

## **CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD**

### **Chapter 6 - 5 – Trouble Stirring**

Four months had passed since Talmir and Kosak's boar hunt. Life in Kolma, shaped by discipline and survival, had returned to its usual rhythm. Spring air warmed the fields, the farmers sowed, and the hunters resumed patrols.

But that morning, something felt... off.

Tom, one of Kolma's gate guards, leaned lazily against his spear, a half-eaten apple in one hand. He squinted down the road toward Lupos, chewing slowly.

"Traders should've been here by now," he muttered. "Probably got drunk in the taverns again, those lazy bastards."

The supply traders came weekly, always arriving the morning after Lupos's market day. They brought fabrics, spices, smoked meats, letters – little lifelines from the wider world. Their absence was rare, as trading was profitable and easier than slaying beasts.

It was alarming, to say the least, when those money grubbers went missing without a word.

By noon, Tom's confidence had soured.

And by late midday, he sent a message to the village chief.

Village Chief Brahm walked up to the gates from the town square, his broad shoulders stiff with unease. Despite his age, Brahm still looked like a hunter — smaller in stature, but packed with a nasty punch, the kind that could drop a stone boar at sixty paces with a single swing of his battleaxe.

"Still nothing?" he asked.

Tom shook his head. "No message, no people, heck, not even dust."

Brahm didn't reply. He simply turned and walked back, jaw set.

That afternoon, he summoned six of Kolma's active hunters to the square — among them, Talmir and Ulmak, the two most seasoned hunters.

"Thanks for coming this quickly and on such short notice," Brahm began, his voice heavy. "The traders are late. No message from them. No signs of them. This might

be nothing still, as we all know they like money, booze, and women, but nobody showing up? – my gut tells me something ain't right, and 'might be nothing' doesn't cut it."

From beneath the guild hall, Brahm opened the old stone cellar, and from it, he retrieved six glimmering spatial rings – enchanted and pre-packed for emergencies with reinforced armor, cloaks, food, medical kits, flares, and survival tools.

"These are for when things go wrong," he said. "Well... I think something's gone wrong, so everyone gear up right now." He paused, then continued after a moment of brooding.

"Also, if it's a beast you can't handle, retreat and report the situation. We can always request reinforcements from Lupos, so don't be stupid and act like heroes."

The hunters stepped forward.

Ulmak accepted his ring first, with a smirk. "Was hoping I'd get to stretch my wings after a long time."

"You're in charge, Ulmak," Brahm said. "Talmir, you're second. No arguments."

"None needed," Talmir replied.

"I want you covering the road to Lupos. Check all three fork points. If there's anything – tracks, blood, or worse – I want to know."

Ulmak was an elite fire mage and hunter. He was highly experienced, being a former knight, and had the most destructive power among the hunters. He was the ideal captain for this mission. Talmir also had tactical training, and his composed nature was always welcome – the perfect second.

"Come back safely, lads. I hope my worries are unwarranted."

"Don't worry, you old fossil, I'm gonna bring them back with all of the traders in tow, and then you can buy me a beer haha!" While Ulmak was boasting, Brahm only gained a sour face.

"Ugh! Talmir, please keep him in check."

"Yes, chief."

The armor was moderately heavy, forged from a mix of plate, hardened leather, and woolen cloth for comfort beneath the metal.

The head was protected by a barbute helmet with a T-shaped visor, worn over a padded arming cap. Pauldrons and a layer of chainmail guarded the shoulders and neck, while the torso was encased in a salamander-steel cuirass. The arms were fitted with vambraces and gauntlets, and the legs were shielded by greaves and sturdy boots with steel caps.

Ulmak whistled. "Wow, Brahm, this is military grade, isn't it?"

"It is. Can't have my boys and girl die now, can I?" he said boastfully.

Every hunter present had a smile on their face once they heard that. Brahm was mostly stoic, and people who didn't know him thought he was emotionless — besides the occasional anger fit — but these hunters knew that wasn't true.

"Thanks, Brahm, for looking after us," said Talmir, patting him on the shoulder.

"Khm! No worries... a-anyway, off you go!" As red as a beet, he turned around and walked away, which earned a few laughs.

Except for the military outfits, the hunters packed light — only the essentials they needed.

After checking everything, they exchanged nods and departed before sundown.

The road wound through sparse forest and low hills. Not dangerous terrain – not like the deep forest or the mountains – but far enough that safety was never guaranteed.

Talmir soared ahead in intervals, rising into the canopy or darting above the treetops. Ulmak kept the ground team tight, marching in a double-line formation. They put trailstones on the ground and marked their route, glowing faint blue in the dirt. This was done so that pursuers with corresponding trailstones could find them should something go wrong.

Several hours in, Ulmak called for a halt.

He crouched beside a patch of disturbed soil.

"What is it?" Talmir asked.

"Not wagon tracks," Ulmak murmured. "Something small, clawed, and bipedal."

Talmir frowned. "Kobolds?"

"Could be," Ulmak said. "But if so... they're far from their hunting grounds. Anyway, besides this strange trail, there is no sign of the traders."

Sera chimed in, "Yes, they haven't even come this far. Either they postponed their visit and are drinking, or we'll see bodies."

"Now, now, don't be so pessimistic, Sera. I'm sure we'll find them soon... well, hopefully. Hope dies last, they say." Although Ulmak said that, it wasn't looking good.

They marked the site and moved on.

Later, the sun dipped low, and still no wagon, no debris. Just marching in silence and mounting tension.

That evening, they made camp on a flat rise beside a slow stream. A wind barrier spell was set up by Talmir to mask their scent. The fire pit was dug low. The weapons and armor were checked again.

Talmir dropped beside the fire and looked to Ulmak. "Still think they're drunk in Lupos?"

Ulmak exhaled dryly. "I'd rather have that than what my gut's telling me."

Darnel answered, "Well, they better be kidnapped by some monsters, because if I find them drinking, I'll be the monster!"

Ulmak just laughed. "Calm down, man, and enjoy the nice walk."

As the stew warmed, the fire's soft crackle loosened a few smiles.

"Alright," Ulmak said, stretching. "We're out here with no traders and no answers. My guess? They ran off with someone from Lupos."

Obin snorted. "Maybe the whole caravan eloped together."

Sera rolled her eyes. "That's not funny."

A younger hunter named Tolk leaned over to Talmir and tried to make small talk. "How do you bend the wind like that? With the arrows, I mean."

"Practice and patience," Talmir said, sipping his tea. "First, try to spin the wind around the arrow, and when you release it, try to guide the arrow to your target. When you achieve that, ask me more."

Darnel grinned. "Man's married to the wind, not Saldia. Only training – and I have been saying it for years."

Laughter followed. But unease never left.

Earlier that afternoon – back in Kolma

Teclos sat on a stool in the herb room, book in one hand, pestle in the other. A fine mist of powdered bark drifted from the bowl as he worked. Across the room, Saldia catalogued herbs in tight, looping script.

"What's the difference between crimsonroot and fireleaf again?" he asked.

"Crimsonroot heals fever. Fireleaf makes it worse," she said. "Mix those up and Father Pella will give me another two-hour lecture."

Teclos chuckled. "Got it."

The moment felt simple and familiar. The quiet scrape of parchment, the dusty smell of dried herbs – it had become his new normal. And yet... something was different today.

He was worried because his father left on such short notice.

"Mom, do you think dad is going to be alright?"

"Don't worry, Teclos. He's strong and a great hunter." Though she said that, her face betrayed a frown of worry. It wasn't every day that he was called to duty so suddenly.

"Ok, I'll go outside a bit, Mom."

Wanting to clear his head, Teclos sat behind their home next to the trees. What better way to calm the nerves than to train and see some progress made with mana? he thought internally.

As he started the training session, something felt different.

The shadows around him seemed to respond more than usual, the air still and dark. Following Talmir's technique, he focused on his breathing again in a lotus position.

All of the gathered mana went towards his heart, like before with his core. He tried to spin it faster and faster until a circle formed.

He drew mana through his lungs, spiraled it into his chest, and a basic shape of a circle was forming. Differently from the past months, though, this time it was merging with him as it took shape. Then... a pulse.

His chest tightened, the pressure mounted, and his mana overflowed. He opened his eyes and tried to calm the mana, as Talmir had said he could become crippled if the mana grew rampant.

He winced — not from pain, but from intensity. His thoughts sharpened. His awareness deepened. The mana inside him clicked into place. With every beat of his heart, the mana flowed freely. Darkness around him responded even more.

It enveloped him and the tree around him, making it into a still and windless cocoon.

A new circle formed — quiet, cold, and powerful.

He had never felt this alive in his previous life.

The world didn't look different, but it felt different. The mana was easier to sense now – easier to control.

Saldia rushed out. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Teclos said softly. "I think I just formed my second circle."

Flabbergasted and with mouth open at first, she quickly became happy. "My Teclos is a genius! Haha, can't wait to see Talmir's face when he sees it! This calls for celebration."

Smiling, Teclos went inside, eagerly waiting for food, as the circle had quite literally exhausted and famished him.

Later – at the Smithy

Laughter rang across the open-air forge. The sun was still high when Gillard held out his first real sword – forged from steel, rough at the edges but unmistakably a real sword.

"It's not perfect, but anyway, you formed your second circle already? Damn, we got a genius on our hands," he said, wiping soot from his brow.

"It's your first sword," Ralph said. "That makes it cool man, and yeah, I guess we have to step up our game too."

Teclos stepped closer. "Don't worry, guys, you'll get there." He said smugly. "But let's talk about the sword first now. So you made this?"

"How humble of you to include us your highness, and yes, from start to finish," Gillard replied with a smile and added, "Father helped with the tempering."

"Can I?"

Gillard hesitated, then handed it over. Teclos tested the grip. Unbalanced – but solid. "It's cool. We should test it out," he murmured.

Then Ralph tried to lift it next. "Okay, heavy. Definitely not for cutting apples."

They laughed.

Then Ralph glanced between them. "Hey — what circles are you guys planning to go for next?"

"I have Two already," Teclos said boastfully. "Heart and core. I'm planning it on head next, for a balanced approach."

"I'm going mind right now, already got a core circle," Ralph said.

Gillard shrugged. "Almost two. Heart and core as well. Strength and stamina — that's all I care about right now."

Ralph smirking said, "Going for those locations tells me that blacksmithing is all you care about, haha."

"One day," Gillard said, almost shyly, "I'll forge blades for all of us."

They stood there in silence for a moment, each lost in his own dream. Just two boys and an old geezer in the body of a boy.

Back at the Hunter Camp

The fire had dimmed to embers. Talmir leaned against a tree, his sword at his side, watching the stars.

"Hope the kid's doing alright," he muttered.

"He's fine," Ulmak replied. "Probably grinding herbs and learning which one makes you shit and puke out your dinner, to pull a prank on you."

Talmir chuckled. But he didn't relax.

They all felt tense, as it was more and more apparent that something went wrong.

Tomorrow, they might find the answers.

And those answers were... hopefully good news.

## Chapter 7 - 6 – The Vanishing Trail

The forest whispered its secrets as the last watch of night slipped into dawn.

Sera crouched near the low-burning fire, rubbing her arms against the chill. The mist clung thick to the ground, turning breath into clouds. She glanced toward the still form lying nearby – Ulmak – snoring softly with a crooked arm over his eyes.

With a flick of her boot, she nudged his ribs.

"Get up, flame-boy. It's your turn."

Ulmak blinked. "Ouch! Already?" Yawning, he slowly stood up. "By the way, Sera, do you also wake your husband like that, or is it just me?"

Sera rolled her eyes. "Just you, darling, and you were the first to sleep. Don't start whining."

He groaned, stretching. "Fine. You better not do this again though, or I'll launch a fireball next to your bedroll next time."

She snorted. "Can't promise anything, your face is just too punchable."

Ignoring her Ulmak pulled on his cloak and moved toward the outer perimeter of the camp. Sera bundled herself back into her bedroll with a satisfied sigh, trusting the experienced scout to watch over the camp. She'd get two more hours — not much, but it was enough.

Ulmak stoked the embers, coaxing the fire back to life. Then, he quietly began his watch, eyes scanning the trees while the camp remained silent under the rising light.

Nothing much happened besides the occasional bug crossing their camp. After a while, just before wake-up call, he put a pot of water on the fire, and from the spatial ring he took out some already cut meat, herbs, fat, oats, and barley. He was making basic porridge for the whole group so that they would have the energy for the day.

After the wake-up call, they ate.

"You can cook? Color me surprised," said Obin, while the rest nodded, agreeing with him.

"Don't faint — I'm full of surprises."

By midmorning, the hunters finished eating and had broken camp to set off toward Lupos.

They moved cautiously, weaving through hills and old forest trails. Ulmak led half the group beneath the trees, checking the map, while Talmir occasionally soared above — his wind-assisted glides scouting silently across the canopy.

The group encountered a few of the more dangerous beasts — like a fire bear resting by a crumbled log with ash all around it, or a lightning wolf pacing far off-trail — but they moved on without provoking them, thanks to Talmir's scouting. Their mission came first, and they had no time to deal with those beasts. Although, there were some complaints.

"Damn, that fire bear could have made a nice addition to my floor," complained Darnel.

"Keep it to yourself, Darnel. We are on a timer and a mission here, not a luxury hunt," Talmir said flatly.

"Alright, alright, no need to get angry now."

By late afternoon, the towers of the city Lupos crested the horizon finally — stone walls, square towers, and northern flags waving in the wind.

At the gates, a pair of guards leaned lazily on their halberds. When they saw six well-armored people, they straightened up and were on guard.

"Stop! Who are you?"

"Hail," Ulmak called. "We're Kolma hunters, and we're tracking a missing trader caravan."

Hearing that they were from Kolma, the guards straightened into a more relaxed pose. "Missing? Is there something wrong?"

"A few caravans are late, actually," Talmir explained. "And for a full day now. So, did any traders leave Lupos for Kolma recently?"

One guard frowned. "They left two days ago and should've reached Kolma yesterday morning at the latest."

The other guard remembered as well. "Oh yeah! Those drunk troublemakers did indeed leave yesterday."

Ulmak crossed his arms. "So you let a caravan full of drunk traders vanish and didn't check the road?"

The second guard scoffed. "Maybe they just found a wine cellar and forgot the road existed."

"Or maybe something's gone wrong," Talmir said flatly. "What guards and how many did they employ? Do you maybe remember?"

"They had three mercenaries with them, and talk to the sergeant if you want to know more," the first guard said.

Talmir turned to Ulmak and laid out a plan. "I'll handle the resupply in the city. You speak with the sergeant and get their statement. The rest can take it easy and wait here."

Ulmak frowned, then let out a snort of amusement. "Oh look at you, giving orders now, are we? ...Well fine, fine. You heard the man, chop chop!"

The rest just shook their heads and went to check their gear in some shade.

Once inside Lupos, Talmir noticed that the market was bustling — carts full of summer fruit, travelers, blacksmiths sharpening tools, and chatter echoing off stone alleys.

Ignoring everything else, Talmir moved with purpose until he found a small dry-goods stall manned by a scarred old woman.

"Talmir?" she blinked in surprise. "By the gods, that you?"

"Still running this place, Ada?" he replied with a smile.

"Well, someone has to. I thought you'd moved to the forest for good, chasing that love of yours."

With a light smirk, Talmir replied, "I'm still out there, and I caught my lovely bird in the end. Anyways, I need dried meat, oats, sugar — emergency stock for six people."

Ada's brow furrowed. "Let me guess — your caravan of drunken fools vanished?"

Talmir nodded, surprised.

"How'd you know?"

She tossed a wrapped parcel into a basket. "Because two of their guards owed me money and didn't show up yesterday. And seeing you here, I guess I won't get it back either."

Talmir's eyes narrowed. "Do you remember what route they were supposed to take maybe?"

"Indeed I do — they blabbered about it when they promised to get me my money with this job. Instead of the same one they always take, they forked left when the path splits. You should take the main pass near Hollow Ridge."

Talmir nodded. "Thanks, I owe you one, Ada."

"Don't fret over it, boy. Oh, and Talmir?" she added. "If you find Draks, take the money pouch and punch him once for me, will ya?"

Talmir smirked. "No promises," he said, slipping her a silver coin before disappearing into the crowd.

Outside the gates, the hunters were relaxing in the shade after their gear check-up. Obin stretched and yawned.

"Maybe they really eloped," he offered again.

"With who?" Sera asked, deadpan. "The cabbage vendor's daughter?"

Ulmak leaned against the gatepost. "My money's on the barmaid. No, but seriously, it could be kobolds."

The gate guard snorted after overhearing that. "Kobolds? That's your excuse, really?"

Darnel shrugged. "Would explain how you idiots lost a whole caravan without a whisper."

The guard frowned and stood up from that remark. "Hey—"

Ulmak quickly raised a hand. "Relax, friend. We're here to fix this, so go back to your post unless you want to be beaten... friend."

The guard was shocked, to say the least, and mad. He wanted to retaliate, but his buddy stopped him and whispered something in his ear. After that, he returned to his post still angry.

Seeing that Obin and Darnel laughed at him.

Talmir returned by midday with loaded packs and a marked map, just at the right time as the talks with the sergeant and the guards fell through.

Talmir explained everything, and they followed Ada's route, taking the Hollow Ridge pass — the one the caravan should have taken.

En route, hours passed in tense silence, and then a trail finally.

"Here!" Darnel was the first to notice.

A shattered wheel and cracked crates. There was blood on the leaves nearby and drag marks in the dirt.

But no bodies. Fortunately — or not — has yet to be seen, but at least they could track them now with this new lead.

Talmir crouched, brushing a claw mark on a broken beam. "It's definitely a kobold mark."

"Huh, so I was right. Anyways, this mission just got a bit more dangerous, so form teams of two and spread out – not too much though, five hundred meters at most."

They spread out, searching for clues. Talmir who was paired up with Obin were on the kobold trail, and the other two teams were on their flanks. While Obin followed the tracks, Talmir flew a quick arc, returning with grim news.

"More drag trails heading north. No blood trails though, and no sign of dead guards. Could mean they're alive – we have to be quick."

"If this turns out to be a rescue mission," Obin grimaced, "we're in trouble."

"It is going to be harder, I agree with you – but we have to do it."

"No one said we wouldn't."

They moved like ghosts, using wind and earth magic to mask their scent and camouflage themselves. After all, they were dealing with kobolds — creatures with sharp senses of smell and hearing.

The air felt tense, charged with danger and worry. If the kobolds spotted them first, it was going to be trouble.

Then from a ridge above, Obin raised a hand and whispered.

"Movement. Downhill towards the east."

They spotted five kobolds — small, hunched, with bone weapons in hand. One dragged a sack full of something. Another — a body, limp and clearly human.

Obin's face hardened. "They're heading to the caves."

Talmir whispered, "Send a signal to the others to gather, then we follow. Quietly."

Using special signal crystals that light up when mana was poured in, Obin sent the signal.

After gathering, they prepared for the attack.

The search mission just changed into a rescue mission — or, if no one was alive anymore, an annihilation mission.

That Evening — Back in Kolma

The apple trees rustled softly under the setting sun. Teclos sat cross-legged in the dirt, eyes closed, back straight. His breath moved slow and deliberate — the mana flowing through his lungs, gathered and nourished the two already-made circles while also preparing for a third.

To build up a circle took time — and a lot of mana.

Step by step, the mana would gather into a vessel that could contain it, like the core or heart, for example. Then he would shape the mana into a circle slowly, and when it finally connected both ends, the first stage would be done.

Every stage needed a certain talent — like feeling the mana, control over it, speed of the flow, and so on...

The second stage was mainly focused on merging that gathered wild mana with himself and making it his own. Once complete, a stable source of power was gained in the form of a rotating circle.

Talmir told him that, "A circle is like a reservoir of mana that completely obeys you. It nourishes your body and gathers mana on its own. Of course, once the circle is full, it stops gathering it."

"Hmm, I wonder what the circle in my head is supposed to do. Father was rather vague about that... If I go by gaming standards of Earth, my Core is for my body and inner strength, Heart is for the outer strength and output outside of my body... Head – I get that it gives you reflexes and thinking time, but is that all?" he pondered. "I'll need an advanced book on mana when I get older and when I'm allowed to go to Lupos."

A twig suddenly snapped near him...

Loric stood nearby, arms crossed, and watching him.

"Practicing again, you freak?" he sneered. "Or just pretending?"

Teclos exhaled slowly. "What do you want, Loric?"

"A match. Unless you're scared, coward."

Teclos stood, brushing dirt from his pants.

"I'm not fighting you outside of the grounds."

Loric snorted. "Scared you'll lose?"

"No, I'm scared I'll break your bones and be blamed for it," Teclos said.

He glanced toward the well. A figure sat there — Alissa, one of the fourteen-year-olds. She'll do, he thought.

He called out: "Alissa. Can you maybe judge this fight?"

She looked up, sighed, and stood. "Not here. Go to the sparring grounds, and tap out or stop when I say it."

"Good enough?" Teclos asked.

Loric nodded. "Let's go."

At the sparring grounds, a few kids already gathered, and once they faced off, word spread — so Ralph and Gillard also showed up.

Once Alissa gave the sign to start, Loric tried to hold a speech. "I'm gonna stomp you today so that—"

Teclos just rolled his eyes and cut him off. "Just start already, this is embarrassing."

The crowd chuckled, and Loric was beet red from anger, so he charged in aggressively with a shout.

Loric sped up fast with the wind swirling around his feet and jumped, trying to slam into Teclos with both feet.

Teclos sidestepped and perfectly countered him midair with a hook like elbow to the stomach. Loric was then thrown into the ground, gasping for air.

"What? A wind mage out of air? Now that's funny," mocked Teclos.

He put up both hands and went into a boxing stance, quickly closing in on Loric with his footwork. Loric tried to retaliate with a hook punch of his own, but Teclos calmly dodged by weaving under it while also countering him with an uppercut, knocking him out – and also one of his teeth.

"Didn't even need mana for you," said Teclos, turning around and walking away. Of course, Loric didn't hear that.

The crowd of kids was awed, as they had never seen anything like it, it was a no contest fight wich ended in record time.

Even the older kids were stunned by how well Teclos fought without mana.

From the hill, Ralph whispered to Gillard, "Holy shit,he can fight and to think i almost took him up on that challenge."

Gillard nodded. "Maybe I should spar with him next."

Ralph laughed. "After seeing this, maybe you'll finnaly get beaten for the first time."

Once the disturbance was dealt with, Teclos returned to the apple trees and sat down. He closed his eyes and began training again.

He returned to shaping that third circle — slowly, steadily, like laying the first stones of a fortress that shall guard his life one day.

## Chapter 8 - 7 - Echo and Ember

The kobold trail wound through tangled thickets and moss-covered roots, a subtle path that only trained eyes could follow. Talmir crouched low, hand brushing over a fresh claw print in the dirt.

"They passed through here earlier."

Ulmak gave a sign to halt. "Once we cross this line from now on," he drew an imaginary line, "we only use hunter signs — otherwise, complete silence." he whispered.

Talmir took out a tube from his spatial ring and flew up above the canopy, silently watching through the fog. It was an enchanted metallic tube with crystal lenses at both ends — something you could see great distances with.

From his vantage point, he saw it — the cave mouth nestled in the ravine ahead. Ten kobolds lounged near the entrance, gnawing on bones or resting against spears carved from animal horn and sharpened bone.

Smaller creatures and primitive, they have a wolf or dog like appearance with a small loincloth around their waists. Their pelts provided them with some protection but that was it.

Then the scout pack they had tracked emerged from the forest and approached the cave. The entrance guards were alerted at first, but after a moment, the groups approached each other — and began sniffing? It seemed the greeting was doglike: short bursts of scent-testing, nudges, even throat clicks. Primitive, but clearly a method of identifying kin and confirming pack hierarchy.

Talmir took out a book from his rucksack and described the behavior for study later. After finishing his notes, he descended toward the team and described what had happened, what the cave looked like, and how many kobolds there were.

Ulmak narrowed his eyes. "There's too many for a frontal assault."

Darnel chimed in, "That's only the entrance — it could be double inside."

Talmir nodded and added, "We also have to watch out for escape tunnels since they appear to be cunning enough."

Ulmak responded with a plan he had thought of. "Alright, I think I've got a plan. First off, we can't rush this – even with possible hostages. Safety first. I'm thinking of setting up traps all around the cave when they're sleeping to block off escape routes – early in the morning. Obin, you'll go underground, find anyone still alive, and rescue them to safety. After that, collapse the cave. I'll fly over the cave, and when I get your signal, Obin – I'll start bombarding it.

Talmir, Sera, Darnel, and Tolk – you'll surround the cave, and when I stop bombarding it, you go in and kill the rest."

Everyone nodded and retreated until nightfall for the operation to start.

They made camp far enough away so the kobolds couldn't discover them, but close enough that they could still see through the crystal lens.

Talmir was on first watch while the rest were huddled around the small temporary camp.

Obin cursed under his breath. "There goes my sleep for tonight."

"And we also have to fight right after that... wouldn't it be better to change the plan into shifts so we at least get some sleep?" Darnel continued.

Sera rolled her eyes at those comments. "You know that's not possible. Who will set up all the traps if we have people sleeping, huh?"

Ulmak said, "Guys, guys, don't argue — you have me on this mission." He made a cheeky smile and pointed to himself. "It's hard, yes, but it's doable, and we've got the element of surprise on our hands! What could go wrong? So just relax, we got this."

After the sun went down, they started moving.

Talmir and Tolk set up a spell as close to the cave as they could — a wind barrier masking their scent.

Obin quietly raised a rock wall just past the wind barrier. If the kobolds were injured, it could stop them completely — otherwise, it would at least slow them down.

Ulmak, Sera, and Darnel began building traps around the encirclement.

The traps they prepared in such a short time were primitive but effective — spiked pitfalls, hanging tree-trunk traps, concealed sharp wires. Of course, it couldn't stop the kobolds completely, but it would wound and slow them down for later pursuit if any got through.

They surprisingly finished about two hours before dawn — as Kolma's finest hunters, they were raised for this.

Obin and Talmir were tasked with scouting for alternate exits — any second tunnels or cave vents. They spent an hour circling the ridge, climbing rocky slopes, and checking crevices. Nothing. The cave had one entrance. Good. That meant they could seal them in.

Ulmak then gave the signal to gather back at their temporary camp. Grinning, he said, "Just like old times, eh lads? Oh — and missy."

Sera snorted. "You say that a lot. One day, I want to meet these 'old times' you keep talking about."

"Yeah, I can't imagine you being a knight at all, Ulmak," Darnel scoffed.

"What can I say? I was just that awesome back in the day," boasted Ulmak.

One might forget that he was over forty with the way he acted sometimes — but he was indeed the oldest on this mission.

"Alright, there's still about an hour left before we attack, so rest up a bit, everyone."

There would be no escape. Not for the kobolds.

Talmir didn't speak much. He sat with his back to a tree, eyes open but unfocused — listening. His breathing was slow, as he was meditating. Preparing, and gathering mana.

Ulmak broke the silence briefly as he loosened a strap on his arm guard. "By the way, do you ever wonder where Brahm got these rings? That armor, weapons, and gear inside? It's top-notch."

Obin chuckled. "I've wondered that since I saw them."

"Smuggled it during the war, I say," Sera muttered. "Bet he was someone big once — like a commander."

"Chief's got more scars than stories," Darnel added. "And he doesn't to share them, so i doubt we will ever find out."

"You're right, we can all just wonder about it, because we won't get the answers... at least we know now that our dear little Tolk isn't gonna get scratched up," Obin said laughingly.

"Oh, shut up, I can fend for myself," said Tolk, shocked by the sudden jab.

That drew a few quiet grins. Even before a battle, humor always seemed to seep through.

Then the time came for the assault.

The sky was still dark but slowly turning bright.

Each hunter donned their gear fully – strapped pauldrons and cuirass in place, tightened vambraces, and pulled on gauntlets. As a finishing touch, they placed their helmets on, except Sera for some reason and were ready for war.

"Alright," Ulmak said, adjusting the clasps on his vambrace, "now I know Brahm's hiding a fortress somewhere."

Talmir checked his blade, ignored him, and said, "Positions."

The six hunters split — each taking a route through the brush to circle the cave. Once outside the camp's protective barrier, every step was calculated. Leaves were avoided. Branches bent silently.

From behind a boulder above the cave, Ulmak waited. Once he saw Obin in position, he gave the okay sign.

Sinking into the ground, Obin burrowed beneath the cave and felt the vibrations on the surface, searching for survivors. The sheer number of kobolds startled him — there had to be more than forty. A minute or so later, luck finally turned around as he found signs of the hostages. Sadly, he could only sense five people alive — but still, better than nothing.

Obin shot up from the earth and quickly encased the survivors in a sphere of stone, pulling them underground and escaping before any kobolds were alerted. He then tried collapsing the cave, but it was too big and since his focus was already split, he only managed to partially collapse it — though that was enough to signal Ulmak.

Immediately, two massive fireballs appeared in Ulmak's hands, each roughly six meters in diameter.

"I'll show those rascals how a knight gets things done!" he roared, unleashing hell upon the still-groggy kobolds.

The earth around the impact zone exploded, sending debris flying and fire spreading with it. The bombardment lasted five minutes, and when it was done, Ulmak gave the signal for the rest of the hunters to close in.

Talmir moved first.

He inhaled — deeply, with a hiss — and the air around his feet twisted into a vortex. With a sharp exhale, he vanished from his spot, reappearing behind a panicking kobold near the cave opening.

Steel flashed.

The kobold's head fell cleanly to the dirt.

Before the body hit the ground, Talmir spun and sent a curved wind blade toward a second one. The arc sliced through the air — too fast to see — but the kobold, startled by the death of its kin, twisted away at the last moment. The blow missed the heart, catching only its shoulder and slicing its hand off.

The kobold howled.

The forest exploded with noise from the assault.

From the cliffs, Obin slammed both palms to the dirt. Earth surged upward — encasing him and forming a stone golem. The survivors were left behind in the sphere, holes in it for breathing.

Ulmak then dropped from above, fire flaring in his palms as he hurled a pair of smaller fireballs into two scrambling kobolds near the back.

Sera was already mid-run, flaming blade in hand, breathing fire like a dragon — burning every kobold in sight.

Tolk was astonished. "Oh so that's why she doesn't wear a helmet."

Then he drew his bow once — three arrows at the same time — laced with spiraling wind. The arrows zipped in bursts, maiming two and killing one.

The stream below the ridge twisted unnaturally, flowing toward Darnel — encasing him in water and forming a giant water golem with octopus-like arms.

The battle had begun — and Kolma's best had struck first and struck hard.

That Same Evening — Back in Kolma.

The scent of crushed mint and bitterroot filled Saldia's apothecary hut. The stone mortar was smooth under Teclos's hand as he ground the mixture with careful, rhythmic turns. A soft green paste began to form beneath the pestle.

"You're keeping a steady pace," Saldia noted, seated across from him with a bowl of dried leaves in her lap. She plucked a few apart as she spoke. "No need to rush, but it's good to see you're not drifting off with your thoughts again."

Teclos gave a small nod. "I'm focusing on breathing while I'm grinding herbs. It helps me stay focused."

She tilted her head, amused. "Breathing while working with herbs? Don't mess up the formula — things can go very wrong." She lectured lightly.

"And how is your mana training going?"

He kept grinding but didn't look up. "The third circle is coming along just fine — slow, but fine. The head is trickier than expected, so it'll take longer than the core or heart, I think."

"Mm." Saldia's voice softened. "That's ok, don't rush. You're on the right track, so don't worry. Patience is needed here — and patience is something most boys struggle with, especially ones with... your temperament."

Teclos smirked faintly. "I'm working on it mom."

"And your friends?" she asked, brushing a pinch of herb dust from her lap. "How are Ralph and Gillard? Are you boys getting along?"

"Ralph is a cheeky bugger — but honest and fun to be around. Gillard... Gillard's bold but also quite shy in a way, I think, but I also think I can entrust my back to him. To be honest, Mom, after everyone found out that I have the darkness attribute, I thought I didn't have any friends anymore. So I'm grateful they stuck around."

She smiled, happy with that, but then Saldia also asked about Loric.

Teclos hesitated. "I don't like him. He always picks a fight and even insulted you — and I won't forget that. But I'm willing to tolerate him if he gives me space... that's something, right?"

Saldia gave a knowing nod, then leaned forward and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thank you for protecting me, my brave hero. Now let's get back to the herbs, shall we?"

She slid three small ceramic dishes toward him, each holding a differently colored powder — one pale yellow, one deep green, and one chalky red.

Teclos examined them.

"Hmmm... those are Aurelian Bloom powder, Thornleaf blend, and Iron Rose dust, I think."

"Exactly." She reached forward and ruffled his hair — a rare gesture during lessons. "Well done. I'm proud of you, Teclos. Not just for memorizing them, of course. Although I wish you wouldn't treat knowledge about herbs like a weapon. I saw you making explosive powder...you know that could get you into trouble, right?"

Teclos looked down, his voice quieter. "How, whe—no haha i don't plan on using that mom, don't worry." He tried to laugh it off.

Saldia narrowed her eyes but didn't scold him. She simply stood up and began sweeping the herbs back into jars. "Just make sure you use it to protect others or yourself. That's all I ask of you."

He nodded, grinding the last bit into the bowl.

The scent lingered – sharp and clean, yet sweet.

After cleaning everything up, he went outside to train a bit before heading to the smithy – oblivious to the battle raging beyond Kolma.

## **Chapter 9 - 8 - Lightning Fang**

The forest shook with the echo of screams.

Steel flashed.

Wind howled.

Flame roared.

Water surged.

The hunters of Kolma moved like phantoms through the battlefield — six warriors, honed and precise, cleaving through the first wave of kobolds like wheat before a scythe.

The ambush was successful and the kobolds were in panic. Normally kobolds were hard to deal with, as they were as cunning as wolves for example, but the difference was that kobolds were cowards. They always hunted in numbers even for a single prey, so now that they were being hunted, most of them simply tried to run away like headless chickens.

Talmir was a blur.

He ducked and spun, slicing kobolds in half from meters away. His blade, wrapped in wind, curved through the air like a silent whisper.

One kobold managed to dodge — barely — only to find Talmir already behind it, his body vanishing and reappearing with a gust of pressure.

His blade flashed and the kobold was beheaded.

Across the ridge, Ulmak soared through the trees, hurling fireballs that burst like thunderclaps on impact. Explosions rocked the backlines of the kobolds, scattering them. Even when they dodged, the blast radius tore limbs and sent burning fur flying. He swept above, circling like a hawk waiting for the right time to plunge.

Obin was a juggernaut.

Stone encased him like a thick armor. He barreled into groups of kobolds with unstoppable momentum, fists cracking bone and sending bodies flying. When a spear jabbed his side, he barely registered it — the hardened stone absorbed it. Still not wanting to give them even an inch, he dove straight into the dirt, burrowing underground with the whole golem, reappearing only to crush them with his hands.

Sera was fire incarnate.

She danced through enemy lines, sword blazing. Every slash left trails of flame that licked at flesh and bone. When surrounded, she inhaled — then exhaled fire in a wide arc, roasting four kobolds where they stood. The fire wrapped her like a cloak, making her presence too hot to approach.

Behind them all Tolk stood, and fired his arrows in perfect rhythm.

Perched near the treeline, he drew his bow again and again — almost never missing. Arrows rained in clusters, bending just enough with his wind magic to dodge past his allies and strike the kobolds.

They scattered every time they heard the hiss of his arrows.

And Darnel —

His body wrapped in water, forming a massive golem with long, octopus-like limbs.

Each strike took out three enemies at once, crashing through bone weapons. His limbs dragged kobolds off the ground, encasing and suffocating them mid-air before tossing their limp forms aside.

The battle was going well.

Until the second wave came with a strong howl.

They crawled from the half collapsed cave in numbers — kobolds shrieking in fury, rallying in twos and threes, surrounding the hunters.

The ambush had cost them many, but they still had around twenty. The panic was gone, replaced by fury and strange confidence.

Obin shouted as he tossed two half-dead kobolds aside. "They've stopped running!"

"They've regrouped," Talmir muttered, slicing through two at once. "Form a line —"

Then suddenly a howling roar cracked the sky.

Lightning split the cave entrance wide open.

A blur dropped from the cave mouth—faster than the eye could follow. Claws bit into the earth, eyes burning violet.

A mutant kobold. It was the alpha

Its fur was pitch black, unnaturally smooth, and crackled with arcs of electricity. Its claws sparked with energy, and its body rippled with power far beyond any normal kobold. Its eyes locked onto Talmir —filled with cold rage.

They barely registered it, before it was already behind Talmir.

Talmir spun to defend — but it was too fast. The alpha slashed at him in a flash of lightning, claws extended, electricity bursting from the strike across his back.

It sent him flying.

Talmir grunted, thrown through the air. He crashed into a tree hard enough to splinter it.

"TALMIR!" Ulmak shouted.

But luckily Tolk was close and reacted just in time — he channeled wind between Talmir's falling body and the tree, softening the impact a little.

Talmir groaned, dazed but conscious, his body battered and broken.

The kobolds howled — emboldened. Their alpha had come. Their attacks became sharper and more coordinated.

The alpha reappeared behind Darnel, taking advantage of the hunters' confusion. Darnel roared and turned, swinging the full weight of his golem at it. Water surged toward the alpha—but it only grinned.

Dodging the brunt of the attack by a hair's breadth, electricity burst from its limbs. The alpha struck the golem directly. The water shuddered, crackled... then exploded.

Darnel was hurled backward, his body steaming and charred. He slammed into the ground, skidding across the stones before finally coming to a stop. He gasped, twitching as his magic shorted out.

"Bad matchup... I guess," he said, coughing up blood and falling unconscious.

Sera surged forward, fire spinning around her. "Then don't attack it, you idiot!"

She and Obin flanked the alpha — on one side with a wall of fire, on the other with the stone golem.

The alpha fought like no kobold ever had. It dodged Obin's hammer-fist, redirected Sera's flame with raw lightning, and even launched lightning bolts in short, explosive bursts. But this wasn't a fair fight — it was three against one.

As Tolk held the rest of the kobolds back with volleys of arrows.

Ulmak descended like a meteor, seeing his chance.

Fire wrapped around his legs as he dropped from the sky, slamming into the alpha with explosive force. The impact shook the battlefield. Dirt and sparks flew. The alpha screamed in pain as its flesh burned.

Ulmak didn't let up — he grabbed its head and forced it down.

But the alpha in turn channeled all its electricity toward Ulmak, shocking him and dazing him for a second.

Before it could finish him, Sera drove a flaming kick into it. Fire coiled around her feet, the impact sending the alpha flying—its flesh searing on contact.

Obin cast stone walls in front of Ulmak, Talmir, and Darnel to shield them quickly, then joined Sera in the fight.

In an instant, what had seemed like a certain victory turned to disaster. One hunter lightly injured, two others severely wounded.

Tolk joined them up close now as well because he was out of arrows.

The only good news was that the alpha was also heavily injured now, so Obin and Sera were pushing it back.

Slash after smash, those two worked wonders with their teamwork. Still, it wasn't enough, as Tolk couldn't hold the rest of the kobolds back forever, and he was in danger of being surrounded.

The alpha's pelt sparked once more, its muscles rippling in its legs. It charged at Sera, managing to kick her away from Obin.

Now that it had breathing room again, it went for Obin, and while the matchup against earth was bad, Obin was by far the slowest. Nearly teleporting behind his back, it drove its hand toward Obin's skull.

But then at the last moment... Ulmak, recovering from the daze, predicted its movement. Seeing that it liked to attack from behind, he waited for it to choose a target and prepared to counter.

Once it went for Obin, Ulmak pushed all of his power toward his legs. A fire stream erupted from them and propelled him forward almost as fast as the kobold was.

"Gotcha, you bitch!"

A fireball erupted point-blank against its skull.

An explosion occurred.

When the dust cleared a few seconds later, the alpha lay twitching, its head and upper body burned so badly almost no flesh remained – only bones.

Obin approached it, not taking any chances, and crushed its chest with a final stone-covered stomp.

Silence.

The remaining kobolds – maybe eight – fled or tried to. Tolk and Sera put them down cleanly once they fell into the traps.

When it was over, they turned to tend the wounded.

Sera checked the others. "Quickly, take out the potions," she said as she rushed toward Talmir.

Ulmak took out a potion and gave it to Darnel. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, it's just a scratch," said Darnel, standing up, grunting and coughing up some blood.

"And you, Tolk?"

"I'm fine."

"Obin?"

"Fine."

Ulmak walked over to Talmir, who was sitting against a tree while Sera fed him the potion, blood on his back and on the ground under him. "You alive?"

The potions could stop the bleeding to some extent, but heavy internal injuries and wounds were a problem.

"Barely," Talmir managed to say, coughing up a lot of blood.

As Sera administered first aid, Ulmak said, "You're lucky to be alive, taking a hit like that. I swear Saldia's going to kill me for not protecting you."

Talmir smiled faintly, though his tone remained serious.

"Cough...that might happen you know?"

Suddenly Ulmak didn't feel like joking anymore. Cold sweat ran down his forehead.

Obin then emerged with the five rescued captives — bruised, tired, but alive. Some even went on their knees, thanking them.

A few crates had survived too – some dried food, tools, and a sealed parcel marked for Kolma's smithy. Not much, but better than nothing.

They made a stretcher for Talmir out of bark and branches. Tolk and Ulmak would carry him while Obin helped Darnel.

After hours of walking back, they managed to return to Kolma intact...mostly.

The guard Tom, lazily chewing a stick of mint root, stood up straight when he saw the group.

Once they got close, his face fell at the sight of limping forms and a bloodied Talmir.

"By the gods... what happened to you?"

"A mutant kobold. Haven't seen anything like it yet," Ulmak said dryly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm tired and they need medical attention, so call Father Pella."

Tom gawked. "And Talmir lost?!"

"Yes, Captain Obvious," Ulmak said quickly. "Now if you'll excuse us." He rolled his eyes at Tom.

Tom looked them over. Bruised. Soot-stained. Tired and bloody. But still... victorious and alive.

He stepped aside, tapping his spear. "Welcome back. I'll call for Brahm."

And Kolma's best walked through the gates — wounded, bloody, and tired. A sharp reminder for the rest of the villagers, of how dangerous it can be out there.

Once Tom rang the bell twice — the signal that Kolma's hunters had returned — the village began to stir.

Within minutes, families and friends gathered at the gates. Relief surged through the crowd as the wounded appeared but were still breathing. Loved ones rushed forward, tears and tight embraces all around. It wasn't the first time hunters had returned injured... but this time it had clearly been close.

Those whose injuries were minor — bruises, shallow cuts, or exhaustion — remained behind with Ulmak and Brahm for a debrief. The rest were directed toward the Dawn Church, where Father Pella was already waiting at the steps with two apprentice healers and a flask of glowing tonic.

Ulmak stood near the stone well by the square and turned to the group.

"I'll handle the briefing," he said. "Return your gear. Get healed and get some rest."

Before they could scatter, Brahm stepped forward. His expression was firm – but proud.

"You came back alive," he said, looking over each of them. "All of you. That's all that matters, and I'm proud of you. Good work, lads."

He then turned toward the traders and called out their leader with a hand signal.

No one spoke, but the nods that followed were full of quiet respect.

Each hunter removed the spatial ring Brahm had entrusted them with.

One by one, they returned the rings, as well as any armor or weapons borrowed from the town's emergency stockpile.

"Man, I'm going to miss these..." Ulmak complained.

"Tell me about it," Obin agreed.

Then they dispersed — some heading home, others toward the church, where Pella had already begun assessing Talmir's back with a tired frown and glowing palms.

Back in the guild hall, Brahm sat in the meeting room as Ulmak laid out the report.

He started from the very beginning:

The initial tracks along the road to Lupos. The absence of wagon debris until Hollow Ridge. The kobold trail. The cave. The traps. The alpha.

Ulmak kept the report clean and systematic — no exaggeration, no glorifying. Just facts.

When he finished, Brahm leaned back in his chair.

"You did well," the chief said. "All of you. And you made the right calls, the mutant was just an unfortunate encounter. I'll take the trader's testimony as well – but I trust you."

Ulmak gave a small nod. "Thank you, old goose. I'll go hide from Saldia now."

"Haha! Oh yeah... good luck."

Outside, the square was slowly clearing. The crowd was dispersing. The rescued merchants were now being guided into the church – their faces pale, but glad. Except the leader, who had to stay with Brahm.

The village was a bit shaken.

The wounds. The blood.

But mostly glad, as the hunters had survived.

Except for one – Saldia. Trouble was brooding on Talmir's horizon, as Saldia was quickly approaching the church, furious and worried at the same time.

## Chapter 10 - 9 - A burnt Sylph

Kosak stood leaning against the village gatepost, arms crossed and gaze steady. The hunters were returning – bruised, bloodied, but walking. Relief filled him... until he saw Talmir.

After Ulmak and Tolk carried him in on a stretcher, they laid him down as gently as possible. Then two guards lifted Talmir again and rushed him toward the church.

Two other guards flanked Darnel, half-carrying the seasoned warrior, his body scorched and his steps uneven.

Kosak winced at the sight.

"Oh man... Saldia isn't going to be happy."

Reluctantly, he pushed off the post and made his way toward their cottage, each step feeling like he was delivering a death sentence to Talmir.

"I'm sorry, old friend, but she has to know... at least you came back alive and spared me from that fury and sadness from her." Kosak muttered, mentally preparing for any stray curses aimed his way.

He found her outside the house, sitting on their porch and sorting bundles of dried herbs.

"Saldia," he said carefully. "You might want to head to the church..."

She looked up immediately, eyes sharp and narrowing. "Why?"

Kosak scratched his neck. "It's Talmir. He's back....but hurt badly, I think...but don't worry too much he's definitely not dead."

The shock lasted only a moment — she didn't respond, not with words anyway.

The bundle dropped from her hands, and in a blur she was gone, sprinting toward the church.

"Phew....Good luck," Kosak said under his breath to Talmir. "Alright, now that this hurdle is over... where's the kid?" He headed inside the house.

Two guards carried Talmir through the threshold of the Dawn Church. Father Pella stood waiting, sleeves rolled back, a glowing flask already in hand.

"Lay him down here, on the table." Pella ordered. The guards obeyed and gently put him down.

Talmir's breathing was steady but shallow — his face tight with pain. As soon as he was down, Pella tipped the flask to his lips.

"Drink. Every last drop of it."

Talmir grimaced at the bitter taste but he obeyed. The potion worked fast — numbing his nerves while enhancing the body's response to life-mana and healing.

Pella placed his hands over the burns and closed his eyes. Green light pulsed from his palms, gentle but strong.

"These wounds are deep," Pella muttered. "I heard roughly what happened. Your skin was burned badly... but the heat also closed and sterilized the wounds. You're a lucky boy, Talmir. This could've ended far worse with an infection."

He exhaled slowly, focusing as the light in his hands intensified.

"Now tell me — how does our fastest hunter end up with a claw scar on his back?"

Talmir closed his eyes. "We ran into a mutant. It had the lightning attribute. It was so fast, i had almost no time to react."

Pella raised an eyebrow. "Hoh? Looks like you have been slacking on your training. We'll need to message the Count to send an extermination party through the woods again it seems... Though that doesn't matter right now."

Just as father Pella finished the treatment, the church door slammed open.

"TALMIR?!"

Saldia's loud voice rang through the hall.

He winced. "Oh no..."

Pella shot him a dry look and patted him on the shoulder. "You brought this upon yourself, boy."

Saldia rushed to her husband's side, eyes wide and glassy.

"You reckless idiot!" she cried, checking his chest, then his face, then his bandaged back. "What if—? What if it had been worse? What if—?!"

Her voice broke.

He reached for her hand — weak but warm. "But that didn't happen...it's alright."

"You promised me," she whispered, choking slightly. "You said you'd be careful after that god awful hunt."

"I was careful," he murmured. "I just didn't expect something that fast."

"You were?!" Tears streamed freely now — half anger, half relief. "What if I had lost you? What if Teclos had lost you? Have you thought of that?"

She leaned into his chest, burying her face, breath shaking and crying.

He smiled faintly. "I know it's dangerous out there and i know you worry about me every day... but someone has to do it. And I'm still here aren't i? Just a bit... roasted."

He instantly regretted the joke when Saldia lifted her head with a furious frown.

"This isn't the time for your jokes, mister. You are forbidden from leaving your bed until you fully recover. And I mean fully, no arguments!"

While Talmir was trying to apease Saldia.

Pella, watching with a softened expression, cleared his throat.

"He'll live, Saldia. No long-term damage. But yes – he needs two weeks of nothing but eating and sleeping. No walking and no training. My life-mana did its part, but his body needs time."

Saldia nodded, still gripping Talmir's hand.

"Thank you father."

"No problem dear, now if you'll excuse me i have to check on another patient."  
With that Pella gave them space and moved toward the back of the church to check on Darnel.

That was when the door creaked open again.

—

Earlier that morning.

Behind the cottage, Teclos sat in a lotus position, tucked into the deep shade of the wooden wall. His breathing was steady. His eyes closed. Mana swirled faster than usual—smoother.

A small breakthrough.

His third circle was still forming, but now he could pull mana slightly faster. The difference was subtle, but real enough for him to feel it. And he'd noticed something else—training was easier in the shade or at night. Darkness seemed to respond better at those times, in the stillness of the night it responded faster and stronger.

Someone stepped into his quiet space.

It was Kosak.

"Oh, there you are, buddy. Listen — I've got something to tell—"

Before he could finish, Ralph came running aswell.

"Hey!" he said, breathless. "Your dad's hurt. Like... bad. They were carrying him to the church."

Teclos didn't even open his eyes. "Right, right. Maybe try a more believable joke next time."

"I'm serious!" Ralph protested.

Kosak added, more gently, "It's true. He was brought in on a stretcher. Scorched pretty badly, but luckily he's alive."

Teclos's eyes snapped open in disbelief.

He was running before Ralph could even process it.

"Seriously?! You believe him and not me?!" Ralph shouted behind him.

Kosak tapped Ralph on the shoulder and went home to get a cart.

—

Back in the present...

Teclos stepped into the church and saw his father on the cot — bandaged, but alive. Saldia sat beside him, wiping her eyes.

"You..." Teclos whispered in disbelief. "You got hit?"

Talmir gave a crooked smile. "I wasn't fast enough this time."

He beckoned Teclos to come closer.

"That's all it takes sometimes."

Teclos was more stunned than angry. He'd never seen his father like this – not invincible, not as an unshakeable pillar... just a normal human.

"Don't worry," Talmir added. "I've had worse and i'll be fine. Just need to calm your mother a bit, and then we'll go home."

Teclos nodded slowly, still uneasy – but grateful that Talmir was alive.

Later that day, after treatment had finished, Kosak returned with a small pull-cart with padded feather mats on top of it.

He helped the still weak and drowsy Talmir into it, while Saldia steadied his legs and sat beside him. Teclos walked beside Kosak, helping pull the cart, watching quietly as the village passed by.

After they came home, they laid Talmir in his bed, Saldia turned to Kosak and said.

"Thank you."

"No problem," he said back quickly, already walking toward the door. "If you need anything, tell Marie or me. We've got your back."

He tipped his hat and slipped out — partly to give them peace, partly because he still feared being scolded for something.

Saldia lingered near the bedside, checking the blanket for the third time and pressing her palm lightly to Talmir's forehead — not for fever, just habit.

"You're not allowed to do that again," she muttered. "You're too old for reckless bravado."

Talmir smiled faintly. "Thought you liked me dangerous."

She flicked his forehead. "I like you alive."

She turned toward the kitchen, pausing when she saw Teclos standing nearby, quietly.

"I'll make dinner," she said gently. "Don't tire him out too much."

Teclos stepped into the room and sat beside the bed. Silence hung for a moment.

Talmir lifted a hand, gesturing him closer. "Come on. I'm not going to break."

Teclos came forward, arms crossed, expression unreadable. Talmir pulled him into a hug.

"I'll be fine," he murmured. "Just need to lay off the jumping-around-for-a-week thing."

Teclos nodded quietly.

Talmir's gaze drifted upward. "You know... this reminds me of my first real close call. First time I thought I wasn't coming back."

Teclos's attention focused.

"It was a usual day. I went out for a hunt with Kosak — though he'd get annoyed if he knew I'm telling you this. We were after a vine buck. Maybe a stone boar if luck was with us."

"You know what a vine buck is, right?"

Teclos shook his head.

"It's a nature-attribute beast. Its antlers branch like trees, and it can lash vines at you like whips. Not the most dangerous, but tricky to track and hunt. They're hard to find — the rumors vary about why, but people say they can see through the vegetation the same way earth mages can feel vibrations."

Teclos's eyes sparkled at the new knowledge, and Talmir chuckled.

"Anyway, we tracked one and brought it down. I made a clean shot through the heart from the sky. A beautiful kill and almost painless for the buck — still proud of that, but I digress. I was gutting it when it happened. Kosak was at the river a few hundred feet away, washing bones and tossing scraps. That's something I still need to teach you — gutting properly. Can't waste time when the blood's fresh."

"You said it takes five minutes," Teclos said.

Talmir smirked. "You listen well."

The smirk faded.

"Then the bushes behind me exploded in flame and heat. It was a Fire bear. Big one. Must've smelled the blood and ambushed me."

"You didn't hear it coming?"

"No. Fire bears are tricky. Their strength is one thing but you also have to be careful of their cunning. It sneaked up on me and pounced when Kosak was two minutes away and couldn't help. With a knife in hand, no armor, and back turned. Not ideal."

"What did you do?"

"Survived. Barely." Talmir shrugged. "Rolled from its pounce. Hid behind the carcass when it breathed fire. Climbed a tree when it charged. Nothing smart — just stalling after I sent the signal flare. It clawed my arm in the first attack. Still got the scar."

He tapped beneath his right sleeve.

"Eventually it caught me because of a mistake and mauled me pretty good. Luckily Kosak arrived in time and cast an earth sphere around me, pulling me beneath the soil. We ran. That was the end of the hunt that day."

Teclos stayed quiet — thoughtful.

"Point is," Talmir said softly, "out there anything can go wrong. Even when you're good. Even when you're fast."

His gaze met Teclos's. "You'll be a hunter someday so remember this. Prepare for things to go wrong. Always have a back up plan."

There was a pause — then a small smile.

"Of course, your father eventually tracked that bear down and killed it," he boasted. "That was also the day Saldia almost ripped my ears off. Take it as a lesson from your foolish old man — women can be scarier than bears sometimes."

Teclos nodded. "Got it."

Later that night, after dinner and the sound of dishes being washed, Teclos glanced one more time toward the bedroom where his father rested. Then he slipped into his own small room.

He sat cross-legged by the window, where moonlit shadows danced along the floor.

His mind wandered – to the story, the wounds.

Talmir wasn't invincible. None of them were. This was crystal clear now.

"I should be more careful... and train even more," he whispered. "I don't want to end up dead, thinking im the protagonist."

The room went silent after that.

But the resolve settled firmly in his chest.

He had all the time in the world to grow stronger. Prepare as much as he can, gaining as much experience as he can.

After all he intended to explore this world and its wonders some day.