Samara and have water affinity," she said confidently. "I can be a close-range support. I can release pressurized water from my blade—good for staggering or cutting through things." She tilted her head slightly. "I can also draw moisture from the air to create a thin mist."

Her expression sharpened into a smug expression.

"And yes, I can produce drinkable water. So unless one of you plans to eat snow all day, you're welcome."

A faint breath of amusement passed through the group.

Teclos gave a small nod.

"Alright."

He crouched briefly, brushing aside snow with a gloved hand and sketching a simple formation.

"If we encounter a beast, I'll take the vanguard position. I can bind the target first."

He looked at Gillard.

"You move immediately after. You are our assault. Your role is to deal decisive damage while it's restrained."

Gillard nodded without hesitation.

"Samara will be the mid-range support. If possible, attack the beast and blind or disrupt the target with your water. Also use your mist to shroud us."

"Understood."

"Eldric. You're our long-range support. Use wind-infused arrows like you said. Prioritize weak points and call out movement shifts if anything else creeps up behind us, as I'll focus on binding."

Eldric straightened slightly. "Got it."

Teclos rose.

"We move carefully. There is no need to rush. If you notice tracks, broken branches, disturbed snow—tell me immediately."

Ulmak had stepped back during the exchange, observing in silence. He gave no comment now.

Teclos turned toward the forest.

"Let's move."

They advanced.

The trees thickened gradually, pine and oak standing tall. The air felt colder here, the shade from the trees making it colder still. Even the wind seemed to soften as it passed between the trunks.

Teclos slowed their pace deliberately.

He scanned the ground first.

"Tracking in snow is easier—well, usually," he said quietly as they walked. "Snow doesn't lie, and we can track a beast even if the tracks are old, provided there was no new snowfall."

He pointed toward a shallow depression near the base of a tree.

"See, like this one."

Teclos crouched slightly to examine it.

"The edges are soft," he observed. "Meaning it's not fresh."

They continued onward.

A broken twig here.

Bark scraped along one trunk at mid-height there.

"Always check tree lines," Teclos murmured. "Large beasts brush against them."

Samara glanced around more carefully now.

"If we see something unusual?"

"Call it out," Teclos replied. "Even if you're unsure."

Their formation remained loose but still stayed within eyesight, with Teclos leading them.

They moved deeper into the forest.

The morning stretched quietly into midday, pale sunlight filtering through skeletal branches and casting long shadows across the snow. Their pace remained steady.

Tracking in winter was both a blessing and a curse.

Snow remembered everything, yes.

But wind or more snowfall erased everything just as easily.

After nearly two and a half hours of steady progress, the forest began to change. The trees grew sparser, the ground more uneven. Stones jutted from the earth in thick clusters, some half-buried beneath frost.

Teclos slowed.

"Stop."

The others froze instantly.

He crouched near a disturbed patch of snow.

The indentation was deep—hoof-shaped and far deeper than a deer or small beast would leave. Snow had compacted under immense weight, ice crystals crushed into dense layers beneath the footprint.

He brushed aside the powder carefully.

Samara stepped closer. "That one's fresh."

Teclos nodded. "An hour, maybe even less."

A faint trail carved through the snow and the forest, wide like a wagon. Small rocks displaced. Bark stripped off the trees, with some broken branches.

The signs were obvious, and Gillard exhaled slowly.

"That's a big hunt... a stone boar."

Teclos rose.

The tracks were unmistakable now that he saw them fully. Massive hoof impressions. Deep gouges where tusks had scraped low-hanging branches. In some areas, the earth itself seemed slightly warped.

"It's big," Eldric murmured.

Yes.

It was.

Teclos followed the trail several steps forward before stopping again. He studied the spacing between prints.

"It's fully grown," he said quietly.

Stone boars were standard big game in this region.

Common, sure.

But never an easy fight... even more so for new recruits.

He turned to the group.

"Stone boars are territorial," he began calmly. "Their charge is the most dangerous part. Once they lock onto a target, they don't stop easily."

He gestured toward a tree trunk ahead. The bark was splintered, wood cracked inward.

"They build momentum fast. If you're in front when it charges and you hesitate, you die."

They watched the splintered tree in silence.

"Their hide is thick," Teclos continued. "Dense muscle under layered, stone-like skin. Normal arrows won't penetrate deeply unless reinforced or aimed at weak points."

Gillard adjusted his grip unconsciously.

"And they can manipulate earth," Teclos added. "Not like a trained earth mage—but instinctively. They can raise ridges, destabilize footing, even launch chunks of stone short distances."

Samara's expression changed slightly. "So, what's the plan?"

"Well..." He paused. "For a group of four, it should be manageable..."

He looked at each of them.

"We still have time. We could look for something smaller, like snow hares. Something easier like stags, maybe."

His tone was neutral.

Portraying that he didn't care if they changed targets, and was keeping the safety of the team a priority.

"But this," Eldric said, gesturing toward the heavy trail, "is worth more. In evaluation, right?"

The wind shifted softly between the trees.

"It is, but if we take it, we have to really commit to it. No hesitation."

He paused.

"Speak now. Do we hunt this... or do we track something safer?"

Maybe because of pride, more points, or simple youthful bravado, no one hesitated.

"I'm in," Gillard said first, voice steady.

Eldric swallowed once, then nodded. "We can take it."

Samara rolled her shoulders lightly. "If we're going to hunt, we might as well hunt something worth it."

Teclos studied each of them for a second longer.

Then he nodded once. "Alright then. Let's follow the tracks."

The wind favored them as well.

It drifted from ahead toward their backs, carrying their scent away from whatever lay before them. Teclos adjusted their formation slightly, keeping them downwind as they moved.

The tracks became fresher, more obvious.

Another hour passed, and they finally heard the beast.

A distant, heavy stomp. A massive weight moving across the earth without care. They also heard something breaking and crashing.

Teclos froze mid-step and raised a fist.

After listening some more, the breaking and crashing continued.

He motioned them forward slowly.

They crouched low and advanced with deliberate care, avoiding making noise as much as possible.

The bushes thinned gradually, and the forest opened.

A clearing was ahead of them, unnaturally made.

Trees had been uprooted and shoved outward in a rough circular pattern. Trunks lay stacked along the perimeter like crude barricades. Earth was churned and uneven, stone ridges protruding in jagged lines across the ground.

At the center—was the stone boar.

It was massive.

Its body was thick and compact, layered hide resembling overlapping stone plates fused with muscle beneath. Tusks curved outward and slightly upward, their edges chipped from some sort of impact. With each slow movement, dust and frost shook from its back.

It lowered its head and shoved another broken trunk aside.

Almost like it was building a temporary nest.

Teclos turned to signal—

And hesitated.

His fingers moved instinctively, forming short, precise hand signals his father had drilled into him since childhood.

Wait for my mark.

Spread out.

Hold positions.

But the others only stared back at him with obvious confusion.

They didn't understand.

'...Of course they don't understand me...' Teclos grimaced and then sighed.

There was no time to teach an entire signal system now.

Reluctantly, and fully aware of the risk, he motioned them closer. They gathered into a tight circle behind some thicker brush.

He lowered his voice to a whisper.

"First strike is Eldric."

All eyes shifted toward him.

"Aim for pinning shots first. Joints and eyes if you can. Weak points only. The first arrow is our signal to go and attack."

Eldric nodded, focused.

"As soon as he shoots it," Teclos continued, "we move. There can be no delay."

He then looked to Gillard.

"We go head-on at it."

Gillard's expression became focused instantly, nodding along.

"Don't worry, we'll sidestep it," Teclos said quietly. "Just be ready. The moment it lowers its head fully and commits, jump away. Do not try to tank it."

Gillard gave a short nod. "Got it."

"Samara," Teclos turned to her, "you will move with us, but not directly at it. Move in a wide arc around the clearing. Stay mobile."

Her eyes gleamed slightly. "And do what?"

"After the charge. When it misses and has to reorient. Blind it from range, also disrupt its vision with mist."

She smiled faintly. "Alright."

Teclos continued, voice calm and controlled.

"When it misses the charge, I will bind it. Only temporarily. That's your window."

He looked at Gillard again.

"Go for the head. Full force, don't hold anything back."

A beat of silence passed.

"If something goes wrong," Teclos added quietly, "adapt to the situation. Don't freeze up—that's the worst thing you could do. Just don't panic."

He let his gaze settle on each of them once more.

"This is still just a hunt," he finished. "We got this."

The stomping continued in the clearing.

The plan was set—it was time to put it to the test.

Chapter 52 - 51 - Fury of the Earthbound Beast

When they were ready, Eldric knocked an arrow.

The moment Eldric's fingers released the string, time seemed to slow for them.

The arrow cut through the air with a sharp whistle, wind mana wrapped tightly around its shaft.

It struck true.

Straight into the boar's left eye.

A wet, cracking sound followed by an eruption of furious noise. The beast reeled, its roar tearing through the clearing like thunder splitting stone. Dark blood spilled down its plated snout as it thrashed, tusks gouging the churned earth.

Bursting from the treeline the instant the arrow landed, Teclos and Gillard charged at it.

The stone boar's remaining eye locked onto them with blazing fury. It lowered its head—and the ground itself seemed to tremble.

The stone plates on its back and sides shifted, grew spikes, and became jagged.

Layer upon layer of armor surged forward from its shoulders and neck, sliding over one another until its entire front and flanks were encased in thick, interlocking slabs. The creature became a living battering ram.

Then it charged.

The earth cracked beneath its hooves. Each impact sent tremors through the clearing. Uprooted trunks were shattered as it barreled forward, a wall of armored mass and rage.

"Now!" Teclos barked.

Gillard dodged without hesitation.

Flame exploded from beneath his boots. A concussive burst of fire launched him sideways in a blazing arc. He covered nearly twenty meters in a blink—

But he misjudged the landing.

He slammed shoulder-first into a tree trunk with a sickening thud, bark splintering on impact. The air left his lungs in a violent gasp as he dropped hard into the dirt.

Teclos also dodged the second he barked out the order.

Shadow tendrils erupted from the ground beneath him, coiling around his waist and pulling him sideways like a slingshot. He cleared the charge path just as the boar thundered past, the wind of its passing whipping by him violently.

He was slower than Gillard.

But at least he didn't shoulder-check a tree.

The boar plowed forward another ten meters before skidding, hooves carving trenches into the earth as it forced itself to turn.

"Samara!" Teclos shouted.

She was already on its flank.

Circling wide just as instructed, she slashed her blade in a sweeping arc. A crescent of compressed water tore through the air and struck the beast's head.

Then another.

And another.

The jets hammered into its face, splashing violently against stone plating and exposed flesh. One blast struck near the ruined eye, sending the boar into another furious squeal.

But she was on the wrong side.

Her attacks struck the already blinded eye. They caused pain—intense pain—but they did not rob it of sight again. The remaining eye stayed clear, burning with lethal awareness.

"Damn it—" she muttered.

Eldric loosed arrow after arrow, breath sharp and hurried.

He aimed for the good eye.

And missed.

The boar jerked its head violently mid-stride, and the arrow skimmed off its stone plating.

Another shot missed the boar entirely—aimed way too wide.

Then another miss—deflected off the stone plating again.

He was tracking and shooting at the moving eye, too fixated on it. Instead of targeting joints or attempting to pin a leg like they discussed, he wasted arrows and put the team in danger through his panic.

The boar turned fully now.

Its gaze fixed on Samara—the source of the stinging agony at its ruined eye.

It began to lower its head again.

But shadows surged upward before it could commit.

From every direction around the boar, black tendrils erupted from the ground, coiling around its legs, its torso, even its tusks. Teclos clenched his jaw, pouring all of his mana into the bind.

The boar roared and struggled.

For a heartbeat—It seemed to hold.

"Now!" Teclos shouted, a vein popping on his forehead.

But the next second the ground answered the boar's fury.

Stone rippled beneath its hooves. The earth bulged upward violently, lifting the entire beast several meters into the air atop a rising platform of compacted soil and rock. The sudden elevation stretched the shadow bindings thin—

Then snapped them.

The tendrils shattered into black smoke.

"Shit—!"

Gillard, on Teclos's signal, already charged in.

Flames burst beneath his feet as he lunged toward the elevated target, blade blazing red-hot.

Gillard, airborne and committed, smashed directly into the hardened stone barrier. The impact cracked the surface but stopped him cold.

The next second—

An earth spike erupted outward from the wall, aimed straight at his chest.

But Teclos yanked him backward mid-air with a shadow tendril, just in time.

The spike tore through the space he had occupied an instant earlier.

Teclos skidded across the ground as he caught Gillard mid-air, his breath hissing. "Holy shit, you're heavy."

Somewhere behind them, Ulmak audibly facepalmed.

"Focus, goddammit!" Teclos roared.

The boar's attention flicked toward him as he deliberately triggered small bursts of concentrated darkness at its behind, drawing its aggression.

"Samara! Eldric!" he continued, dodging as a spike shot up where he was standing a split-second ago. "Blind side! Push it down from that platform!"

A spike erupted beneath his left foot—he twisted mid-step, barely dodging it.

"Gillard!" he snapped. "Get your head out of the gutter and assess before you charge again! Now help me distract this asshole!"

Yelling while dodging was not ideal.

But at least they moved now.

Samara and Eldric repositioned themselves quickly, sprinting toward the boar's blind flank. They planted their feet in unison.

"Ready?" Eldric asked, already drawing the air in.

"On three."

They began chanting—short, runic-like phrases to amplify their output.

Wind spiraled around Eldric's arms, compressing into a tight vortex.

Water coiled around Samara's blade, pressure building visibly until droplets vibrated in the air.

Gillard, recovered from the dizziness, launched controlled fireballs instead of recklessly lunging at it. They struck the boar's armored plates and burst in flashes of orange flame. The heat blackened the stone but did little more.

Still—

It worked.

The beast's attention fractured between multiple threats.

Teclos drew his bow mid-sprint.

He loosed arrows while moving, never fully stopping his feet. Each shot struck armor and deflected, splintering uselessly—but the intent was just disruption.

The boar bellowed in rage, stomping, summoning jagged spikes in chaotic bursts targeting Gillard and Teclos.

On its blind side—

Wind and water swelled to their peak.

"Now!" Samara said.

The compressed vortex roared across the clearing, spiraling violently as it surged toward the boar's exposed flank. Sensing the surge of mana, the beast twisted at the last possible second. Stone plates shifted, thickening along the side facing the impact.

The blast struck armor instead of flesh.

But that had never been the true goal.

By turning sideways to defend, the boar sacrificed its balance atop the earthen platform it had raised.

With the vortex hitting it flush.

Wind amplified the force, water added weight and momentum. The combined attack shoved the massive creature off-center.

The platform crumbled beneath it, and the boar toppled.

A fortunate break followed—its hind leg came crashing down onto one of its own previously erected spikes. A sharp, cracking snap echoed through the clearing as stone met bone.

The beast shrieked.

When it tried to rise, one rear leg buckled unnaturally.

Teclos saw their opportunity.

"It's hurt!" he yelled. "I'll bind it again! Samara, Eldric—push and pin it down with your mana! Gillard—this time finish it!"

Following his orders, they moved without hesitation.

Dark tendrils erupted again, darker and denser than before. They wrapped around the boar's legs and torso, constricting it as Teclos gritted his teeth and forced more mana through his heart circle, barely keeping up with his mind.

The beast struggled—but the injured leg limited its leverage.

Wind and water crashed down into it again, driving its body into the churned earth. Mud and shattered stone sprayed outward as the massive body slammed down.

It worked.

It was bound and pinned.

Seeing that, Gillard charged again.

Flames detonated beneath his boots as he lunged for the neck, blade blazing bright orange.

And once again—

A wall of earth erupted directly in front of his face.

He crashed into it full-force.

The impact rattled the clearing. Dust exploded outward as Gillard slid down the freshly raised barrier, dazed and furious.

Rolling his eyes, Ulmak almost began laughing. "Well, at least he's sturdy, I guess."

The next moment the ground beneath Teclos rippled.

It rose in a violent wave—stone and soil surging toward him like a collapsing cliff.

The boar seemed to target him now specifically.

Teclos barely had time to inhale.

A shadow line shot from his hand, anchoring to a distant tree. He yanked at it—

The line snapped tight and slung him upward just as the earthen wave tore through where he had just stood.

The tree he'd used as leverage splintered instantly.

And the trees behind it—

For nearly a hundred meters—

Were crushed flat as the wave rolled forward, reducing trunks to shattered debris.

Teclos felt cold sweat pour down his spine as he soared upward.

"Holy shit, that was close..."

Mid-air, darkness bled from his back and spread wide, forming a crude, tattered canopy above him. A makeshift parachute of darkness slowed his descent.

But it also made him a target.

A sitting duck.

Below, the boar shifted, stone grinding against stone as it prepared to retaliate.

Before it could—

Samara burst into view on its right side.

This time, the correct side.

She dashed in low and slashed upward, a concentrated blade of water screaming toward the remaining eye.

At the last second, the boar squeezed its eyelids shut. The water blade struck, slicing across stone plating and flesh but failing to penetrate the sealed eye.

It avoided permanent blindness.

But now—

With both eyes closed—

It had to rely on the ground to see.

Vibrations pulsed outward through the soil. Through its connection to the earth, it could sense any movement around it.

Something was wrong.

It couldn't feel the reckless one who kept smashing into its walls.

A brave and honorable human, the boar might have thought in another life.

Nor the leading human.

So it had to burst earth spikes outward, forcing Samara to retreat as the beast opened its eyes again.

It saw the water girl disengaging.

Then it saw a large tendril of darkness retracting into mist.

Lastly—

As it looked up, it saw the leader and the brave human.

One was slowly gliding down, but the other—

Was flying at it like an arrow.

Another shadow tendril snapped tight in midair.

Teclos redirected Gillard's descent, channeling the last of his leverage through a single precise pull.

Gillard picked up his speed even more then,

Flames exploded beneath his feet again, propelling himself downward at breakneck speeds.

Teclos's shadow line adjusted his trajectory mid-flight, angling him like a spear.

Gillard descended in a blazing arc, sword raised above his head.

Momentum, gravity, and flames.

He came down at an angle across, just behind the armored neck of the boar.

The blade met its stone hide and cut through it cleanly.

Like a single stroke of a brush.

The red-hot edge sliced through plated armor and flesh alike.

For half a second the world seemed to still.

Then the head separated from its body.

The massive body convulsed once before collapsing heavily onto the torn earth.

Gillard managed to stop his fall this time, still just barely as he skidded several meters before rolling onto his side, his chest heaving.

Teclos touched down lightly moments later, shadows dissolving around him.

It looked like a proper battlefield.

Broken trees.

Shattered ground.

Steam rising from a corpse with a severed head.

Samara fell flat, landing on her rear with a graceless thud. Eldric simply collapsed where he stood, rolling onto his side and staring blankly at the sky, sweat rolling off him.

Gillard just continued to lie where he landed.

Teclos remained upright for half a breath longer.

Then his legs gave out as well.

All tension left their bodies at the same time as the hunt was over.

Gillard let out a breathless laugh. "We... actually did it."

"It was messy," Samara muttered, staring at the sky. "But we did."

Eldric didn't speak. He was still clutching his bow, fingers trembling from mana overuse and adrenaline.

A slow clap echoed from the edge of the clearing.

Ulmak stepped into view.

He looked untouched by the chaos. Not a speck of dirt on him. In one hand he held a small leather-bound notebook.

He walked toward the corpse calmly, glancing at the fallen trees, the cracked earth, the spike fields, the scorch marks.

He scribbled something down.

Paused.

Looked at Gillard.

Scribbled something again.

Glanced at Teclos.

Added another note.

Closed the notebook with a soft snap and tucked it back into his satchel.

Only then did he speak.

"Well," he began evenly, "first of all, I want to congratulate you on performing your first hunt."

The four of them straightened slightly, happy despite their exhaustion.

"But," Ulmak continued without pause, "I also don't want to lie to you."

His gaze swept across the ruined clearing.

"This was one hell of a messy hunt."

They all grimaced.

Ulmak folded his arms.

"You lost formation multiple times. You overcommitted on direct assaults. You wasted mana on low-efficiency attacks." His eyes flicked briefly toward Eldric. "And you wasted arrows, with no control or grasp of the situation, endangering your teammates."

Awkward silence followed that critique.

Then—

He nodded once toward the corpse.

"Gut the boar properly. Extract what's usable. Tusks, core stone, usable hide sections."

He turned slightly toward the direction of town.

"Then transport it back."

He looked at them one final time.

"Once we are back, I'll tell you whether you've made it as hunters."

Teclos pushed himself up first, legs still shaky but functional.

"Alright," he said quietly. "Let's move."

The tension from the hunt may be gone.

But the test wasn't over, and more work still awaited them.

Chapter 53 - 52 - Hunter

They stood around the corpse, just looking at it for a few seconds, then Samara stepped forward.

"My father's a butcher," she said, already rolling up her sleeves. "Follow my lead. If you ruin the hide, you're carrying twice the weight for half the profit."

Gillard blinked, surprised. "Have you done this a lot?"

"I have, since I was five."

She knelt by the boar's flank and drew her blade. When she started cutting the boar, it was apparent that she was skilled; her cuts were clean and efficient. She guided the others where to slice, where and when to pull or peel the hide back, where to separate the tendons from the bones.

Teclos crouched beside her, assisting where he could. He had helped his father with smaller game before—rabbits, deer, even a young wolf once—but nothing on this scale. Still, he understood the basic structure of the beast and how to cut the meat the easiest.

Eldric stood on the opposite side, watching carefully before following instructions. He was hesitant and clumsy, so she had to correct him a lot at the start; ultimately, she had him wash the hide and meat because he was just too slow.

Gillard also looked completely lost with this.

"I hit things with a hammer," he muttered. "I don't know how to butcher animals..."

"Then just hold the leg still," Samara replied flatly. "And don't drop it on me."

Ulmak leaned against one of the few intact trees at the edge of the ruined clearing, simply watching them.

Time passed quickly.

They separated the armored hide in large sheets, carving around the thicker stone growths where possible. The tusks were removed with a bit of mana. The internal core—dense, mineral-rich tissue near the chest cavity, almost like a second heart—was extracted carefully under Samara's direction.

The unusable parts were dragged aside.

By the time they finished sectioning the carcass into manageable portions, their hands were slick with blood and their backs ached.

Then came the next problem as they all stared at the pile of meat.

And hide.

And tusks.

And dense stone segments.

They stood there stunned.

"How," Eldric finally asked, "are we supposed to transport this?"

Samara wiped her hands on a scrap of cloth. "Teclos. Can't you... do it?"

Teclos shook his head immediately.

"Are you insane? I could maybe drag it fifty meters before my darkness and I collapse together." He scoffed.

Gillard crossed his arms. "We can't exactly carry it on our shoulders either."

Eldric hesitated, then raised a hand slightly. "Well... I have an idea."

Samara looked at him skeptically.

"We could cut some logs," he continued. "Make a platform. Then pull it back to town... I guess."

She stared at him.

"At this point, I think you might be mentally challenged."

Eldric's face flushed. "It was just—"

"No," Teclos interrupted, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "No... it might actually work."

Samara blinked.

"But," Teclos continued, already scanning the surrounding trees, "we'd need smaller logs for the platform and cut segments of some trees into crude wheels. We can tie up the platform with tree bark or vines." He gestured with his hands. "Doesn't have to be pretty, just needs to do the job."

Gillard nodded slowly. "Well, whatever. As long as we get it back to Kolma."

Ulmak remained silent but unknowingly nodded his head in approval.

So they went to work.

It was grueling.

Cutting the logs alone was exhausting. Gillard burned through trunks with controlled heat, careful not to start a fire. Eldric used compressed wind to assist and lift the logs. Teclos reinforced weakened sections with precise shadow bindings and guided the bark and vines through the holes they made.

Even with mana, it was not easy.

Rolling the logs into position was hard.

They strained their shoulders and legs to carry them, even with wind and water helping lift the logs.

The makeshift ropes were slowly fastened.

Half a day slipped by beneath the cold winter sun.

By the time they finally lifted the processed boar onto the makeshift platform, their arms felt like lead and their mana reserves were thin.

Teclos stood at the front of the crude construct they called a platform...studying it.

It was ugly.

Rough.

But functional.

Once they finished loading it up, Teclos spoke.

"Alright," he said. "Let's try it."

He extended both hands. Darkness gathered around his forearms, stretching outward into thick, rope-like strands that wrapped around the front beam of the platform.

"I'll pull from the front," he continued. "You three push from the back."

Gillard flexed his shoulders.

"Try to push with your mana," Teclos instructed. "And do it in small, controlled bursts so you don't waste your mana."

Samara placed both palms against the wood. Eldric did the same.

They nodded.

"On three," Teclos said.

Mana flared from everyone's feet, and Teclos pulled it with all his strength.

The platform groaned.

It moved.

Slowly at first.

Grinding across the earth.

But it moved.

Step by step, meter by meter, they dragged the weight of their first hunt back toward Kolma.

They were exhausted, filthy, and victorious.

They were also very aware—

That Ulmak was still watching.

The gates of Kolma finally came into view long after the sun had dipped below the horizon.

By the time they rolled the makeshift platform through the northern entrance, the sky was black, lanterns already lit along the main road.

And when they crossed the gates and arrived at the guild hall—

They saw the others had already returned.

One group stood off to the side with small game laid out neatly before them—hares and a young poison fox, modest but clean kills.

Another team had brought back two wolves, their grey fur matted dark from blood.

And the last team...

They had nothing...

Except torn clothes and bruised faces. One boy's arm was wrapped in a hastily bound cloth that was still faintly smoking at the edges. They stood there in silence, eyes and heads lowered.

Something went very wrong there, Teclos thought.

Then their platform rolled fully into the lantern light.

The stone boar hide.

The tusks.

The sheer volume of meat.

A few trainees stared.

Even some of the instructors raised their brows slightly.

Despite their exhaustion, a small surge of pride warmed Teclos' chest.

Ulmak stepped forward.

"Hunters," he called to some helping hands standing at the guild's doors calmly, "bring the meat inside."

Two guild members moved without complaint, lifting sections of the boar and carrying them toward the storage room.

"Trainees, form a line," he ordered next. "Next to the others."

They did.

The four groups stood side by side beneath the lantern glow.

Sera folded her arms as Ulmak approached. "You're late, Ulmak," she said casually. "Well... understandable if they hunted a stone boar."

Ulmak snorted faintly. "Yeah. It was quite fun to watch." His eyes shifted toward the battered team. "What happened to that one?"

Sera let out a short laugh. "Apparently they were too cocky and tried to hunt a fire bear. Darnel saved their asses. He's royally pissed."

Ulmak was shocked. "What? I would be too. Why did he even allow that to happen?"

"Beats me," Sera replied with a shrug. "I think he just didn't pay attention. Was too far behind them to notice what they were up to."

Kosak stepped forward, calm as ever. "Let's do the evaluation and get this over with."

Ulmak nodded once. "Sure. We'll start in order of who came back first."

Darnel stepped up.

His face was already red.

He didn't even open with pleasantries.

"Not only did you go after an impossible hunt for a novice team," he barked, voice echoing across the yard, "you almost got yourselves killed and forced me to intervene."

The four trainees in front of him flinched.

"I gave you a chance to turn back when you spotted the bear," he continued, nostrils flaring. "But to my surprise—and utter dismay—you charged in. Didn't even give me time to process what a stupid decision that was."

He jabbed a finger toward their leader.

"Leadership was god-awful. Judgment was god-awful. You panicked. You didn't ambush it. You didn't coordinate. You ran in screaming." His lip curled. "Though it wouldn't have mattered anyway with that thing as your opponent."

He was practically huffing now, shoulders rising and falling.

"You all failed!"

He pulled out his notebook.

Cold mana spread across its surface instantly, frost crystallizing along the edges. With a sharp motion, he threw it to the ground and stomped on it.

It shattered into many frozen fragments.

The silence afterward was suffocating.

Next came Ralph's team.

Kosak stepped forward, opening his notebook without theatrics.

"First," he began evenly, "leadership was poor. Ignoring your teammates because you believe you are right is not confidence. It is stupidity."

The boy at the front—Brock—stiffened.

"Scouting and tracking were excellent," Kosak continued. "Teamwork was below average. Game choice was also below average. The beast you brought back could barely cover your operational cost."

He turned a page.

"You had more potential than this. Frankly, one hunter could have completed that hunt alone."

Brock swallowed.

Kosak looked up.

"Leader Brock. You failed. Re-do the exam next year if you wish."

The boy's shoulders slumped.

Kosak's gaze shifted.

"Team member Tessa. Your scouting was impeccable. Combat ability is passable. You pass. Welcome to the hunters."

Tessa inhaled sharply, then bowed her head.

"Team member Ralph." Kosak's eyes flicked toward him. "You brought the team together when leadership faltered. Your agility and combat performance were solid."

Ralph stood straighter.

"You pass. Welcome to the hunters."

A slow grin crept across his face.

"Team member Cyprus," Kosak continued, voice hardening slightly. "You conspired with your leader to claim the game your teammates hunted. Additionally, your combat contribution was negligible."

Cyprus' face drained of color.

"You failed. Re-do the exam next year if you wish."

Kosak closed the notebook.

Sera stepped forward next.

"Loric," she said, glancing briefly at him. "Clean execution. Good ambush positioning. Minimal wasted mana. Two dire wolves taken down without unnecessary risk."

Loric stood tall, expression composed but satisfied.

"Leader Loric," she finished, "you pass."

She glanced at Kross beside him.

"Solid support with no hesitation. You pass as well."

The rest of their team passed as well.

Then—

Ulmak stepped forward.

He opened his notebook and looked at Teclos' team.

He looked at the four of them for a long second; he saw tired and dirty faces with trembling hands.

Then he exhaled through his nose.

"Well," he began, scratching lightly at his beard, "first of all... it was a messy hunt."

His words stung a bit.

"But a hunt you performed nonetheless."

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"You decided to make it entertaining for me."

A few nervous breaths escaped the trainees.

Ulmak tilted his head slightly. "Leadership was solid. Execution?" He clicked his tongue. "A mess."

Teclos felt his shoulders stiffen.

"I was," Ulmak continued calmly, "about this close to intervening." He held up two fingers with barely a sliver of space between them. "And I don't enjoy paperwork."

A faint ripple of restrained laughter moved through the other hunters.

"Scouting and tracking were solid. Ingenuity?" He shrugged. "Acceptable. You didn't die. That's already a plus considering your choice of prey."

Then his expression sharpened.

He looked directly at Teclos.

"Team leader Teclos."

Teclos met his gaze.

"Your leadership was solid. You adjusted quickly when things fell apart—and they did fall apart." A faint emphasis. "Your commands were sharp. You regained control when your team started panicking."

Ulmak flipped a page.

"Combat ability—solid. Ingenuity—solid. Quick thinking saved that hunt."

A small pause.

"You pass. Welcome to the hunters, boy."

Teclos exhaled slowly, tension draining from his spine all at once.

Ulmak's eyes shifted to Samara.

"Team member Samara."

She straightened.

"Butchering skills—very useful. Good positioning during the fight. You listened to your team leader and you adapted well."

He nodded once.

"Combat ability also passable. You pass. Welcome to the hunters."

Samara allowed herself the faintest victorious smile.

Ulmak turned to Gillard.

"Team member Gillard."

Gillard stood rigid.

Ulmak raised a brow. "Your power is outstanding."

Gillard blinked.

"But," Ulmak continued dryly, "you are clumsy...like really, really clumsy."

A few snorts escaped from the side.

"You charged multiple times. From the front. Where the beast could see and react to you." He tapped the notebook lightly. "Twice you almost turned yourself into a decorative wall ornament."

Sera coughed to hide a laugh.

"Combat ability good. Awareness?" He tilted his head. "Needs work. A lot of it."

He tapped on his notebook, thinking.

"You pass... barely," he replied a second later.

Gillard's jaw tightened, and he did a guts pose.

"Don't celebrate yet, kid. You were really close to failing, and you need a lot of work and training...nonetheless, welcome to the hunters guild."

He looked down, a tiny bit ashamed, but still nothing could beat passing at this moment.

Then Ulmak's gaze moved to Eldric.

"Team member Eldric."

Eldric swallowed.

"Positioning—poor. You fixated on its eye and wasted a lot of arrows. That decision put your team in harm's way, as you didn't listen to your team leader and didn't aim for pinning shots." His tone was no longer joking.

Eldric's fingers curled at his sides.

"Cooperation was acceptable. Combat ability is also passable."

Ulmak closed the notebook.

A short silence.

"Sadly," he said evenly, "you failed. You may retry next year."

The words landed heavy.

Eldric lowered his head.

"Why?! Gillard also made many mistakes!" he complained.

"Yes, he did. He barely made it through with his power and self-sacrifice...you? You made mistakes on an even worse level but with no impact on the fight. Decision-making is nonexistent, as everyone had to tell you what to do; even your positioning was god-awful. Without a dependable team, you would fare even worse."

Ulmak didn't soften the blow.

"That concludes the evaluations."

He ignored the frown from Eldric and moved on.

Four groups had entered the forest that morning as trainees.

Some now stood as hunters.

Some did not.

Ulmak looked across all of them one last time.

"Being a hunter isn't about how much you hunted or how strong the prey was," he said calmly. "It's about teamwork and surviving to hunt another day."

On that note, the exam was officially over.

And for Teclos—

A new path had just begun.

Chapter 54 - 53 -Master of Hunters

The failed trainees were dismissed first.

Some left with stiff backs and clenched jaws. Others avoided eye contact entirely. A few muttered promises about "next year" under their breath.

Ulmak watched them go without comment.

Then he turned toward those who remained.

"The rest of you," he said, voice lighter now, "let's head inside. The Guild Master is waiting."

A ripple went through the newly accepted hunters.

Their new boss, the most seasoned hunter in the town was waiting for them.

Together, Ulmak, Sera, Darnel, and Kosak led the group toward the guild hall. The heavy doors were pulled open, and warm lanternlight spilled out to meet them.

Inside the guild the atmosphere was lively as always.

Hunters filled the long tables to the left, hands with ale in them raised to the sky . Others stood near the quest boards, scanning parchments for tomorrow's work. Employees moved behind the reception counters, tallying requests and sorting monster parts brought in earlier that day.

But when the doors shut behind the group—

All of the Attention shifted.

Someone near the tables blinked once, then twice.

And then the first cheer erupted.

"Fresh blood!"

A tankard slammed against wood.

"Congratulations!"

"Eyyy! A round of applause for our new hunters!"

Laughter followed.

"Finally! More drinking buddies!"

The noise rose quickly—boots stomping, mugs clanking, whistles cutting through the air. A few hunters even stood on benches, raising their drinks high as if celebrating a festival rather than a certification.

It was bordering on obnoxious.

Teclos felt Gillard tense beside him, unsure whether to grin and cheer with them or hold it in.

Ralph looked mildly pleased despite clearly trying his best to look stoic.

The guild employees handled it differently. They clapped politely from behind the counters, smiling warmly. A few offered nods of approval. Their approval though quieter, was no less genuine.

The outsiders, however—merchants, travelers, and those seeking escorts—watched with mixed expressions. Some joined the applause halfheartedly. Others simply observed in silence, calculating what a few more licensed hunters might mean for their own business.

The celebration swelled, getting even more roudy and loud.

And then—

"QUIET!"

The roar came from above like a thunderclap.

The entire building seemed to tremble. Dust shook loose from ceiling beams. Tankards rattled violently against tabletops.

Silence crashed down just as suddenly as the sound had.

Hunters froze mid-gesture, with one man nearly choking on his drink.

Even the employees straightened instantly.

For a brief second, no one dared to breathe.

Then, from somewhere near the back tables, a mutter slipped out.

"Damn geezer always ruining the fun..."

Another grumbled into his mug.

"That old man should get a life."

A third sighed dramatically.

"Eugh... I just lost my happy drinking mood."

A few snickers followed—but they were subdued now.

Respect—however reluctant—had returned.

At the far end of the hall, near the staircases built into the stone wall, Ulmak smirked faintly.

"Still got lungs like a war horn," he muttered.

Without further delay, he gestured for the trainees to follow.

Together, the four examiners and the newly accepted hunters walked toward the back of the hall—toward the staircase leading up to the administrative level where the Guild Master was waiting.

They ascended the staircase in silence.

The noise of the main hall faded with each step upward, replaced by a calmer, more restrained atmosphere. The air itself seemed different here—less smoke and booze, less sweat, more polished and smelling of ink.

The upper floor was lined wall to wall with a thick brown carpet, silver patterns woven into it in elegant, flowing designs. The same silver thread decorated its outer edges in careful embroidery, catching the lanternlight with a faint shimmer as they walked.

Their boots no longer echoed against stone.

Instead, their steps were muted.

They passed many doors along the corridor. Some stood slightly ajar, revealing glimpses of offices stacked with ledgers and maps. Others were closed—meeting rooms, storage chambers for sensitive documents, spare sleeping quarters for visiting officials or high-ranking hunters.

The deeper they walked, the fewer people they saw.

After what felt like a long corridor of authority, ink and paperwork, they reached another staircase—narrower, leading upward once more.

At the top, the atmosphere shifted again.

This corridor was different.

Decorated.

A deep red carpet stretched from wall to wall, far thicker than the one below, embroidered with golden patterns along its edges—intricate designs resembling intertwining beasts and blades. Lanterns encased in polished brass lined the walls at equal intervals, their flames steady and bright.

At the very end of the corridor stood a single door.

It was massive and imposing.

Unlike the others, this one bore a golden outer layer that gleamed under the lanternlight. Its surface was engraved with subtle reliefs—mountains, forests, beasts—scenes of struggle and triumph worked into the metal itself.

At its center rested the knocking handle.

A lion's head forged from pure silver, jaws parted slightly, a thick gold ring held between its teeth.

Even the trainees felt it.

Authority.

Ulmak stepped forward first.

His hand grasped the silver ring, and he knocked three firm times. The sound resonated heavily through the corridor, metal striking metal in deep, deliberate beats.

A pause followed.

Then a deep voice answered from behind the door.

"Enter."

Ulmak pushed the door open smoothly.

He stepped aside at once, holding it open with one hand while extending the other arm toward the youths in invitation.

"Go on," he said quietly.

One by one, they entered.

The door closed behind them with a muted thud.

The office was... simpler than expected.

Not small—but not extravagantly grand either.

A few modest statues stood along the walls—small stone carvings of beasts mid-roar, a hunter drawing a bow, a wolf frozen in motion. They were well-crafted, but not ostentatious. Symbols of the guild's purpose rather than decorations meant to impress.

To the right stood two dark leather sofas facing one another with a low wooden coffee table between them. A clean, practical sitting area—likely for discussions rather than leisure.

But the room had two unmistakable focal points.

The first was the desk.

A massive wooden worktable stood in the center of the room, dominating the space without needing ornamentation. The wood was dark and polished to a subtle sheen, its surface wide enough to hold maps, ledgers, weapons, and still leave room for more. The craftsmanship was flawless—solid, enduring, built for decades of use.

The second distinction surrounded them entirely.

Every single wall—from floor to ceiling—was lined with bookshelves.

Thick volumes. Rolled parchments. Bound documents. Permits, contracts, reports, beast encyclopedias, territorial maps. The scent of old paper and ink lingered faintly in the air.

This was not a throne room.

It was a command center.

And seated behind the desk was the guild master.

One of the elders they had seen during the coming-of-age ceremony.

But this... was not the same man.

Then, he had worn ceremonial robes like the other elders—blending in, giving off no aura and unremarkable.

Now—

Now he looked entirely different.

He wore a fitted leather vest over a plain linen shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The leather was dark, worn, but meticulously maintained. The linen beneath it was clean and simple.

His forearms were exposed.

Despite his age, they were still thick with muscle.

And covered in scars.

Long cuts. Jagged marks. Old punctures. Some thin and pale with age, others thicker and uneven. They crisscrossed his skin like a map of battles survived.

His attire was hunter-like—practical—but there was something undeniably regal in the way he wore it.

Not quite noble but more like the undisputed leader of a pack.

Or the head of a gang who had carved his authority through trial and blood.

His long white hair was tied back neatly, falling behind his shoulders. A medium-length beard framed his jaw, trimmed but not styled. A faint scar ran along one side of his face, partially hidden beneath the beard—barely visible unless one looked closely.

He was calmly writing when they entered.

Methodically and in his own world, he didn't look up at them yet.

And still—

The room felt heavy.

Oppressive.

His presence alone pressed down on the trainees like an unseen weight. It was suffocating—not because he was flaring his mana, or because he was angry.

Simply because he existed in that space.

The youths exchanged brief, uneasy glances.

They had seen him before.

They stood not even twenty meters away from him during the ceremony.

But back then, he had felt... ordinary.

Now—

Now it was as if a predator sat at that desk.

And they had just stepped into its den.

The guild master set down his pen after a few more seconds of writing and finally looked up at the newly approved trainees.

The shift was immediate.

His eyes were sharp.

Clearly Measuring the new blood.

He did not rush his inspection. His gaze moved from face to face—lingering a fraction longer on some, unreadable in its judgment.

Then the man spoke.

"I am Guild Master Gunvald. Nice to meet you all, and welcome to our guild."

His voice was deep, controlled, and carried the kind of authority that did not need to rise to command attention.

"I have the Rank Six Novice Hunter badges prepared for you. Do not lose them. You will be fined if you do."

A faint pause.

"Our basic values here are camaraderie among hunters, honest work—so that means no stealing—and helping the weak."

His gaze hardened slightly.

"At the frontier, it is our job to trim the monsters instead of soldiers or guards, so that people may live peacefully and oblivious to the dangers outside."

He gestured toward the large map spread across his desk.

"Town Mayor Brahm, in these past few years, has grown this place from a small village into a full-blown medium-sized town. That means more work outside for us—securing more land, hunting more meat, and exterminating monster pests."

He suddenly grabbed a knife resting near the map and stabbed it down into the parchment with a solid thunk.

"Make no mistake," he continued evenly, "this is a dangerous profession. Any glory hound who risks the lives of my hunters for fame or pride will be banned from this establishment."

Silence pressed in after that statement.

"Finally, we will assign each of you a mentor hunter for one year. After that, you will form teams of two as regular Rank Five hunters. Depending on the job, it could be more."

He leaned back slightly in his chair.

"Anyway, I have spoken long enough. All novice hunters report to reception to receive your badges and basic gear from storage. All instructors stay here for the briefing."

Ulmak and the other hunters moved instantly.

One sharp stomp of the right foot aligning with the left. Left fist struck firmly against the chest with a loud thud.

"Yes, sir!"

Teclos blinked—then half a second later mirrored the motion as closely as possible. The stomp. The fist to the chest.

"Yes, sir!"

The others followed a beat behind, some slightly out of sync but equally serious.

Gunvald gave a single nod.

Dismissed.

The trainees turned and filed out of the office, hearts pounding with a strange mix of pride, curiosity and excitement.

When the heavy door closed behind them, only Ulmak, Sera, Darnel, and Kosak remained in the guild master's office.

Gunvald turned back toward the large map embedded with his knife and fell silent.

The lanternlight flickered across the parchment, casting long shadows along the borders of marked territories. His fingers rested lightly against the edge of the table, unmoving.

Behind him, the four instructors stood as still as statues.

After several long seconds, Gunvald exhaled slowly through his nose and turned around.

"So," he said evenly, "how were they?"

Ulmak stepped forward first.

"A solid addition to our guild, Master."

His voice carried none of its usual lazy humor. No smirk. No playful undertone. Only respect.

Gunvald's gaze sharpened slightly.

"So a good batch, then." He leaned back against the edge of the desk. "Tell me about the top scorers in each team."

Ulmak inclined his head.

"Teclos. His leadership was outstanding. Highly adaptable combat style with his darkness mana. Quick thinking under pressure. High potential for the future."

Gunvald listened without interruption.

Then he spoke calmly.

"Do not praise him too much."

Ulmak's eyes flickered, unsure and a question on his face that said 'why not?'

"He is still a novice. And a child. Treat him as such. Give him honest advice, not inflated expectations."

"Yes, Master."

Sera stepped forward next.

"Loric," she began. "Leadership was solid. His raw power output was a decisive factor in their hunt. He maintains composure in direct combat."

Gunvald gave a small nod.

"The same applies. Strength at a young age often breeds arrogance. Make sure it does not."

"It won't," Sera replied confidently.

Kosak moved next.

"The top scorer from my team was our scout. Excellent sensing range. Because of her, they located every beast within their assigned perimeter. Defensive and support capabilities are stable."

Gunvald's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"A scout with range like that is valuable. Pair her carefully."

Kosak bowed his head slightly. "Understood."

Finally, Darnel stepped forward.

His jaw was tight.

"I'm sorry, Guild Master," he said flatly. "They all failed."

The room remained still.

Gunvald did not look surprised.

"Hm." A single, thoughtful hum escaped him. "I trust you did not fail them without reason."

"No, sir."

Gunvald gave a curt nod.

"Very well. Return to your duties. Dismissed."

The instructors saluted sharply once more—right foot stomp, fist to chest.

"Yes, sir."

One by one, they exited the office, leaving Gunvald alone with the map, the embedded knife.

Chapter 55 - 54 - Silence in the Snowy Forest

Once they received their badges and basic gear, the hall slowly emptied.

Newly appointed novice hunters stepped out into the night in small groups, some quiet and overwhelmed, others whispering excitedly about mentors, assignments, and imagined futures.

One by one, they drifted home.

Except for three.

Teclos, Gillard, and Ralph remained standing in the town square.

It was cold. Their breath fogged in the winter air, drifting upward beneath a sky scattered with pale stars. Lanterns along the street flickered lazily, casting long shadows across the cobblestones.

For a moment, none of them spoke.

The badge was finally pinned to their chest.

The word hunter was now added to their name.

Gillard stared down at his own insignia, fingers brushing against the metal.

"We did it, boys," he murmured quietly. "We made it."

The words hung in the air for a few seconds.

Ralph froze.

Then—

"AAAAAAA—HA! HAHA!" he exploded into laughter, throwing both arms into the sky. "HELL YES, WE DID IT!"

His voice echoed violently through the square.

"OOOOAAA!" Gillard suddenly roared as well, all composure shattered. "WE'RE HUNTERS NOW!"

Teclos felt something inside him open, like a door he had kept shut for years finally letting in light.

"FINALLY! HELL YEAH!" he shouted into the night, joining them.

For a few glorious seconds, they didn't care.

They didn't care about the cold outside or about their dignity. They didn't care who listened to their outburst.

Because they were finally hunters, with the official papers and everything.

Recognized by the whole town.

Then, suddenly, after a few more seconds of shouting—

"SHUT UP, YOU RASCALS! SOME OF US WANT TO SLEEP!"

"Who is screaming this late at night?!"

"Holy hell! Shut up, will you?!"

Windows creaked open.

A boot flew out of a second-story window and clattered uselessly onto the street below.

The three of them froze for a second, startled. Then they looked at each other and bolted.

Laughter followed them down the street as they disappeared into the alleys like criminals fleeing a scene.

—

A week passed.

The guild hall became a second home.

Teclos learned its corridors, staircases, and hidden corners. Storage rooms, training chambers, processing areas, offices—each had its own purpose.

All of the novice hunters were shown the facilities in detail. The sheer scale of it all was overwhelming at first. The underground levels alone felt like a fortress within a fortress.

But gradually, it began to feel familiar. And after a while, belonging began to replace their awe.

Now—

Chilly morning air seeped in through the guild hall entrance as Teclos stood near the reception counter.

Ralph leaned against one of the oak desks, arms crossed, pretending not to look nervous.

Gillard stood upright beside them, gaze calm and trying his best to look sharp.

Around them, the other novice hunters gathered in loose clusters. Some fidgeted nervously while others whispered among themselves. They tried and failed to appear confident.

They were all waiting.

Waiting for the hunters who would guide them for the next year.

Finally, the door creaked open.

Several heavy boots stepped inside the hall.

They belonged to the fully geared hunters who had just entered, cloaks dusted with snow, weapons resting comfortably at their sides.

They scanned the room—

Then smiled.

"Alright," one of them called out warmly. "Which one of you poor souls is mine?" A crooked smile appeared on his face.

Laughter rippled through them when they saw the trainees fidget among themselves like a herd of sheep.

The hunters wasted no time.

They quickly located their assigned novices, calling out names, clapping shoulders, gesturing toward empty tables scattered across the guild hall. Small groups formed as each mentor began outlining what the next year would look like—training schedules, field duties, expectations.

Teclos waited.

He had assumed—perhaps foolishly—that one of three men would approach him.

Ulmak.

Kosak.

Or Talmir.

Instead, all three ignored him. They passed him without so much as glancing in his direction when they called out different names and sat at tables with their trainees.

For a brief second, Teclos felt a flicker of confusion.

Then—

"Talmir's kid, eh?"

The voice came from behind him.

Teclos turned around.

The man standing there was entirely unfamiliar. Clearly in his forties, maybe older. He carried himself like a seasoned veteran—relaxed but dangerous.

He was smaller than Teclos. Barely reaching his shoulders.

Which meant Teclos had to look down slightly.

A thick scar ran from the man's forehead, over his left eye, and down across his cheek. The eye itself worked—but it gave him a permanently narrowed, predatory look. His hair was black, streaked with gray, and cut short. A rough goatee framed his jaw.

He looked like someone who had seen way too many things in his life.

Teclos was momentarily stunned, as he didn't know who that man was. He had never seen him before in this town. Then, finally snapping out of it, he bowed quickly.

"Good morning, sir!"

The man snorted.

"Forget the 'sir' part and follow me."

Without another word, he turned and walked toward the exit.

Teclos hesitated only half a second before following him.

They left the guild hall.

And even left the town.

Then, suddenly, entered the forest.

The walk was long, quiet, and felt directionless.

There was no explanation of where they were going.

No small talk either.

Just the sound of boots crunching snow beneath their feet.

After nearly half an hour, Teclos finally spoke.

"Pardon my rudeness, si—" he caught himself. "...but where are we headed?"

The man didn't look back.

"Boy, like I said, forget the 'sir.' You'll see soon enough."

And soon enough came.

They reached a small shed deep within the woods.

It looked ordinary at first glance—wooden walls, slanted roof.

But as Teclos stepped closer, he saw them.

Runes.

Inscribed all over the exterior, carved deep into the wood and filled with faintly shimmering mana residue.

It seemed like a protective barrier was around it, and its walls were reinforced.

The old hunter reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a ring of keys, and unlocked the door.

It creaked open, and inside—

Were weapons, lots of them.

Curved blades of different lengths hung neatly along the walls. Throwing knives arranged in rows. Several bows of varying draw weights. Bundles of arrows. Short swords. Daggers.

Teclos blinked.

"Mister... why is this shed here?"

The man stepped inside and began moving weapons aside casually.

"It's my personal stash, kid."

He grabbed a short sword from a rack and turned, tossing it lightly toward Teclos.

"Now take this."

Teclos caught it instinctively.

"And leave the rest of your weapons here."

Teclos stared at the blade in his hand.

Then at the man.

"May I ask... why?"

"You may not."

The answer was final and left no room for arguments.

Before Teclos could react further, the hunter stepped forward, removed Teclos's bow from his back, unclipped his daggers, and relieved him of his sword and every utility-based piece of gear he carried.

All that remained was the short sword in his hand.

The shed door closed behind them with a dull thud.

As the lock clicked, the old hunter turned around and began walking deeper into the forest again.

"Follow me," he said casually.

As they walked deeper and deeper into the forest, something felt off to Teclos.

There were no birds chirping, no animal sounds at all.

Like the forest was abandoned, there was only silence.

He became tense at this unnatural phenomenon, but since the old man kept leisurely walking, he said nothing and relaxed after a while.

After nearly half a day, gradually ascending toward the lower skirts of the mountains, the old hunter suddenly stopped.

He turned around with an unreadable expression.

"We will train your stealth today, kid. Your mana is well suited for that," he said casually.

Teclos straightened slightly.

"You will return from here to the shed and bring back my short sword."

What? That was it?

The man's eyes narrowed faintly.

"I wish you good luck. And remember—" A brief pause. "Hide."

And then he suddenly vanished.

One moment, he stood in front of him, and when Teclos blinked, he was gone.

"...What?"

He turned around in a slow circle, but only an empty forest was in front of him.

"What kind of mana does he even have...?"

There was no distortion in the air or the ground. No footsteps.

He just disappeared.

Teclos exhaled slowly.

"Just return? Is he testing if I get lost on the way back?" he muttered to himself. "I guess this will be easy..."

He adjusted his grip on the short sword and began walking back the way they came.

At first, he moved casually.

Still alert, of course.

He was deep in the forest, after all.

But the path had been straightforward. He remembered the terrain and the direction of the slope.

So he thought it would be easy.

But then, a few hundred meters in—

A chill crawled down his spine.

His instinct flared, and he dropped to the ground quickly.

Something white blurred past his head with a violent whizz, slicing through a lock of his hair.

He rolled and sprang back to his feet.

A beast landed silently several meters away.

It had white fur, a lean body, and red eyes.

It was a frost lynx.

Larger than Teclos himself, its fur almost glowing pale against the snow-dusted forest floor. During winter, they were considered apex predators in these parts.

Cold sweat poured down Teclos's neck.

A frost lynx was far beyond his current ability in a direct fight.

And he had nearly died without even realizing he was being hunted.

"Shit..."

The lynx crouched low, its muscles coiled.

Above its head, mana gathered—

Sharp and dense needles of ice began forming mid-air.

Teclos's mind raced.

Since he couldn't win head-on, he needed a distraction.

Time to escape.

Darkness stirred around him.

Shadows erupted from the ground in a circular perimeter around him, blocking some vision like a thick black curtain while also forming writhing tendrils of darkness.

One coiled around his own waist from behind.

When the lynx pounced.

Teclos lashed out, trying to bind it mid-air—

But the lynx launched its ice needles at the same time.

They impaled the shadow constructs effortlessly, tearing through them like brittle cloth. The lynx shredded the remaining tendrils with its claws and momentum alone.

It burst through the collapsing darkness faster than he anticipated.

But before it could reach him—Teclos yanked himself upward.

The shadow around his waist tightened and slingshotted him into the air.

Claws sliced empty space beneath him.

Mid-air, he twisted and slashed downward with condensed darkness mana.

A crescent of black energy tore toward the lynx.

It dodged the attack cleanly and effortlessly.

But that wasn't the point.

He had bought himself precious seconds with that attack.

Once he hit the ground, he rolled and immediately sprinted away.

With no hesitation or pride.

Branches whipped past his face as he ran.

Behind him—

The silent hunter pursued him, and it was faster than him.

A sharp crack split the air.

Teclos twisted his body just in time, and with the help of his tendrils, he managed to escape fatal damage. A jagged ice needle tore past his shoulder, grazing him, the cold biting deep into his flesh like venom. He hissed but managed to push forward without slowing down.

He rolled, stumbled to his feet, and ran again.

Behind him, a low, rumbling snarl echoed.

It started forming another ice needle.

Teclos didn't dodge it this time, but instead turned around in the blink of an eye.

Just as the ice needle formed, he lashed out.

Two tendrils suddenly snapped around the lynx, wrapping around its forelegs mid-cast. The beast was thrown to the ground violently, and it staggered back to its feet.

With this chance, Teclos didn't wait for the lynx to get up and was already moving.

Toward it.

He pulled himself in with one tendril he cast around a tree next to it, surprising the lynx—flying straight into its blind spot, above its head.

"Got you."

Condensed darkness formed along his blade and arm.

The edge carved across the beast's back, deep enough to tear fur and flesh alike. It was somewhat shallow, but a burst of dark blood still stained the snow as the lynx recoiled with a furious, pained roar.

Teclos launched himself away as he bought himself some more time, shadows gripping branches, trunks—anything—flinging him through the forest in rapid bursts.

Leap after leap, his confidence and relief rose.

And after a minute of running, a thought crept into his mind.

Maybe he had lost it and could return now, back to the shed, and be finally done with this day.

Sadly, it wasn't meant to be.

Multiple ice needles suddenly flew toward him, and he had to dodge.

With a sharp pull, he hid behind a tree, just in time as the needles peppered the air where he would have been.

'Dammit!'

He cursed in his mind, as it was persistent, and Teclos had just made it angry.

Chapter 56 - 55 - Thrown in to shit

Teclos ran.

Branches clawed at his face and arms as he tore through the undergrowth, boots barely finding proper footing before he launched himself forward again. Darkness lashed out instinctively—tendrils snapping around the trees.

He slingshotted himself ahead.

The world blurred.

An ice needle screamed past his ear and exploded against a tree in front of him, showering splinters and frost in every direction.

His breathing was already chaotic.

Fast and ragged pulls of air. Panic was slowly setting in. He was beginning to tire.

"What kind of damn training is this?!" he gasped between strides. "Try not to die?!"

Another tendril wrapped around a thick trunk to his right—he pivoted mid-run, swung wide, and hurled himself down a slope. Snow and dirt sprayed behind him.

The frost lynx followed effortlessly.

Although it was injured now, it still didn't lose a lot of speed, if any at all.

Teclos thrust both hands backward and unleashed a curtain of darkness, a thick veil spilling between the trees like ink in water. It swallowed light, distorted shapes, and blurred depth perception.

He then cut sharply left, trying to lose it for a moment and hide.

But the lynx burst through the curtain as if it were ordinary mist, and its red eyes locked onto him instantly.

With no hesitation or confusion whatsoever.

"How?!" he hissed.

Ice needles grazed both of his thighs this time, slicing through his clothes and biting into his skin.

A sharp, cold pain flared up, making him stagger a bit, but he didn't stop.

'Above the treeline...' he thought. Maybe gaining height would help him escape it.

A shadow tendril coiled around a high branch, and he hurled himself upward, boots kicking off the bark as he vaulted onto a thick branch. From there, he launched again, bounding across the canopy, using darkness to pull and propel himself from trunk to trunk.

Wind roared in his ears. He became faster than on the ground.

The lynx leapt high with one powerful jump, its claws sinking into the bark as it started its pursuit leisurely.

It jumped from branch to branch with terrifying ease, bounding through the trees, its movements impossibly fluid and making it just as fast as Teclos.

Ice needles started forming above its head again. It released them mid-leap, toward him.

One shattered a branch inches from his foot.

Another skimmed his leg, and he nearly lost balance.

Seeing that it kept up easily, he dropped back to the forest floor deliberately this time, rolling hard and sprinting again.

Zig-zagging.

Cutting tight angles between narrow trunks.

Sliding beneath fallen logs with no particular pattern or rhythm.

Pure instinct and will to survive.

Still—

It stayed on him. Always just behind him and always within sight.

Another problem started showing itself: his lungs started burning.

His mana reserves dipped faster than he liked. Every slingshot. Every curtain. Every defensive lash drained him more and more.

The lynx, by contrast, looked relentless and unhurried.

Like a predator leisurely enjoying the chase.

Teclos risked a glance back at the best possible timing.

He managed to spot that the lynx had closed the distance.

And sure enough, it lunged at him—

He threw himself sideways as claws carved through the space he'd occupied a split second earlier. The impact cratered the ground, ice spreading outward in a jagged, frosty flower bloom.

He scrambled up, slipping in the forming ice. His mind was panicking.

It didn't matter what he did.

Shadow curtain to obscure vision? It tore through it.

Swing and jump above the treeline? It easily followed him.

Zig-zagging through the forest around boulders, trees, and bushes? It adjusted mid-leap.

It never lost him. It never hesitated. Hell, it didn't even slow down.

Cold realization settled in his mind.

It was plain as day and simple—it was toying with him.

His mana pulsed erratically, and his breathing bordered on hyperventilation.

"Think," he muttered hoarsely. "Think!"

Another ice needle clipped his calf, and he stumbled hard, barely catching himself with a shadow tendril before crashing face-first into the snow.

The lynx didn't immediately pounce.

It slowed down and stalked him.

Red eyes gleaming in delight.

An experienced hunter knew that prey wouldn't just die and would fight for its life with a last stand.

And true enough, Teclos pushed himself upright, chest heaving violently.

Darkness gathered around him again—only thinner now. He looked pathetic, bloodied, covered in mud and ice, and tired. But his eyes were still alive.

The lynx lowered itself, ready for the finale.

Its claws elongated and reshaped—ice forming over them, extending into curved, razor-sharp talons that gleamed like polished blue steel. Above its head, more needles condensed. There were more this time. Denser as well, taking more of a long, thick spear shape rather than a needle.

Teclos staggered back a step.

His mind raced, grasping for anything.

Anything.

A shadow tendril lashed out behind him, snapping toward a sturdy tree trunk. If he could just sling himself away one more time—

But then a jagged wall of ice erupted from the ground.

Sharp as a guillotine.

It severed the tendril cleanly. His escape plan was foiled the second he tried it.

"Fu—"

The curse never left his lips because when he looked up—

The lynx was already there, a few centimeters from his face and mid-lunge.

Claws poised to tear through his neck, its red eyes filled his vision.

He had no more time left to counter or block it.

No space to dodge out of its path and no spell fast enough to slow it down.

That was when a single thought formed in his mind.

'I'm dead.'

And just as the lynx was about to reach him, with only a finger's width separating his neck and its claws—

The lynx suddenly dropped.

Its body simply... separated.

Three clean, horrific sections slid apart mid-air before collapsing into the snow in a spray of blood and guts.

Teclos stood frozen, heart hammering violently against his ribs.

The lynx twitched once.

Then lay still.

Dead.

He was bewildered.

'What the fuc—'

His thoughts were interrupted.

"...Pathetic."

The word came from behind him.

Emotionless and cold.

"And you are supposed to be the best of the batch this year?"

Teclos spun around.

The old man stood there, hands behind his back as if he had merely taken a casual stroll. No visible weapon in hand. No sign of where he had even come from.

Teclos stared at him.

"What?!" he burst out, fury overriding shock. "You expect me to fight that thing and win? Are you mad?!"

His chest heaved violently.

"Besides—you left me in this forest with no explanation at all!"

The old man's expression didn't change.

"I gave you instructions." His voice hardened slightly. "And you did not follow them."

Teclos blinked in disbelief.

"You didn't even listen," the man continued, shaking his head slowly. "I told you to hide. Not to fight."

Teclos clenched his fists.

"You vanished! And what was I supposed to do? Just stand there?!"

"What did you do?" the old man shot back calmly. "You leisurely strolled back as if you were walking through a town market."

Teclos opened his mouth—

Closed it.

The old man stepped closer, gaze sharp as drawn steel.

"Do you not know where you are currently, kid?"

His tone lowered.

"You are in the deeper parts of the forest. Territory claimed by apex predators."

Teclos's jaw tightened.

"Then explain the damn assignment properly!" he snapped. "And don't act like this was obvious! There weren't any beasts around before you disappeared, old man!"

The hunter exhaled slowly, as if dealing with a particularly slow student.

"Kids these days..."

He gestured lazily toward the surrounding forest.

"There were no monsters because I drove them away."

Teclos froze.

"I cleared the area so we could walk undisturbed. And once I finally found a suitable beast for you to hide from—"

His eyes narrowed.

"You didn't even attempt to conceal your presence."

The words struck him hard, stunning him for a second.

"You radiated mana the moment I left, with no effort whatsoever to conceal it. You strolled back casually. You made noise everywhere. You treated the forest like it's your damn playground."

Teclos's anger faltered for a second.

The old man continued mercilessly.

"A frost lynx hunts by sight, sound, smell, and sensing prey through snow. You announced yourself in all three. Congrats, kid." He said the last line as sarcastically as possible.

Teclos swallowed.

"Again... I told you to hide. Simpler orders don't exist."

The hunter turned away dismissively, and silence hung heavy between them.

Teclos stared at the three bloody remains in the snow.

"I did try to hide... It was chasing me. How was I supposed to lose it?"

The old man sighed and turned. "It was chasing you the second it found you... because you announced your presence like an idiot."

Teclos couldn't say a word back, because he knew the old man was right... at least somewhat.

The old man began walking away.

"Cool your head, kid. We're returning."

His voice carried back through the trees.

"I am done with you for today."

Teclos stood there for a long moment, fists still clenched from frustration. The lynx hadn't been the real test. He had failed the moment he assumed he just needed to return to the shed.

After a second, he exhaled shakily and followed after the old man.

They walked back in silence, and the forest had changed again.

Where moments ago it had felt like a hunting ground for apex predators, now it felt... hollow.

It was empty again, no beast in sight and no sound to be heard except the wind in the trees.

Teclos noticed it immediately now.

The old man walked ahead of him, hands clasped loosely behind his back, posture relaxed—almost casual.

'How is he doing that?'

Driving away every predator in the deeper parts of the forest?

Killing a frost lynx so cleanly it didn't even register what happened?

'Just who is this old man?' he asked himself.

Teclos had grown up in Kolma. He had heard stories of capable hunters, veterans, even a few near-legendary figures who had once passed through.

He clenched his jaw.

He knew the old man had been right—at least partially.

He had been careless.

He had assumed the assignment would be easy.

He had strolled back like a fool.

But—

But!

Heat surged in his chest.

The man had said nothing.

No explanation. No briefing. No context.

Just "hide."

Hide?!

Then he vanished and tossed him into a life-and-death situation.

Anger bubbled inside him.

The old man reminded him of people from his previous life.

The "know-it-alls."

Bosses who expected perfection without giving any direction.

Teachers who criticized your knowledge without teaching.

Seniors and relatives who loved preaching about how "you'll understand when you're older."

People who acted as if they had every answer and expected blind obedience.

'Pathetic?' Teclos thought bitterly. 'Who are you calling pathetic when you can't teach for shit?'

The words echoed in his mind, though he kept them behind his teeth.

They reached the shed without another incident.

The old man unlocked it, stepped inside, and waited.

Teclos handed back the short sword without a word and retrieved his own weapons.

When they left the forest and the walls of Kolma came into view, the old man finally spoke again.

They entered the guild hall.

Hunters milled about. A few glanced their way but said nothing.

"Brat," he said flatly.

Teclos stiffened.

"Tomorrow is going to be the same..."

His eyes flicked sideways, a sharp and unreadable glare.

"Don't whine that I didn't tell you tomorrow like you did today."

Teclos felt his temper flare again.

"And try not to be such a pathetic child," the old man continued, his voice cutting deep. "Throwing a tantrum the moment someone criticizes the 'oh so perfect' you."

Teclos stared at him, stunned.

The audacity.

Before he could form a reply—

The old man vanished.

Again.

"Damn that old bastard!" Teclos hissed under his breath.

A nearby clerk glanced at him strangely.

Teclos exhaled sharply, dragging a hand down his face.

He approached the reception desk and notified them of his return, voice clipped but controlled. The clerk nodded and marked something down.

Then he left.

The cold evening air gnawed at his skin as he made his way home.

His body ached.

His shoulder throbbed where the ice had grazed him. His calf burned with every step.

But it wasn't the pain that bothered him the most.

It was the humiliation from the old man.

Tomorrow will be the same?

Teclos looked up at the darkening sky. His jaw tightened.

"Fine," he muttered. "If that's how you want to do this..."

His anger hadn't cooled in the slightest.

And tomorrow—

He would show that old man who's pathetic.

Chapter 57 - 56 - Rabbit chase

After what happened yesterday, Teclos was in a sour mood this morning, but Talmir mistook it for him being tired.

Teclos sat at the wooden table, arms crossed, staring into nothing while steam curled lazily from the cup in front of him. Across from him, Talmir calmly sipped his tea as if the world were perfectly normal.

It wasn't.

"Dad," Teclos began, voice tight, "who is that old fart that's my mentor?"

Talmir almost spat his tea across the table.

He choked violently, coughing as liquid went down the wrong way. His chair scraped loudly against the floor as he half-rose, glancing left and right—

As if expecting the man to materialize in the kitchen.

"You should show some respect, son," Talmir muttered hoarsely, still clearing his throat. "That man isn't from here... but he is quite famous."

Teclos frowned.

"Huh? And who is he exactly?"

Talmir's expression changed.

Closed off.

Careful.

"Just someone really scary, that's all I can tell you."

Teclos blinked. "What? Why?"

Teclos's mind churned.

Who exactly was this old fart, to silence his father?

And why would someone send an apparently dangerous old man to mentor him?

"Just know this," Talmir continued quietly, setting his cup down. "You shouldn't anger him."

Teclos's jaw tightened.

That old man didn't deserve respect.

He hadn't explained anything or warned him. He'd thrown him into a death trap and called it training... on top of that, he called him pathetic.

Respect?

For what?

Teclos felt something firm settle in his chest.

He had been trampled by "people from above" once before—in another life. Authority figures who expected obedience without earning it.

Not again.

Not in this life.

If the old man wanted respect, he would have to earn it by teaching him properly.

Teclos stood up.

"I'm heading out."

Talmir watched him carefully but didn't say another word.

The two left the house together. The morning air was crisp and fresh. Frost clung to rooftops, and thin trails of smoke rose from chimneys across Kolma.

They walked in silence toward the guild hall.

Hunters were already gathering. Some were laughing while they chatted, and some were checking their gear.

Once they reached the entrance, Talmir stopped.

"I'll be mentoring another novice today," he said, eyes lingering on his son. "Just... keep your head cool."

Teclos gave a short nod.

Talmir disappeared into the main hall.

Teclos remained near the reception area, hands in his pockets, eyes scanning the entrance every so often.

He waited.

And minutes passed.

Other mentors had already arrived and taken their novices. Laughter and chatter drifted through the hall as pairs and small groups departed.

Teclos stayed where he was.

Waiting.

After a while, part of him wondered if the old man would show up at all.

Another part wondered if he would simply appear behind him again—

Without warning.

He exhaled slowly. Yesterday, he had been through a lot. Today, he promised himself that it would be different. Whether the old man explained himself or not—

Teclos swore to himself that he would not be caught unprepared again.

Teclos stood near the reception desk, leaning lightly against one of the wooden pillars. From the outside, he looked calm—arms loosely crossed, posture relaxed, gaze drifting across the hall.

Inside, however, he was anything but relaxed.

The guild hall was already busy when he arrived, but the morning rush was slowly dying down. Mentors had come and gone, collecting their assigned novices and heading out toward the forest, the plains, or the town outskirts. Groups had formed, instructions were given, and laughter and chatter echoed through the large hall.

Now the crowd was thinning.

A few hunters remained at the bar finishing their morning drinks. Clerks sorted papers behind the reception counter. The occasional hunter passed through the doors, either returning from night patrols or heading out late.

Teclos kept one eye on the entrance.

Yesterday's humiliation still lingered in his mind like a splinter he couldn't pull out.

The word "pathetic" really grated on his nerves the longer he waited there.

The memory made his jaw tighten.

Just as he was beginning to wonder if he should just head home—

The front door opened.

Cold morning air swept briefly into the hall.

And there he was.

The old man stepped inside casually, brushing a bit of frost from his coat as if he had just come back from a short walk. No dramatic appearance. No sudden manifestation out of thin air like yesterday.

Just a normal entrance.

Teclos watched him from the corner of his eye.

The old hunter didn't even look at him.

Instead, he walked straight to the reception desk as if Teclos didn't exist. That alone made his eyebrows twitch in annoyance.

The old man leaned on the counter and spoke quietly with the clerk. Their conversation was brief—too quiet to overhear—but the clerk eventually handed him a rolled parchment.

A map.

The old man unrolled it halfway, scanning it briefly with a keen eye before rolling it back up.

He still didn't acknowledge Teclos.

No greeting, not even looking in his direction... nothing. It was like he was just air to him.

It grated on Teclos more than he wanted to admit.

But he kept himself still.

'You won't get a reaction out of me that easily...'

After a few moments, the old man finally turned and walked toward him, the rolled map resting loosely in one hand.

He stopped a step away.

"Follow me, brat."

Teclos felt a vein throb on his temple.

The word nearly dragged his frustration and anger out of him, but he forced it down. His jaw clenched briefly before he pushed himself away from the pillar.

'Fine. No need to greet that old ass either.'

The two of them left the guild hall together and stepped out into the cold morning air.

Kolma was slowly waking up around them. A few merchants were opening stalls near the square, smoke drifted from chimneys, and townsfolk shuffled along the streets wrapped in thick winter cloaks.

The old man didn't slow down and headed straight toward the forest path.

Teclos followed several steps behind, matching his pace.

Silence fell between them again.

The crunch of frost beneath their boots and the distant caw of a crow were the only sounds accompanying their walk.

Teclos paid closer attention this time.

Yesterday, he had walked half-distracted, assuming nothing dangerous would happen.

Now he knew that the old man would just toss him to the beasts and disappear again. So today, he watched the forest more carefully.

He noted the direction of the wind.

He tracked how the trees grew thicker or thinner in certain patches.

He quietly measured the distance in his head as they walked.

Eventually, the familiar shape of the shed appeared between the trees.

Runes carved along its wooden walls glimmered faintly with residual mana.

The old man unlocked the door and pushed it open.

"Short sword."

Teclos didn't argue this time.

He removed his bow and main blade, handing them over without comment. The old man placed them inside the shed, then reached for a familiar weapon.

The same short sword as yesterday.

He tossed it lightly, and Teclos caught it.

The weight felt somewhat familiar now.

The shed door closed again with a dull wooden thud, the lock clicking into place.

Then they walked once more.

But this time, the direction was different.

Instead of heading toward the rising slopes that led to the mountains, the old man angled them toward flatter terrain deeper in the forest.

The trees grew more spaced apart here.

The ground was steadier, less cluttered with rocks and roots.

Visibility stretched farther between the trunks, though thick patches of undergrowth still broke the sightlines in some places.

Teclos had a suspicion that this wasn't random. That the old man had chosen this location deliberately.

They continued to veer deeper.

Again, like yesterday, the forest felt strangely quiet.

The silence wasn't natural. The old man had cleared the area of beasts again.

It nagged at his mind. How was he doing that? Did the beasts run away? Or did he have a way to kill them from afar? Was he simply avoiding them?

After some time, the forest finally opened up.

The trees thinned, and a wide clearing appeared ahead, sunlight filtering through the canopy and reflecting off patches of frost that still clung stubbornly to the ground. It wasn't a large meadow, but compared to the dense forest around it, the open space felt almost exposed.

The old man stopped.

Teclos halted a few steps behind him.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The wind whispered quietly through the branches overhead.

Then the old man turned.

"Alright, brat," he said flatly.

Teclos watched him carefully this time.

"Again, like before, your only mission is to hide and make it back to the shed before today ends."

No further instructions.

Just that.

And before Teclos could say a word—

The old man vanished before his eyes.

Gone.

Just like yesterday.

Instead of being awed, weirded out, or shocked, Teclos didn't waste even half a second.

The moment the man disappeared, Teclos bent his knees and jumped upward, catching a thick branch overhead. With a smooth motion, he pulled himself up and leaned against the trunk, his body merging naturally with the shadow cast by the surrounding foliage.

He slowed his breathing down.

And focused, closing his eyes briefly to let his darkness spread outward.

The forest was full of shadows. Noon sunlight struggled to pierce through the thick canopy, leaving dark patches everywhere—between branches, beneath roots, behind rocks.

For someone with darkness mana, it was like a web connecting everything.

Teclos let his mana flow freely from the second circle within his heart.

Since advancing, his output and control over his abilities had grown significantly.

If he remained still and concentrated, he could now sense nearly everything within a hundred-meter radius.

The forest around him slowly came alive inside his mind.

The shifting leaves. The tiny rodents beneath the snow.

The sway of branches.

And then—

Something else.

Right at the edge of his range.

A presence that was large and moving quickly.

Teclos's eyes snapped open.

'I knew it...'

Then another presence showed itself.

And another.

It was a pack of direwolves.

His heart sank slightly as recognition came to mind.

'This crazy old bastard.'

Massive wolf-like beasts known for their speed and coordination. Their grey-white fur blended easily into the winter forests, and they hunted with frightening efficiency.

Not only were they fast enough to outrun most prey—

They could launch compressed wind blades from a distance.

And when they hunted...

They were almost completely silent.

Teclos remained still, watching through the network of shadows.

The wolves seemed to be spreading out, fanning through the forest like a tightening net and hunting for something...

Then it dawned on him.

The wind.

The cold breeze blew from behind him—straight toward the approaching wolves.

Teclos's eyes narrowed.

That meant his scent was being carried directly to them, and they already knew his rough location.

He couldn't stay here, so without hesitation, he moved.

A shadow tendril extended from his hand, wrapping silently around a nearby branch. He swung forward and caught another trunk, his feet barely touching bark before launching again.

From tree to tree and branch to branch.

He left no tracks on the ground or in the snow as he avoided it entirely, moving like that.

His shadow tendrils did all the work, silently pulling and slinging him through the forest like a phantom moving between the canopy.

Below him, the direwolves reached the clearing where he had stayed.

Teclos felt their presence converge on his previous position.

They were efficient.

The wolves fanned out again almost immediately, forming a loose arc that slowly began closing.

They weren't chasing randomly.

They were cutting off his retreat routes.

A chill ran down Teclos's spine.

If he had lingered in that clearing even thirty seconds longer...

He might've been surrounded already.

And unlike the frost lynx yesterday—

There were multiple attackers now and multiple angles to defend from.

A fight like that would quickly turn into another life-or-death struggle.

Teclos kept moving, careful not to create noise. Each swing was controlled, precise, barely disturbing the branches he used.

Still—

The wolves continued adjusting toward him.

Somehow, they were tracking him...

And something else bothered Teclos as he frowned slightly.

He hadn't heard a single howl.

Yet they moved with perfect coordination.

As if each wolf knew exactly where the others were.

As if they were communicating silently somehow.

His gaze sharpened.

"Just how smart are these things...?" he muttered under his breath.

The forest ahead darkened slightly as the sun dipped lower behind the mountains.

The pack kept hunting him.

It was looking like a long day was ahead of Teclos.

Chapter 58 - 57 - An Unseen Observer cccc

The old man strolled lazily through the market square of Kolma.

Morning had already given way to the busier hours of the day, and the town square buzzed with life. Merchants called out their wares, carts rattled across the cobblestone streets, and the scent of freshly cooked food drifted through the chilly winter air.

It was a lively scene.

And the old man walked through it like he had all the time in the world.

He had one hand tucked behind his back and the other idly rubbing his chin as he wandered between stalls.

"Hmm..."

He paused in front of a fruit stand first.

Dried apples, yellow pears, dried berries bundled in small cloth sacks. The vendor had even polished some of the apples so they shone invitingly in the pale winter sunlight.

He leaned slightly closer.

"Fruit... in winter?" he muttered to himself.

He picked up an apple, turning it around thoughtfully before placing it back down.

"It's a bit shriveled up... not quite to my liking."

He moved on.

A few stalls down stood a butcher's table. Thick slabs of fresh meat hung from iron hooks, and sausages were neatly lined up in rows. The rich smell of smoked pork lingered in the air.

"Maybe some meat after a long while...?"

He stared at a particularly thick cut of beef steak.

Then shook his head.

"No, no... that's not it either."

The butcher watched him expectantly, but the old man simply waved dismissively and wandered away again.

He drifted through the market slowly, clearly enjoying the morning atmosphere more than actually committing to buying anything.

Then his eyes lit up slightly.

"Oh!"

He stopped in front of a bakery stall.

Rows of freshly baked bread were stacked neatly across wooden trays. Round loaves, sweet rolls, buttered buns, and long golden sticks dusted lightly with coarse salt.

Steam still rose faintly from some of them.

The warm smell of baked dough filled the air.

"Now this looks promising," the old man muttered approvingly.

The stall owner—a plump woman with flour dusted across her apron—smiled warmly.

"Morning, sir. Fresh out of the oven."

The old man nodded, already reaching toward a tray of long salted bread sticks.

"Morning. I'll take a few of those salted—"

He suddenly froze.

Then abruptly smacked himself hard on the forehead.

The sharp slap echoed loud enough to startle the baker.

"That stupid brat!" the old man barked.

The baker blinked in shock.

The old man squinted his eyes and shook his head, like something was wrong.

"Don't run that way! The wolves already cut it off, you dumb brat! Ugh... I really drew the short straw with teaching this imbecile."

The baker stared at him like he had just lost his mind.

A few nearby customers glanced over as well.

The old man slowly noticed their looks.

"...Ah."

He cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Apologies."

The baker blinked again.

"...Would you still like the salted sticks?"

"Yes. Three, please."

Deep in the forest, Teclos swung between trees.

A shadow tendril lashed out, coiling around a thick branch and pulling him forward. His body arced through the air as he caught the next trunk, launching himself onward once more.

He was quick and quiet.

But the pressure behind him kept growing.

"Shit..." he muttered under his breath.

The direwolves had changed their pace. Teclos could feel it through the shadows. They were closing the distance.

"They're getting closer."

Below him, grey shapes moved through the forest like living wind.

Too fast to escape.

He swung again, landing briefly against a trunk before launching himself forward once more.

But something was wrong.

The wolves behind him were gaining ground.

What Teclos didn't notice—

Was the ones to the side.

Two of the wolves had already broken away earlier.

They moved wide through the forest, cutting through the terrain with long, silent strides.

They had overtaken him minutes ago.

Now they simply kept pace ahead of him, maintaining distance.

Waiting.

—

Back at the market stall, the old man chewed thoughtfully on a salted stick.

Crunch.

"Why don't you question their numbers?" he grumbled quietly to himself.

He shook his head.

"Seriously... kids these days."

Crunch.

He took another bite, clearly enjoying it.

"Mmm."

His eyes drifted upward, staring into the sky.

"This stuff is good."

Another bite.

"Maybe if some wolves disappear from your detection range..." he muttered between chews.

"...that should concern you a bit?"

He shrugged.

"No?"

Crunch.

"Just me?"

The old man stepped away from the bakery stall after he paid.

The baker still looked slightly unsettled after his earlier outburst, so he gave her a brief apology again and wandered off toward the town square.

"Best not scare the woman any further," he muttered under his breath.

Kolma's square was as lively as ever. Merchants called out their wares, townsfolk haggled over dried meat and clothing, and hunters pushed through the crowd with dead beasts slung over their shoulders. Children darted between the stalls, weaving through the bustle with boundless energy.

The old man ignored it all.

He walked toward a simple wooden bench near the center of the square and sat down.

He stretched his legs slightly, leaned back, and finally took another bite of the salted stick.

Crunch.

The sound was satisfying.

"Mmm."

He chewed slowly, savoring the warmth of the bread against the cold winter air.

For a moment, he simply watched the square.

Then he snorted.

"That brat..."

He shook his head, taking another bite.

"All that praise. 'Best of the batch.' 'Outstanding talent.'"

Crunch.

"Overrated, if you ask me."

He wiped a crumb from his beard.

"Can't even think two steps ahead. Running around like a headless chicken."

He leaned back against the bench, staring lazily up at the pale winter sky.

"Should've known better than to listen to half the nonsense those guild instructors spout. 'Promising prodigy' this, 'great potential' that."

He waved a dismissive hand.

"Bah."

The salted stick was disappearing fast as he continued eating.

Still, a faint glimmer of interest lingered in his eyes.

"Though... the brat's got a nice mana type," he admitted quietly. "If he survives long enough to use it."

Crunch.

He sighed.

"Thought I'd finally get some rest after all those years running errands for the Count."

Another bite.

"Decades doing the man's dirty work..."

His voice lowered slightly, more thoughtful now.

"Always one job after another."

Crunch.

"And the moment I finally get a few free days..."

He glanced vaguely toward the forest beyond the town walls.

"...I end up babysitting an incompetent kid."

He shook his head again, though there was a faint hint of amusement in the gesture.

—

Deep in the forest, Teclos pushed himself to the limit.

Yet it wasn't enough.

His breathing had grown heavy, his chest rising and falling rapidly as cold air burned through his lungs.

Sweat soaked through his clothes despite the winter chill.

"They're getting closer..."

Behind him, the pack leader was barely twenty meters away now.

Teclos could feel the beast through the web of shadows that filled the forest.

Its presence was domineering, focused, and predatory.

The direwolf moved like the wind across the forest floor, bounding silently between roots and snow with terrifying speed.

Teclos gritted his teeth.

"I need to think... think!"

The wolves still hadn't visually spotted him yet. His darkness mana blended him well with the shifting shadows beneath the trees.

But that advantage could disappear in an instant.

One snapped branch.

One wrong landing.

His arms burned from the constant strain of maintaining the tendrils.

Then—

Something ahead made his heart stutter.

Two more shapes appeared out of nowhere.

Two wolves were suddenly ahead of him.

Teclos's eyes widened.

"What?"

For a moment, his mind struggled to accept what he was feeling through the shadows.

Then the realization struck him like ice down his spine. The wolves he had assumed were falling behind...

...had never been behind him at all.

They had circled around.

Cold sweat ran down his back.

They had cut off his escape and were waiting to pounce on him.

Teclos understood the danger he was in at this moment. And how terrifying those wolves truly were.

Like a net, the pack spread out wide, keeping constant pressure on their prey. One group forced the target to keep running, draining its stamina.

Meanwhile, others moved silently ahead.

Cutting off escape routes.

Waiting patiently until the prey tired and slowed. Then the pack would close in.

It was efficient, ruthless, and deadly.

Teclos's heart hammered against his ribs.

"Damn it..."

He could end up as dog food.

Teclos's mind raced desperately.

"I need to break their net."

And he needed to do it now.

Behind him, the pack leader was gaining ground with terrifying speed—each silent leap eating away the distance between them. Ahead, two wolves waited like shadows carved into the forest itself. To the sides, the rest of the pack adjusted their positions with eerie precision, unseen but very much present.

Every path forward ended in a fight to the death.

Every hesitation ended in him getting bitten.

He panicked, imagining countless scenarios where his head was crushed between a wolf's jaws.

Then an idea came to mind—simple and so stupid it just might work.

Teclos stopped.

Abruptly.

A shadow tendril snapped tight around a thick branch above him, halting his momentum mid-swing with a jolt that strained his shoulders. At the same time, his other hand flicked forward with as much force as he could muster—

A loose piece of his gear he tore off shot ahead into the forest, carried by momentum.

It spun through the air, landing farther along his current path.

And then—

Teclos hugged the tree.

Standing high up on a branch—

He made himself smaller.

Darkness surged around him, thicker than before. He pulled it tight against his body, layering it like a second skin. He forced the mana to bend, exerting as much control as he was currently capable of.

His presence dimmed.

Until it was barely noticeable.

He slowed his breathing.

Forced his heartbeat to steady.

'Just pretend to be shadow among shadows.'

Back in the town square, the old man paused mid-bite.

The salted stick hovered just in front of his mouth.

His brow rose slightly.

"Well, I'll be damned..."

A small smile appeared—a genuine one, this time.

"The brat actually did something right."

The direwolves surged forward.

The pack leader leapt through the exact space Teclos had occupied moments earlier, landing without a sound before continuing forward without pause.

The rest followed.

Their focus locked entirely onto the moving target ahead—the thrown piece of gear still carrying Teclos's scent.

None of them noticed.

Not until it was too late.

Teclos didn't move yet.

He clung to the branch, completely still, wrapped in dense shadow. Even the faint disturbances he had created before were gone now, swallowed by his mana.

Below him—

The last wolf passed.

Only when the final presence slipped beyond his sensing range did he move.

A tendril snapped out silently, pulling him backward across the trees. His body followed in a smooth arc as he retraced his path, his presence still mostly concealed.

Once he deemed that enough distance had formed between him and the pack, he changed direction sharply.

Cutting across the forest at a ninety-degree angle.

Half a kilometer later, he adjusted again—

A straight line now.

Toward the shed.

—

The wolves reached the gear. They slowed... then stopped.

One sniffed it, nostrils flaring.

Another circled slowly, scanning the perimeter.

The pack leader stood still.

Its brown eyes scanned the forest, and the wind shifted beneath its feet.

It scanned the area quickly... but the prey had escaped.

The wolves spread out again, searching in widening arcs, trying to find a lead again... trying to pick out his scent again.

—

Teclos didn't stop until the shed came into view.

Only then did the tension in his body begin to ease.

Only then did he allow the shadows to loosen their tight grip around him.

His arms trembled slightly from the strain. His breathing was ragged—and heavy.

As he approached the shed carefully, his senses extended outward just in case, but he felt nothing.

He made it.

—

Back in the town square, the old man leaned back on the bench, finishing the last of his salted sticks.

"Hmmm..."

He tapped his fingers lightly against his knee.

"He needs refinement..." He closed his eyes. "But..."

A slow smile crept across his face.

"I could shape him into an assassin for the lord."

And then, for a single moment—

The air around him changed.

A suffocating wave of killing intent erupted from the old man like an invisible explosion.

The wooden bench beneath him creaked violently, fine cracks forming along its edges as if it couldn't bear the sudden pressure.

The ground around him felt heavier—so dense that the air thickened, turning almost liquid and suffocating those nearby.

A nearby merchant dropped a crate of fruit, apples spilling across the ground as his hands trembled uncontrollably.

A woman froze mid-step, her breath hitching as her chest tightened.

A child nearby burst into tears without understanding why.

Their instincts screamed.

Danger.

It wasn't visible, nor tangible—but it felt absolute.

The kind of presence that didn't just threaten death—

It was death itself.

For that brief second, it felt as if a monstrous predator had stepped into the square.

Something that hunted not out of need—

But out of fun.

The old man's smile twisted, stretching wider than it should.

Into something unnatural.

Grotesque, even.

Like a mask barely containing something far more sinister beneath.

His eyes darkened.

Cold and empty.

Then—

It vanished.

"Oops..."

Just as suddenly as it had appeared.

The pressure lifted.

The air returned.

Sound rushed back into the world.

People staggered slightly, looking around in confusion, hands clutching their chests or arms.

"What... was that...?"

"Did you feel that?!"

"Something just—"

Unexplainable fear lingered in the town square.

In the Daen church, Pella had gone completely still, his instincts screaming.

From a distance, Ezekiel turned sharply, eyes scanning the area with sudden alertness.

And within the guild hall, Gunvald slowly raised his head, a dangerous glint flashing in his eyes as his presence flared in response.

All three locked onto the same direction.

Ready.

Prepared for a threat—

But it was already gone.

Back on the bench, the old man simply brushed a few crumbs from his coat and stood up—unbothered, calm.

He slowly stretched his back as if nothing had happened.

"Ahhh, tasty bread and a new toy," he muttered, satisfied.

And with that—

He walked off into the crowd, leaving nothing behind but unease.

Chapter 59 - 58 - The Shape of Shadows

When he finally broke through the last line of trees, the familiar sight of the shed stood ahead of Teclos, its rune-covered wooden walls faintly humming with residual mana. For a moment, he just stood there—chest rising and falling, breath visible in the cold air.

Then he exhaled. A long and heavy sigh.

His shoulders dropped as the tension left his body all at once.

He made it.

He didn't need luck or saving. He had pulled through with quick thinking and adapted to the situation given to him.

A grin slowly spread across his face.

It grew wider by the second, until by the end, it looked quite cheeky.

"Suck on that, old man..."

He muttered under his breath, satisfaction clear in his tone as he walked up to the shed.

"At least you're not a total disappointment, brat."

The voice suddenly came from behind him.

It was close, very close, in fact.

Teclos froze.

The grin vanished instantly.

His body tensed as he turned his head slightly—

The old man stood just a few steps away, hands behind his back, posture relaxed as if he had been there the entire time.

Watching.

Teclos rolled his eyes and turned fully now, masking the brief shock as best as he could.

"I did what you told me to do, old man," he said, tone sharp, a hint of defiance slipping through. "What's next?"

A brief silence followed.

The old man studied him—not casually, but with a sharp glint in his eyes.

A piercing stare.

It unsettled Teclos. The man usually ignored him—never even sparing him a glance.

His eyes lingered on Teclos's posture, his breathing, the way he held the short sword, the faint tremor still present in his arms.

Then he looked at his face.

The defiance was written all over it.

'He's stubborn like a bull and proud like that lowly manticore up on the mountain.'

For a brief moment—

There was no humor in the old man's expression.

Only cold evaluation.

Then—

A faint crease formed between his brows.

It wasn't anger, at least Teclos didn't seem to think so.

But more like a judging look.

"You talk too much," he said flatly.

Teclos didn't back down.

"Yeah, yeah, and you don't explain enough. Anyway, I did the task."

A pause.

The old man's gaze lingered a second longer.

Then he turned away slightly, walking past Teclos toward the shed.

"You did," he admitted.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside, motioning Teclos to follow.

"But barely."

Teclos's jaw tightened, but he stayed silent this time.

The old man placed the short sword back among the other weapons and retrieved Teclos's gear, tossing it to him without ceremony.

Teclos caught it.

"Your concealment was decent," the old man continued. "Your decision to break the line of pursuit—correct."

A pause.

"But your awareness is lacking."

He shut the shed door with a firm click.

"You noticed the pack too late. You didn't question their numbers soon enough. And if you hadn't acted when you did—"

He glanced sideways at Teclos.

"You'd be dead."

He gave a blunt and unfiltered judgment.

Teclos frowned but didn't argue.

Because he knew.

The old man wasn't exactly wrong; it was just that his tone was pissing him off.

The old man turned fully now, facing him again.

There was something different in his expression.

Less dismissive.

More... acknowledging, kind of.

"You've got instinct," he said. "And just enough brains to not die immediately."

A faint smirk tugged at his lips.

"But that attitude of yours..."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"...will get you killed faster than any beast in this forest."

Teclos met his gaze.

Unflinching.

"I'm still alive, aren't I?"

For a split second—

Something flickered in the old man's eyes.

Amusement.

Sharp and dangerous, like he was looking at a fun toy to play with.

Then it was gone.

"Hmph."

He turned and began walking back toward the forest path leading to town.

"Come along."

Teclos followed.

This time, the silence between them felt a bit different.

Not as empty or distant anymore, at least Teclos seemed to think so.

The old man spoke again after a few steps.

"Same time tomorrow."

Teclos exhaled through his nose.

Of course this stubborn old fool wouldn't acknowledge him that fast, but this time—

There was no frustration from Teclos, as he saw that this old, grumbling ass of a man also could be moved, even if just a tiny bit.

The only thing left for him was to focus on the next task.

Because now he understood the rules of this game.

And he intended to shatter every expectation the old man had.

—

Teclos returned home that evening like he always did lately.

Dinner was quiet. Familiar. Pleasant.

The warmth of the house, the simple food, the low murmur of talking—it all felt... distant compared to the forest. Compared to the constant tension of being hunted.

He ate his fill.

Answered a few of Saldia's questions about his day.

Avoided the ones he didn't feel like explaining.

Then he went to his room to lay down—

And was fast asleep within moments.

Morning came.

The room felt cold and crisp.

He went through his morning routine: dress, wash, and eat. Then he stepped outside with Talmir. The two walked together in silence for a while before splitting near the guild hall, each heading toward their own responsibilities.

Teclos took his usual spot by the counter.

Waiting with folded arms.

Leaning slightly against the wall near the entrance.

'Feels like this is my new job. Heh... somehow this hell feels nicer than my old job back on Earth. I just wish I had coffee...'

A faint smirk tugged at his lips.

A pause.

His expression twisted slightly.

'...even though my new boss can go suck a long one.'

Right on cue—the old man appeared.

No grand entrance.

No sound.

Just... spawned out of thin air.

"Come, let's go."

That was all he said, and Teclos followed him as usual.

Days turned into weeks.

The routine never changed.

Guild hall.

Forest.

Shed.

"Hide."

Run away, adapt to new beasts' hunting methods, and survive while returning to the shed.

Again.

And again.

And again.

At first, Teclos barely made it back each time—scraped, exhausted, pushed to his limits.

Then—

He started improving. At the end of each day, he would ponder what had gone wrong or how he could escape or hide better.

His movements became quieter.

More efficient.

His control over darkness was better.

His senses expanded.

The forest, once overwhelming and dangerous, slowly became something he could read the flow of and adapt to its dangers.

And then one day—when he wasn't even winded.

Teclos stepped into the clearing of the shed, breathing steadily with a relaxed posture. No frantic or panicked movements during the chase. No desperation.

His first clean escape.

For once—

There was no immediate comment from the old man on how he sucked.

No insult or critique.

The old man simply watched him for a moment, again longer than usual.

Then—

"Come with me."

Teclos raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

They didn't stop at the shed.

That was new...

Instead—

They headed in a completely different direction. Toward Lupos.

Teclos noticed it immediately, and his curiosity sparked.

'What's this about...?'

He glanced at the old man, but there was no point in asking.

He already knew the kind of answer he'd get, so he kept quiet.

They walked.

And walked.

Roughly halfway to the city, the old man suddenly veered left—back into the forest.

They went deeper and deeper, into different terrain. A slightly different scenery.

After another two hours of the same rough path—

They reached a clearing.

And there—

Another shed stood.

Teclos stopped for a second, flabbergasted, thinking he was experiencing déjà vu.

He stood there, blinking.

'...How many of these things does he even have?'

The old man ignored his reaction entirely, walking up and unlocking it like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Inside—

Weapons again.

Different arrangement and selection, but the same idea as with the last shed.

The old man reached in, grabbed a short sword, and handed it to Teclos without explanation again.

Then he took his gear like always. By now, it was also part of the daily routine.

Predictable.

Until—

It wasn't.

The shed door closed with a dull thud.

The old man turned around.

And for the first time—

He spoke before disappearing.

"Up ahead," he said, voice calm... but somehow colder than usual, "you'll find a goblin camp."

Teclos's ears perked up.

"A small one. They have primitive—wooden and bone—weapons."

A brief pause, then he explained more.

"Your target is the boss of that camp, the chieftain."

As his eyes locked onto Teclos, they lost their light, and a pure, cold killing intent slightly seeped through.

Unwavering and absolute.

"Kill him."

The words hit harder than anything the old man had said before. The tone he said it in gave Teclos slight goosebumps.

There was no sarcasm, no mockery.

Just an order.

"Then return like usual."

For a fraction of a second—

Teclos felt the old man's unsettling coldness.

Like something darker sat beneath the old man's usual grumbling and insults.

Something dangerous.

Then—

He vanished again.

As if he had never been there, Teclos stood alone in the clearing.

"..."

He exhaled slowly.

Goblin camp...

Kill the boss...

His grip tightened slightly.

"Yeah... sure. I swear a moodier geezer doesn't exist on this planet."

He muttered it under his breath—but there was no real complaint in it.

After all, he finally had something other to do than just run away.

Still... he couldn't shake that feeling.

That brief glimpse of something behind the old man's eyes.

"...You're one weird old bastard..."

Teclos shook his head and started his mission.

And walked toward the camp.

Teclos didn't waste a second after the old man vanished.

A shadow tendril snapped upward, wrapping around a thick branch, and with a smooth pull, he lifted himself into the canopy. His boots never touched the ground.

Then—

He disappeared.

Darkness gathered around him, shrouding him and making him less noticeable in the shadows. It clung to his body, wrapped around his limbs, softened his outline, and blurred his presence.

He burned through less mana than before and was more obscured than before.

He was... part of the darkness now.

The dim light filtering through the dense canopy broke into patches and streaks, shadows stretching and connecting across trunks, branches, and uneven ground.

Teclos slipped into them like water finding its path.

This was the first time since the old man had started training him that he wasn't prey, but the predator.

He moved forward carefully, branch to branch, never rushing.

Each step was deliberate.

Each shift of weight calculated.

He was really starting to move differently now. No more rushing, always in the darkness and shadows, never straying away from them even for a second.

His mind was slowly being morphed to think differently about what the best course of engagement was.

He only had a hard time rushing forward and head-on. And he always found success when going the silent way.

What he didn't know was that he was being deliberately shown only one way out.

—

Teclos extended his senses.

His awareness spread outward from him, everything within his range noticed.

He felt every movement around him. Sure, the range wasn't that great, but it was absolute.

Nothing could escape him once it entered his range.

After a while, he found what he was looking for: faint, scattered signatures ahead.

Goblins.

He slowed down and lowered his presence even more.

The first one came into view minutes later.

Perched lazily near the edge of a crude wooden structure, a goblin leaned against a sharpened stake, scratching its neck with dirty claws. Its skin had a sickly green tint, its posture hunched with twitchy movements.

A guard.

Teclos studied it.

The only problem now was the direction of the wind.

"...Tch."

It was blowing from his back toward the camp.

Goblins had sharp noses, so if his scent reached them—

This would turn messy fast.

He adjusted his route.

Slowly circling around the camp to get a better vantage point.

Then he sensed something like a messy patrol up ahead.

They weren't organized like soldiers—but also not entirely careless either.

Unpredictable.

Which made them dangerous in their own way.

Teclos paused on a thicker branch, crouching low.

'I don't know what the boss is...'

That was the biggest issue. A goblin wasn't just a goblin; the chief might be a hobgoblin.

A stronger and faster variant. A physically enhanced goblin.

Or a shaman?

Adept at using special magic.

That could complicate things, depending on how smart it was.

A beast tamer?

That would be the worst outcome.

It would mean that powerful beasts could guard it, or ones with strong senses.

His jaw tightened slightly. There were too many unknowns.

Too many ways this could go wrong.

His gaze shifted across the camp again.

Teclos exhaled slowly through his nose.

'I can't just start killing them.'

One wrong move—

And the entire camp would be alerted to an intruder. Besides, their blood could fall on him, always giving his location away.

The old man told him to kill the chief, not fight the whole camp.

This was a hunt.

And hunts required patience.

He leaned forward slightly, narrowing his eyes.

Kill the head—

And the body would fall into chaos.

That was the plan.

Simple but efficient.

Just to be sure, Teclos sank deeper into the shadows, his presence dimming further until even the faint traces of him became nearly impossible to detect.

Once he was sure they wouldn't detect him, he moved again.

Like a ghost drifting through the canopy, closing in on the heart of the camp.

Chapter 60 - 59 - Glimpse of True Darkness

Although he didn't notice it himself, on this new mission, Teclos moved differently—he wasn't faster or stronger, at least not by much. But something had changed in the way he approached a hunt. He was stealthier.

Every step he took carried the intent of stealth.

Every breath he took was controlled.

Even the way he shifted his weight along the branches felt refined, moving with the forest itself.

Like a shadow of the forest, unseen by most of its dwellers.

He had begun to understand something fundamental about his darkness affinity.

For him, brute force was not the answer anymore.

Stealth was.

Patience.

And a precise killing blow.

It was what allowed him to fully utilize the nature of his darkness mana—and without realizing it, he had started walking the exact path the old man had been pushing him toward from the very beginning.

The old man chose the training targets in a way that favored stealth—either because the target was too strong for a frontal assault or too quick.

It forced Teclos to unconsciously think like an assassin, relying on evasion, blind spots, and hiding.

Nothing like a proud warrior, but something more cowardly and sneaky, deadly if used in the right way.

Before now, he had only given him missions that required running away, so his progress was somewhat obscured. But this time, it was the first mission that required Teclos to kill a target. It was a test to see if he was usable, or if he should discard the idea of teaching him and coaxing him into obedience.

—

The goblin camp stretched beneath Teclos like a festering scar carved into the forest floor, its crude structures forming a loose and chaotic circle.

Flickering fires cast uneven light, their smoke heavy and foul, carrying with it the stench of rot, filth, and decay. Even from above, the smell gnawed at his nose like a ferocious beast.

Teclos remained still for a while, crouched low along a thick branch, his presence nearly nonexistent as he observed.

He didn't rush and only watched from afar for now, trying to learn their habits and behavior, as well as count them.

The goblins moved erratically, their patrols lacking any discipline, yet there was still a strange efficiency to their chaos. Guards lingered at key points, some alert, others distracted, scratching at their festering skin or muttering under their breath.

They were unpredictable, and that made them more dangerous in his eyes—but not impossible to navigate.

Teclos exhaled slowly, letting his body relax, and wrapped himself further into the shadows, erasing his presence and scent almost perfectly.

Then, finally—

He moved.

A small stone slipped from his fingers and dropped into the underbrush below.

The faint tap was enough to draw the attention of some goblins.

One of the nearby goblins snapped its head toward the sound, its ears twitching sharply before it shuffled forward, curiosity outweighing caution.

That was all the opening Teclos needed.

He dropped silently behind it, his landing so soft that not a single leaf stirred. Before the creature could make a sound, his hand clamped over its mouth. In the same motion, he twisted his whole body with brutal force, wrenching its head at an unnatural angle until its neck snapped.

The goblin went limp instantly.

Teclos held it for a second longer, ensuring there was no twitch or reflex left, before lowering it carefully into the shadows.

No trace or scent of blood remained.

And he was already moving again.

Another guard paced along a rough path between huts, its steps uneven and distracted.

Teclos stayed behind a tree this time, clinging as closely to it as possible, his body flattened against the bark. He watched the rhythm of the goblin's movements.

Stepping forward.

Pausing suddenly.

Then turning around.

Like it had noticed something amiss for a second. But then it continued onward.

Another step—

Teclos rushed out the moment its back faced him again.

An arm slipped around its throat, tightening his grip enough to cut off airflow. The goblin struggled weakly, claws scratching at his vambrace, but Teclos didn't rush it. He held firm, steady, waiting until the body went limp.

Then he disappeared again, taking the body into the trees, where he laid it on a branch and fastened it with a piece of rope.

Nothing was left behind with a chance of being discovered.

He moved through the camp like that—silent, unseen, a presence that existed only between fleeting moments.

Sometimes he created diversions, tossing pebbles or snapping twigs at a distance to draw attention away from his path. Other times, he simply slipped past guards entirely, letting them live, choosing efficiency over unnecessary risk.

And when needed—

He eliminated them.

Cleanly.

Quietly.

Without hesitation.

—

Back at Kolma, while playing cards in the tavern, the old man suddenly laughed like a deranged man. Across the table from him, another old man looked up with a questioning expression, doubting his sanity.

"Oh, sorry for my laugh just now, friend. I seem to have remembered something good just now."

"Hmph! I fold my hand. There is no way I'm falling for your tricks!"

While carrying the game onward, the old man was pleased by Teclos's methods.

—

Back at the goblin camp.

Minutes stretched on as he carved a path through the camp's outer layer, never once revealing himself, never once allowing his focus and tension to break.

Until finally—

He reached the center of this filth.

The largest structure stood before him, towering over the rest of the camp.

A grotesque tent stitched together from thick animal hides, its surface reinforced with bones and crude carvings that seemed almost ritualistic in nature. It radiated corruption—wrongness.

It was the chieftain's dwelling. He was sure of it.

Teclos lowered himself onto a branch overlooking it, his body blending seamlessly into the shadows as he focused.

Then—

He heard it.

Moaning.

Wet sounds.

It was... unmistakable.

His expression didn't change, but something behind his eyes did.

Slowly, carefully, he descended along the tent's outer edge, using the deeper shadows cast by its uneven surface to conceal himself completely.

He made a small tear in the hide.

Just enough so that he could look inside.

Before anything else, the rotten smell hit him first.

Death.

Sweat.

Blood.

And something far worse that lingered heavily in the air.

His gaze shifted toward the edge of the tent.

Bodies lay discarded in the corner—unmoving, lifeless, tossed aside like used-up and defective products. Bodies of different races. Different features. Different ages... but unmistakably women... only women.

All reduced to the same miserable end.

At the center of the tent, the cause of this atrocious sight stood—the monster, the filth—

The chieftain.

A hobgoblin, larger and more imposing than the others, its frame thick with muscle and decorated with crude trophies. Bones, teeth, scraps of armor—all signs of its dominance over the other goblins.

And beneath it—

A woman.

Barely moving.

Barely resisting.

Her strength was long gone, it seemed.

Suddenly, the shadows seemed to become darker, deeper. The chief noticed the change but didn't think much of it, as he didn't feel any killing intent and didn't smell anything amiss.

But outside—

Teclos barely contained his rage, engulfed in darkness, his eyes pitch black and darker than the night. He wanted to rip the goblin's head off.

But he had to control his emotions, so he tried to calm down, as a hobgoblin definitely wouldn't be an easy target for a frontal assault.

His breathing slowed to almost nothing as he let his presence sink deeper into the shadows, erasing even the faintest trace of himself.

He studied the chieftain carefully, observing every movement, every shift in its awareness.

He just needed one moment.

One.

A perfect moment to end its life.

Time stretched from seconds into minutes.

The goblin grew sloppier, its focus narrowing completely, its awareness fading as it became consumed by its own desire.

That was the opening.

Teclos moved.

He slipped into the tent like a shadow peeling away from the darkness, his presence so faint it was almost nonexistent.

For a brief moment—

One of the women who was still alive noticed something, her eyes flickering in his direction.

And she saw him, but she was unsure, as her eyesight was blurry.

Only a silhouette that reeked of the promise of death. For a second, she thought that death would finally take her.

A figure cloaked in darkness, his form barely distinguishable from the shadows themselves. His eyes—cold, empty, devoid of hesitation or mercy.

Like death had taken shape and stepped into the room.

Then, just like that—

Her nightmare seemed to be over.

—

Bella—the woman who saw him—was a normal trader who had been captured a week ago and had tried to endure this situation.

Survive.

But her situation just wasn't getting any better. At first, she held out hope that the kingdom might send some knights or adventurers their way... but after a week of this torture, her hopes were diminishing.

And her will to live was fading away.

—

She saw this death close the distance in a single fluid motion, his blade cutting silently through the air as he struck.

The timing was perfect.

The chieftain never even realized what had happened.

Just before he struck, she clearly saw his figure—it was a beautiful young boy. Darkness wrapped his blade, making it pitch black. His eyes were like two voids—filled with malice. On top of all that, he was cloaked in deep darkness, ready to swallow the world.

Bella was delighted.

'Yes! Kill this bastard!' she thought.

His blade passed through the chieftain's neck.

The head separated instantly, blood erupting in a violent spray that painted the interior of the tent red. The body convulsed once before collapsing heavily to the ground, lifeless.

Teclos didn't pause for long. "Old man, I know you can hear me. Save them," he said.

Then he turned around and didn't look back anymore.

He was gone—off to kill the rest.

—

Outside, the camp remained unaware—for a few seconds longer.

The silence was broken by a scream.

Then another.

Confusion rippled outward like a shockwave.

Perfect.

Teclos killed those two so that panic would spread. He watched as it took hold, as order collapsed in the camp and turned into chaos.

This time—

He didn't avoid them, but hunted them like the pests they were.

A goblin sprinted blindly past a hut, fear written across its face—

A shadow dropped behind it, and a blade flashed across its throat in one smooth motion before it could even react.

Another turned a corner—

A tendril of darkness wrapped around its limb, yanking it into the shadows, where a muffled crunch ended it instantly.

They scattered.

Separated.

Fled.

Exactly as he needed them to.

Teclos moved faster now, more aggressive, yet no less precise and stealthy. Each strike was clean. Each kill silent.

He flowed through the chaos like a phantom, appearing and disappearing between moments, never giving them a chance to regroup.

They never saw him.

Never understood what was happening.

They simply died.

By the time silence fully returned—

There was nothing left of the camp but corpses and the lingering stench of death.

—

Far from the carnage, the old man ended his card game, winning a few coins and being accused of cheating.

Now he leaned casually against a tree outside, watching.

A slow smile spread across his face.

"...Heh."

It wasn't warm or kind.

It was something sinister.

"Now that's more like it, brat..."

A low chuckle escaped him, growing into a quiet, almost twisted laugh.

"Maybe... just maybe..."

His eyes gleamed faintly in the dim light.

"...you'll be useful after all."

For a brief moment, something dangerous flickered beneath that gaze—something cold and predatory.

Then it vanished.

He pushed off the tree and said, "Well, might as well 'save' the women there so that the kid will be happy, haha."

He vanished from his spot and reappeared in the forest, which became silent with his presence.

At the camp, goblins were dying off one by one, and amidst the chaos, the old man gathered the women in wooden cocoons and transported them out.