

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 61 - 60 - A Student with Potential

It took Teclos longer than he expected to clear the camp.

Not because the goblins were strong.

But because they scattered like cockroaches once they started dying off. Starting from confusion, it turned into chaos pretty quickly.

Shouts in their guttural tongue broke the stillness of the night. Crude weapons were grabbed. Fires were kicked over. Shadows danced wildly across the camp as goblins rushed in every direction, searching for an enemy they could not see.

That was their mistake.

Teclos melted into the darkness between tents, his presence thinning until it was barely more than a whisper in the night. The shadows clung to him, wrapped around his body like a second skin, swallowing sound, swallowing even his killing intent.

The first goblin didn't even feel its death.

It turned a corner, clutching a jagged spear, eyes wide and frantic—only for a thin line of black to flicker across its throat.

For a brief second, it stood still.

Then its head slipped from its shoulders, tumbling into the dirt as the body followed a heartbeat later.

A pair of goblins rushed toward the central fire, barking at each other, trying to form some kind of defense.

One of them suddenly jerked forward.

A blade had pierced clean through the back of its skull, the tip emerging from its open mouth.

The second goblin froze.

It didn't even have time to turn.

A hand—cold, silent—gripped its jaw from behind, pulling its head back just enough for a short sword to slide beneath its chin and up through the brain.

Teclos vanished and let the body drop on its own, ensuring he wasn't seen.

The camp descended further into madness.

Some goblins ran.

Some hid away.

Some lashed out wildly at nothing in the darkness.

And Teclos used every opportunity to kill them.

He struck from blind spots, from behind, from above—dropping silently from tree branches or slipping between tents like a ghost.

A slash across the throat.

A blade through the heart.

A quick stab at the base of the skull.

One motion and one kill throughout the whole night.

He never lingered in one place more than a second.

Never allowed himself to be seen.

At one point, three goblins gathered back-to-back, trembling, trying to cover all angles.

It didn't matter.

A ripple passed through the ground beneath them—subtle, almost unnoticeable.

Dark tendrils burst upward.

They wrapped around their limbs and yanked every goblin off balance. In that split second of disarray, Teclos dropped in.

Before even landing, he stabbed one through the top of its skull.

After landing, he pivoted and drew a clean horizontal arc with his blade—decapitating the other two.

Screams of their terror echoed in the night.

Some goblins didn't die immediately.

A few collapsed, clutching wounds they couldn't comprehend, choking on blood, trying to crawl away into the dark.

Teclos didn't always finish them right away.

Not out of cruelty alone—but because their struggling, their choking, their faint, desperate noises... fed the chaos.

Distracted the others.

Made them careless.

And careless prey was easy prey.

By the time the last goblin realized what was happening, it was already alone.

It stood near the edge of the camp, weapon shaking in its grip, chest heaving as it looked around at the carnage.

Bodies lay scattered on the ground.

Some faintly moving, trying to cling to life in a futile attempt.

"S-skree'ka... vrash! Graaa...?" it croaked in its own language, undeniably afraid.

Teclos stepped out of the darkness behind it.

For just a moment, and the goblin collapsed, blood pouring out of its eye.

Silence returned to the camp.

And Teclos stood in the center of it all, his blade dripping blood slowly into the dirt.

His chest rose and fell steadily. Clearly tired from using so much mana.

But his expression didn't change.

To him...

They weren't people.

They weren't victims.

They were pests undeserving of life.

And they needed to be erased.

Somewhere far from the camp, unseen—the old man watched and smiled like a happy kid who had found something fun.

Teclos didn't leave immediately.

He stood there for a while longer, letting his breathing settle, letting his senses stretch outward one final time.

The forest had grown quiet again.

No footsteps.

No shifting shadows.

No lingering presence.

Only the faint crackle of dying fires and the metallic scent of blood hanging heavy in the cold air.

Still, he didn't trust that.

He moved through the camp one more time—methodical, precise. Every body was checked. Every fallen goblin inspected. If there was even the slightest twitch, the faintest sign of life, he ended it without hesitation.

A blade through the heart.

A quick thrust through the skull.

Nothing was left to chance.

Only when he was absolutely certain that nothing in that camp would ever rise again did he finally lower his guard—just slightly.

Then came the unpleasant part.

Teclos crouched beside the first corpse and reached for his knife, his expression hardening just a fraction, as he found it disgusting.

But it was necessary.

With practiced, efficient movements, he began cutting both ears off.

He tossed them into a rough sack he had taken from one of the tents.

He kept count in his head, his motions becoming almost mechanical as he worked his way through the camp. Blood smeared across his hands, dark and sticky, but he didn't stop.

This was proof.

Proof that no one else could claim his work.

Goblins were pests—vermin that infested the forest, multiplied, and preyed on the weak. There was no treasure waiting to be found. Their camps held little of value—crude weapons, scraps of stolen goods, things not worth the weight to carry.

The ears were enough.

By the time he finished, the sack was heavy.

He tied it shut, slung it over his shoulder with a small grunt. The weight wasn't unbearable, but it was noticeable.

Teclos gave the camp one last look.

Then he turned away without another thought.

The forest night swallowed him again.

He slipped into the shadows out of habit now, his presence dimming as darkness clung to him once more. He reeked of blood, so the last thing he needed right now was a beast attack as he made his way back toward the shed.

The path felt... shorter.

Or maybe it was just that his mind was no longer racing with panic.

Branches shifted softly as he passed. The cold air brushed against his skin, carrying the faint scents of earth and moss... he walked leisurely through the stillness of the night.

By the time the familiar clearing came into view, Teclos let out a slow breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

The shed stood where it always had.

Safe.

Or at least... safer.

He stepped into the clearing, the tension in his shoulders easing just a fraction as he approached the door.

The sack of ears weighed against his back.

Proof that he had done exactly what was asked.

Teclos adjusted his grip on it, a faint, tired smirk tugging at his lips despite everything.

"Let's see what the old man says now..." he muttered under his breath, pushing open the door and stepping inside.

The door creaked as Teclos pushed it open.

For a moment, the forest outside seemed to hesitate—like even the wind itself didn't want to follow him inside.

He stepped through.

And the shed, dimly lit and packed with weapons, felt smaller somehow.

Teclos looked like something dragged straight out of a nightmare.

Blood—dark, dried, and layered—covered him from head to toe. It clung to his clothes, streaked across his arms, stained his face. Some of it had cracked along the fabric, flaking with each movement. Other parts were still sticky, catching the faint light and shimmering in red.

His eyes, however, were the most unsettling part.

Calm and cold.

Like whatever hesitation he once had... had been carved out somewhere between the first kill and the last.

The sack over his shoulder shifted slightly as he stepped further in.

The old man was already there.

Sitting in a chair like he had all the time in the world.

One leg crossed over the other, leaning back just enough to look completely at ease. In one hand, he held a half-eaten piece of bread—one of those salted sticks he seemed so fond of. A small pile of crumbs rested on his lap, entirely ignored.

In the other hand was a sheet of paper he was reading.

"I killed the target," Teclos said, his voice steady, though rougher than usual.

For a brief moment, he considered dropping the sack at the man's feet.

But before he could—

The old man spoke.

"Well done, kid," he said simply, taking another bite as if they were discussing something as mundane as the weather. "This was a clean job. You are finally learning my ways."

Teclos froze.

Completely.

The words surprised him so much that his brain short-circuited.

No sarcasm, or mockery; heck, not even a backhanded jab could be heard in the old man's voice.

Just... acknowledgment.

The retort he had ready for him stayed in his throat.

He just stood there, staring.

"...What?" the word slipped out before he could stop it.

The old man glanced at him briefly, chewing slowly, then swallowed.

"What, you want me to insult you instead?" he said flatly. "Don't get used to it. You did your job properly for once. That's all."

But even that didn't carry the same edge as before.

Teclos's grip tightened slightly on the sack slung over his shoulder.

"...You're serious?" he asked, almost suspicious.

The old man sighed, like he was already tired of the conversation.

"You infiltrated without raising an alarm. You killed the target cleanly. You used the panic to erase the rest of the camp without exposing yourself unnecessarily." He wiped his fingers casually on a cloth. "Efficient. Quiet. And no wasted movement."

He paused, then added more quietly—

"That's how it's done."

Teclos felt something shift in his chest.

Pride.

Since this training started, it felt like that was the first time the old man actually complimented him.

And that new path of combat he chose was right.

He let out a slow breath, some of the tension leaving his shoulders.

"...Took you long enough to say something nice," he muttered, though the bite in his tone had dulled.

The old man snorted.

"There it is," he said, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "The usual snarky kid. Thought you died out there and got replaced by something competent."

Teclos rolled his eyes, but this time... he didn't snap back.

Instead, he reached up, pulling the sack from his shoulder and dropping it to the ground with a heavy thud.

"Proof," he said simply.

The old man didn't even look at it.

"Keep it. Turn it in later if you want coin," he said dismissively. "I don't care about goblin ears."

Of course he didn't.

Teclos huffed quietly.

For a moment, silence settled between them.

Then the old man leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on his knees, finally giving Teclos a more direct look.

"Don't misunderstand, brat," he said, voice lower now. "This was the bare minimum." He paused for a second. "But... it's a start."

Teclos didn't respond.

He just stood there—covered in blood, exhausted, mind still catching up—

And for once...

He didn't feel like arguing, so he didn't.

"Dismissed."

The word came casually, like everything else the old man said.

Teclos didn't linger any longer.

He simply picked up the sack again, slung it over his shoulder, and turned toward the door. For a brief moment, he paused—just a fraction of a second—as if he wanted to say something.

Then he didn't.

The door creaked open.

Cold air rushed in.

And just like that, he was gone—disappearing back into the forest, heading toward Kolma with steady, practiced steps.

He didn't realize it.

But something had begun to change.

The old man hadn't explained much.

Hadn't taught him in any conventional sense.

But Teclos was learning his ways anyway.

Adapting and sharpening into a blade.

Becoming something else entirely.

Something closer to what the old man wanted.

An assassin.

The shed fell silent after he left.

For a few seconds, nothing moved.

Nothing stirred.

Then—

The old man leaned back in his chair, the faintest grin creeping onto his face.

"Finally..." he muttered under his breath, voice low, almost pleased. "...a student with potential."

The temperature seemed to drop as if the world itself recoiled. The faint sounds of the forest—rustling leaves, distant chirps, the subtle life that always lingered in the background—vanished instantly.

Birds took flight in a chaotic frenzy, wings beating violently as they fled the area.

Small animals bolted from their hiding places, instincts screaming at them to run, to escape, to survive.

Even insects stilled or scattered, as if the very ground had become hostile.

The forest... emptied.

Immediately.

Inside the shed, the shadows themselves seemed to deepen, drawn toward the old man as his grin widened.

Then he laughed.

Unrestrained.

Unhinged.

A madman's laugh that echoed faintly through the empty clearing, carrying with it something deeply wrong.

Something dangerous.

The old man exhaled, rolling his shoulders as if nothing had happened.

The forest, cautiously, slowly, began to breathe again.

"...This might actually get fun. Now I only need to refine him," he murmured, reaching for another salted bread stick like it was just another ordinary day.

Chapter 62 - 61 - Shaped Into a Tool

After the hunt on the goblin camp, the old man started teaching Teclos his ways in earnest.

He did not begin with normal lessons like every other mentor.

He began with suggestions on every hunt.

Small things, at first. Casual remarks slipped into their conversations as though they were important, but Teclos could decide for himself if he wanted to follow his advice.

Pointers about his movement—how he could evade sight better, how he could be stealthier, about positioning, even about the way Teclos approached problems.

"You rely too much on brute force when you don't have the strength to back it up," he had said once, after a completed job.

Teclos hadn't thought much of it then. Just the old man's rambling again.

One day a merchant had arrived in Kolma, agitated and loud, speaking of stolen goods and a figure they had seen slipping through the treeline at dusk the night before. Not a beast, but also not quite a man either.

Most of the hunters dismissed it, as the thief was probably gone by now, with that kind of head start.

But the old man had a keen interest in this job for some reason.

And later, he found Teclos.

"I have a simple task for you," he said, his tone even, almost bored. "Track this culprit and retrieve what was taken." He showed him the flyer.

Teclos frowned. "A tracking job... that's new. Let me guess, you're sending me alone?"

The old man paused, then gave a faint smile.

"Would you prefer an audience?"

Teclos ignored the jab and read the job description.

The old man's shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "This should test your stealth... if you can't even find and catch a thief, then there is no hope for you."

Something about that answer had felt... strange.

But Teclos had taken the task anyway, just another opportunity to get stronger.

—

Once there, at the site—he found subtle clues.

Subtle tracks along the trail. The thief was careful, but not perfect.

He followed the tracks.

Hours passed before he found the hideout, going through a lot. The thief had used a lot of diversions and misdirections.

It was tucked into a shallow dip between two rocky ridges, hidden from direct sight. A small fire pit, long extinguished. A tarp lay over a few boxes—likely the stolen goods—resting in the center.

And a figure stood there, watching him.

Teclos was surprised he or she noticed him as he was wrapped in darkness.

Before he could do anything the figure disappeared.

Teclos's hand snapped to his weapon, darkness spreading around him as he tried to locate the foe.

But it was just... gone.

Teclos's eyes narrowed, his senses flaring outward, but there was nothing to grasp at.

Then—

He sensed a strike from behind at the last second.

He twisted his body, barely catching the knife, but then a knee slammed into his side, sending him stumbling. The impact was heavy and precise.

Teclos recovered quickly, teeth gritted as darkness surged around him and protected him just before the impact—lessening the blow.

"Come out," he muttered.

Silence.

Dark tendrils rose from the ground, with Teclos as the center. Like an octopus, the tendrils snapped outward, striking all around him.

He hit nothing but empty air.

"Stop hiding," Teclos snapped. He tried to lure it out by pushing forward, making himself a target.

That was a mistake.

The ground suddenly disappeared beneath one of his feet—just when he tried to take a step. His balance broke for half a second.

That was all the thief needed.

He appeared behind Teclos, his blade slashing across Teclos's back. It was shallow, but enough that pain surged throughout his body.

"Hah! They sent a boy? What a needless death..." a voice murmured from somewhere behind him.

Teclos's jaw tightened. Darkness surged instinctively, making a spiked cocoon of darkness trying to impale the thief behind him, but it wasn't fast enough.

"See you later, hunter..." Then the presence vanished again.

Teclos was bleeding from behind... but more alarming was the dizziness he was getting suddenly.

"Shit!" It was poison, he was sure of it.

'I have to run... now!' he thought and quickly wrapped himself in darkness and sprinted off. Tendrils snapped around the trees and slingshot him into the air, trying to escape.

But the thief didn't let him.

A rift in space suddenly appeared in front of Teclos, and he fell through it, planting himself full speed and face-first into the ground.

He broke his arm in the fall and was bleeding quite heavily.

In a last ditch effort Teclos lashed out with his sword. A shadow slash rushed toward the thief but was easily devoured by another void rift. Then the thief jumped down onto Teclos's back with full force.

Making him spit out blood and lose consciousness.

The thief drew his knife. "Nothing personal..."

Teclos passed out and then—

Darkness.

—

After a while, Teclos stirred. 'Huh? Am... am I dead again?' he thought, as he didn't feel any pain anymore.

He got up, and that's when he saw that the old man was waiting.

"Well?" he asked. "Aren't you going to thank your saviour?"

"Huh?" Teclos was flabbergasted. Now that his vision and clarity returned, he saw a dead beast-man at the old man's feet. A bloody corpse of it anyway.

It was somewhere around a meter and a half tall and looked like a raccoon.

Its death was anything but pleasant, it seemed, as it was literally wrung dry of blood like a towel is wrung dry of moisture.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Well... you rushed in, got caught with poison, and didn't escape successfully," the old man said calmly. "You engaged in a direct confrontation against someone who had no intention of giving you a fair fight."

"I meant with this... raccoon?"

The old man crossed his arms and leisurely said, "Oh...I handled it."

A pause.

"After you got exposed, you should've re-stealthed," the old man continued. "Instead, you walked into his territory, no knowledge if he had traps, no knowledge how strong this thing really was... Well, I suppose a thief can't be strong, right? Maybe that's what you thought?"

"No—"

"Hah! Try lying to someone else. Your powers are extraordinary, kid. In the right hands, you would be an apex predator in all of this county... but you waste them. Listen closely stealth, ambush, and silent kills is where your path lies. I thought you'd learned this by now."

He listened to the old man ramble after a long time, but no matter how reluctant he was, he had to agree with him this time.

"I can show you the path... but you have to listen."

"Alright, if it makes me stronger..." Teclos agreed.

—

A month after that, the old man trained him normally... sort of.

The first lesson had been simple.

He had to cross a clearing without being noticed.

Teclos had scoffed. It sounded way too easy.

As there was no one else there.

But he was very wrong. The second he stepped forward, he sensed a strange shadow move. A vine coiled itself around his legs and threw him back to the starting point.

"Again," the old man said.

Days passed like that, tossed around by vines, trees, branches... hell, even normal grass bound him one time.

By the third day, Teclos was paranoid of anything that moved even slightly.

By the fifth, he managed to be a bit stealthier and complete half of the course the old man had prepared.

By the seventh, he began to understand more of his powers and completed the first course for the first time.

He had to avoid literally everything the old man controlled, meaning he had to sense any shift or change in the mana of the foliage.

Relying only on darkness was his undoing.

Then, a day after he completed the first training, they camped in the forest.

And when Teclos woke up in the morning, he found a knife resting beside his bed.

Stepping outside the tent, he noticed that the old man was already waiting.

"Today, the only thing you have to focus on from now on is a swift kill in one hit if possible, but no more than two," the old man said.

Teclos almost wanted to argue with the old man, but decided that it wasn't worth it so early in the morning, and just went along with his antics.

In this training, the old man would pick out targets.

Small animals that were quick, alert, and easily startled.

And Teclos approached them the way he used to now. Swift and wrapped in darkness.

But it wasn't enough.

The small animals he picked out for Teclos had acute senses, feeling and sensing even the slightest disturbances.

He had to reach a higher proficiency with his darkness and do it on the same level or better than he did during the goblin hunt.

After a week of this training, he finally succeeded with his first kill.

His presence thinned to almost nothing as he approached from the animal's blind spot, moving without making a sound.

After the first success, the training expanded from there.

Running had to be done as silently as possible.

Striking had to be done with pinpoint accuracy.

And he had practice and train his stealth throughout the whole day, every day. Until he did it subconsciously.

—

After a grueling month of this training.

One evening, as the sun dipped low and the forest darkened, the old man spoke again.

"You see the difference now?"

Teclos didn't answer immediately.

His eyes remained on the ground, watching the dead poison fox twitching between his feet.

"...It is easier, yes," he admitted.

A faint smile touched the old man's lips.

"Of course it is."

He turned slightly, hands folding behind his back.

"You are finally using your gifts... in a way that suits you best."

Teclos nodded slowly.

'I guess it makes sense.'

—

Half a year later, it finally felt like he was doing it naturally and subconsciously.

Each time he got better, the tasks that the old man gave him changed as well.

Small targets disappeared and simple exercises faded.

In their place came assignments that demanded more—from hunting bigger game to even hunting bandits, and thieves again.

One day, the next task the old man brought to him had been a larger than expected beast.

A fire bear.

Its presence alone warped the air around it, heat rising in shimmering waves that bent the forest into a distorted and unstable blur. Its fur was burning hot, embers pulsing with every slow breath it took.

It wasn't something hunters approached lightly.

It wasn't something anyone approached lightly.

And naturally, it made Teclos nervous.

After half a day of searching, he found it.

Watching that beast perched high up in the trees and wrapped in shadows, he remembered the old man's words. "Always observe first, and wait for the best possible moment before you strike."

The creature was currently tearing into a charred carcass. He could hear the bones breaking from its bite force.

Beneath it, the soil had long since dried and hardened from the fire bear's body heat.

As the bear was happily munching on the corpse and oblivious to its surroundings, Teclos decided that it was now or never.

As quietly as he was currently capable of.

He moved.

Down the tree and across the clearing.

The heat pressed against his skin. It was oppressive and domineering.

'Phew, this isn't good for my heart.'

The closer he got, the more his nerves acted up. With all his focus entirely on the beast, he made a rookie mistake and stepped on a branch.

Making the bear's head snapp up.

Teclos lunged forward in panic and as quickly as possible making use of his shadow steps. His blade was drawn and aimed precisely for the throat.

But it was too late.

The creature spun around and roared out a stream of flames.

They engulfed Teclos for a second. The shadows around him broke apart under the enormous pressure, scattering like smoke in a violent storm.

He threw himself sideways just in time, barely avoiding being burnt to a crisp, but the opening was gone, and so was his chance to strike.

A second later a massive paw swung after him.

The impact hurled him through the underbrush, the world blurring as he hit the ground hard and rolled. A layer of dark mana absorbed the worst of it, allowing him to keep moving, but burned claw marks still seared across his chest.

The bear was already on him again.

Teclos ducked, stumbled, barely avoided the full weight of its fire and claws that tore through the ground where he had stood a heartbeat earlier.

It was faster, stronger, and more destructive.

The situation was getting desperate. The bear had already come close to killing him several times, and when Teclos finally rolled the wrong way, he left himself wide open.

The bear took that chance but luckily, that was when the old man came to the rescue again.

When he appeared, the bear's corpse fell.

Headless.

Teclos fell onto his ass, breathing unevenly. His body was scorched, beaten, and tense. The remnants of his mana flickered around him erratically.

The old man didn't look at him and stepped toward the fallen creature, crouching briefly to inspect it.

"Stand up, kid," he said.

Teclos pushed himself to his feet, jaw tight with anticipation of the old man's criticism.

He waited for a second, but it didn't happen.

Instead—

"You were too hasty."

Teclos frowned slightly... that was it?

"You saw an opening," the old man continued, still not looking at him. "And you chose to act on it."

A pause.

"That in itself isn't wrong, but being nervous and letting your fear take over and cloud your mind..." he didn't finish but Teclos knew what he implied. "You should have waited a little longer."

Teclos nodded in understanding, but still felt frustrated about his loss.

"Listen kid, you are moving well. Better than before, and you are properly implementing my teachings. The only thing you are missing is experience now."

—

After half year more of this training, Teclos was almost unrecognizable. The old man said that he still lacked in some aspects and needed more training, but he definitely felt stronger and sharper than before. All thanks to his teachings...

'If only he didn't have such a shitty temper.'

Chapter 63 - 62 - Whispers of the Devil

The training period was nearing its end.

The one year was almost over.

It hadn't felt that long, infact it went by quite fast. From survival and killing beasts or monsters, to even capturing thieves and bandints. It was quite an action packed year for Teclos.

In this year Teclos changed, alot. Everything he did now was besed on erasing his presence, on being silent.

He practiced stealth all the time even in his daily life, more than a few times he startled the people around him when he "suddenly apeared" infor of them.

And the old man...

Teclos started to trust him.

It wasn't complete trust, but atleast he knew that should something go wrong the old man had his back.

Whether he fully or partly trusted him, it was almost close enough that the difference no longer mattered. The only thing he still adamantly disagreed with that old man, was his shitty mouth and way of insulting him every chance he got.

—

Like most mornings, Teclos was waiting at the guild reception.

Seated near the side wall, just out of the main flow of traffic, he watched as hunters gathered, spoke in low voices, and filtered out one by one through the large wooden doors.

The usual rhythm of the place played out in front of him—gearing up, quiet chatter, the clink of the occasional cup of beer and laughter.

One by one, every one was leaving the guild hall on hunts and patrols.

Assignments were taken.

Groups were formed.

And the Noise was slowly fading away.

Teclos remained sitting there on the bench, it wasn't unusual.

The old man was rarely early, most of the time he was late even.

But today—

He really took his sweet time to arrive.

Way more than usual atleast.

Teclos shifted slightly in his seat, fingers tapping once against his knee before going still again.

His eyes flicked toward the entrance.

Then away.

Then back again.

He was getting restless to say the least as more and more hunters left the guild hall.

The younger ones, the loudest of the bunch, some were even going half drunk on a hunt.

Although Teclos was bothered by the noise, he still listened to the conversations. And what annoyed him the most, was hearing alot of complaining from the trainees...about the task they had to do, which was just a normal hunt or patrol.

Soon—

The hall quieted.

Teclos exhaled slowly. He finnaly had Peace, still it was getting late to start the hunt.

"...Where the hell is the old man?"

The words had barely left his mouth—when the door opened.

With a slow creak the old man finally stepped inside.

Nothing about him seemed different at first glance.

He greeted the staff as he passed by, offering a small nod, a few quiet words exchanged with the receptionist. Nothing unusual.

Nothing out of place.

And yet—

Why the hell was he so late?

Teclos watched him approach. Finally.

The old man stopped in front of him.

For a brief moment, neither spoke.

Then—

"Come, boy," he said, his tone even. "Let's sit down for a change."

Teclos blinked in surprise.

That was new...

He was stunned a bit, but what about the hunt? The old man wanted to start even later than now? Were they going on a night hunt today?

Several thoughts raced through Teclos's mind.

He had never suggested sitting down before, never explained things properly, never chatted more than a few sentences and even that was mostly orders for training and of course insults.

Teclos slowly rose to his feet, eyes still fixed on the old man, trying to read something—anything—from his expression.

There was nothing obvious except that he somehow seemed chirpier...happier?

Not that it showed on his face anyways, it was still just the stone cold expression, only teclos could somehow understand him better now.

"...Alright?" Teclos agreed, though the word came stretched out.

The old man turned without another word and began walking to one of the tables at the far end of the hall, in a corner.

Skipping his usual rout of checking out the mission boards, and walking straight toward the tables.

Teclos followed closely behind.

The old man took a seat at one of the empty tables, the wood creaking faintly beneath him. He rested back as if he had all the time in the world, one hand draped loosely over the edge.

Then he lifted his chin slightly, beckoning.

Teclos hesitated for a moment before stepping forward.

"Sit, kid," the old man said. "Now that our time together is almost over... let's have a chat."

'Huh? A chat? Is he sick or something?'

After everything—after the missions, the near-death encounters, the constant pressure from him—

Now he wanted to talk?

He didn't question it out loud. But they spent almost an entire year together...and that old fart didn't even introduce himself...

Still, he pulled out the chair and sat down across from him, posture straight and cautious, his eyes studying the man carefully and with suspicion.

The old man reached into his jacket and pulled out a bottle of wine, placing it on the table with a soft thud. Two simple cups followed.

"Since this will be one of the last times we'll see each other," he said calmly, "let's have a toast, kid."

Well... that fried his brain. Teclos was utterly stunned at this suggestion. In his wildest dreams he couldn't have predicted that the old man just wanted a friendly chat...the mostly silent and grumpy old man.

It was so out of place that it put a smile on his face, a smile of disbelief.

'Well...i guess the world is gonna end tomorrow, might aswell drink one cup then.'

He reached for the bottle, turning it in his hand before uncorking it.

"Then let me pour you a drink, old man."

For a brief moment the old man smiled.

"Hoh, i guess you can have manners if you want to, kid."

Not the faint, almost invisible curve Teclos had to work tirelessly to even get a glimpse off.

But a real smile.

"Didn't know you could even smile, old man."

"The name is Axel, kid."

Teclos froze for a second again.

Wide-eyed, he stared at him—then scoffed.

"Took you long enough to acknowledge me, old man..." he muttered, pouring the wine. Then, with a small shake of his head, "I mean—Axel."

The name felt strange to address him as anything but old man, still it wasn't a bad feeling.

The wine settled between them, untouched for a moment as the quiet of the guild wrapped around the table. The usual noise replaced by a softer chatter from the staff in the distance.

Axel leaned back slightly, rolling the cup between his fingers before finally taking a small sip.

"This place is not much to look at," he said, glancing around the hall. "But places like this... are important. Because of guilds like these, towns and villages around them are safer, people can come and go as they like without being ripped apart by beasts."

Teclos watched him, still not entirely sure what point he was trying to make was, and still not used to hear him speak this much without a curse.

"Sure enough...you've been around a lot, I take it?" he asked.

Axel gave a small shrug. "Enough."

A pause followed, though it didn't feel empty. Axel let it stretch just long enough before continuing, his tone casual—almost idle.

"I take on work where it's needed. Sometimes for merchants. Sometimes for... higher interests." His gaze flicked briefly to the wine before returning to Teclos. "A lord I've worked under for some time now. Keeps things organized. It is pleasant working under him, you can get what ever you want."

Teclos tilted his head slightly. "You don't seem like the type to take orders."

A faint smirk touched Axel's lips. "Everyone answers to something or someone, kid. The difference is that the smart ones choose their chains."

Teclos huffed quietly, taking a sip of his own drink.

"That supposed to be wisdom?"

"Call it experience."

Silence settled again, each taking some gupls of that wine.

Axel didn't rush his point and continued on with his small talk.

"You've changed for the better, kid," Axel said after a while, his voice quieter now. "More than you probably realize."

Teclos didn't respond immediately, though his grip on the cup tightened slightly.

"Yeah?" he said finally.

Axel nodded once. "You move more efficiently now, your way of thinking is better as well. You finally don't waste your talent anymore."

A small pause.

"You could finally survive in this world."

Teclos looked down at the table for a moment.

"...That was what you wanted to teach me, wasn't it?"

"Well, Part of it yes."

Axel leaned forward slightly, resting his forearms on the table now, his attention fully on Teclos.

"What now?"

Teclos frowned faintly. "What do you mean?"

"What comes after survival?" Axel asked calmly. "You've learned how to stay alive. That's only the beginning. Not a final destination...not your dream or goal. Or is it?"

Teclos didn't have an answer for that.

Not a clear one atleast.

Axel watched him closely, seeing the confusion in his face he smiled a little. His smile was a tad bit more sinister but his tone remained even, almost conversational.

"Listen, you've got talent," he continued. "More than most actually. But talent without direction and proper guidance..." He gave a small shake of his head. "It gets wasted. Or worse—you get killed. Be it out of envy from others or your own overconfidence."

Teclos exhaled slowly, he was slowly realizing what Axels point was.

"I'll figure it out."

"I don't doubt that."

Another sip of wine.

"But figuring things out alone takes time. Mistakes and losses." Axel's gaze sharpened just slightly. "You've had a taste of that already, didn't you?"

Teclos's eyes flickered, just for a second.

The memory of the ghoul resurfaced, of the times Axel had to save him during the missions.

Axel leaned back again, letting the pressure ease just as naturally as he had applied it.

"So," he said, as if changing the subject entirely. "What is it you actually want?"

Teclos blinked.

"...What?"

"Your end goal," Axel clarified. "Strength for the sake of strength is meaningless. So what are you building toward?"

Teclos hesitated.

The question felt... heavier than it should have.

"I don't know," he admitted after a moment. "I just—"

He stopped.

Exhaled.

"...I don't want to be weak and maybe travel the world?"

Axel nodded slowly, as if that answer had been expected.

"No one wants to be weak, kid. And traveling the world is fun and all, But have you not thought about where to settle?"

Teclos frowned slightly.

'Settle?'

He hadn't thought that far ahead. Sure he wanted to be a hunter, slay monsters, drink with his friends and travel someday. He knew that for protecting that life style he needed strenght.

But did he want something more? He hadn't asked himself that question before.

Axel didn't press him this time. He simply let the silence sit, letting the question linger.

Then, casually—

"I'm heading back to Lupos soon," he said.

Teclos's eyes lifted.

Axel continued, tone unchanged.

"It's a bigger place and that means more opportunities. Also more... specialized work." He swirled the wine in his cup, watching it for a moment. "The kind that could suit someone like you."

Teclos said nothing.

"I could keep training you," Axel added, almost as an afterthought. "Though properly this time and not just for survival. Refine you in to a deadly gem."

He pause and glanced at Teclos.

"Give you power."

The word lingered.

"You wouldn't be wasting time here," Axel continued. "Running the same circles. Taking the same kind of jobs as everyone else and your real friends would understand that ambition..."

His tone or opinion weren't harsh, nor dismissive.

Just—

Spoken in a Matter-of-factly way.

Teclos shifted slightly in his seat, eyes narrowing just a fraction.

"You're asking me to leave with you?"

Axel met his gaze.

"Well yes and no...it's more like I'm giving you an option."

Silence followed again, and Axel didn't push him.

He simply took another sip of wine, as if the answer didn't matter.

But it did.

Teclos could feel it, a thought forming in his head...should he go? Should he explore more of this world already? After all he got a golden ticket for the start right now.

He wasn't sure but—

A new path opened up in front of him, and his life didn't feel set in stone anymore.

Across from him Axel just smiled, a sinister smirk hiding behind the cup of wine.

Chapter 64 - 63 - Life Changing Decision

The next few days felt... strange.

After a long time of nothing but hunting and training, Teclos finally stood still. No tracking beasts through the woods. No returning drenched in blood and exhaustion. No pressure, no watchful eye of the old man pushing him forward, no urgency driving his every step.

Just—

Time.

Too much of it.

And with that time came thoughts he couldn't push away, no matter how much he tried to ignore them.

Teclos walked slowly down the paved road of Kolma, his hands tucked into his coat as a cold but gentle breeze brushed against his face. Winter hadn't fully left yet—patches of snow still clung stubbornly to rooftops and gathered along the edges of the road, while the ground beneath his boots remained damp from the melted snow.

But the air had changed.

It was softer and warmer during the day. Spring was coming, pushing its way through the remnants of winter, and the village felt livelier because of it.

People were out more often, the sound of chatter being carried through the streets as merchants called out their wares and children ran between carts, laughing freely as if the cold months had never existed.

He should've felt at peace.

And for a moment—

He almost did.

But his mind was a mess right now.

It kept drifting back, again and again, to that day... to that conversation... to the man sitting across from him.

Axel.

"...Damn old man."

The words came out quieter than intended, more of a mutter to himself than anything else.

On one side, he had everything here.

His home. His parents. His friends.

A place in the guild and a future that was stable—predictable in a way most people would have envied. He had already proven himself, stepping out of the shadow of being just a trainee. He was a hunter now, someone people trusted, someone they relied on.

It was a safe option.

And on the other hand—

There was the unknown.

The world beyond Kolma, far larger than anything he had seen so far. Bigger cities, stronger monsters, real challenges that would push him far beyond what he was now.

It was a great opportunity, but also uncertain territory.

His grip tightened slightly as his thoughts circled back to that.

The hunter's badge at his waist felt heavier than usual. It was a key. Something that could open many doors far beyond this small village if he chose to use it that way.

"...I could become famous," he muttered under his breath, almost testing the words. "...Rich too."

A quiet, humorless huff followed.

"Yeah... or dead."

He stopped in front of the butcher's stall, the sharp, familiar smell of fresh meat cutting through his thoughts instantly.

"Ah, Teclos!" the butcher greeted him with a grin. "Haven't seen you around much lately."

"Been busy," Teclos replied simply.

"Ain't that the truth these days," the man said, shaking his head as he reached for his knife.

Another voice chimed in nearby, casual but carrying just enough volume to catch his attention.

"You heard? They're pulling more men again."

Teclos didn't react outwardly, but his ears picked up every word.

"Frontier's getting worse," someone else added. "Orcs aren't backing down."

"Course they aren't. It's been a stalemate for months now."

"Even Count Bellagar sent more men to the king, I heard."

A quiet scoff followed.

"Won't be long before it reaches us too."

Teclos stared at the cuts of meat in front of him, his gaze unfocused for just a second.

"...Half a kilo of the usual stuff," he said.

The butcher nodded, already slicing.

The conversation continued behind him.

War.

Frontlines.

Reinforcements.

Teclos took the wrapped meat and paid without another word.

"...Thanks."

"Stay safe out there, lad."

He walked off, his thoughts brushing briefly against what he had just heard before moving on again, overshadowed by something far more immediate in his mind.

By the time he returned home, the warmth from the hearth inside hit him immediately.

Cozy and comforting.

"Teclos, you're back?" his mother called from the kitchen.

"Yeah," he replied, setting the meat down.

The smell of herbs and spices already filled the house, thick and inviting.

Saldia was in a good mood.

That much was obvious from her tone.

"Perfect timing," she said, turning slightly toward him with a smile. "We're making a proper meal today."

Teclos raised a brow. "We?"

She pointed at him without even looking.

"You're helping."

And so he did. There was no other choice, really.

The kitchen filled with quiet activity as they worked side by side—chopping turnips, carrots, onions, and garlic while smoked pork sizzled at the bottom of the iron pot. The soft crackle of fire filled the background as barley was stirred in, slowly thickening the stew into something warm and rich. Nearby, slices of dark bread rested by the hearth, ready to be dipped into the humble, comforting meal.

For once, there was no rush.

Just time.

Saldia talked as she worked, her voice light as she spoke about the shop, about her day, about small things that normally wouldn't matter.

Then—

"...and I finally got someone to help me."

Teclos glanced at her. "You did?"

"Mhm," she nodded proudly. "A sweet girl. Very attentive. Works hard too."

A small pause followed before she added, almost casually—

"She's about your age."

Teclos froze for half a second.

"...Mom."

"What?" she said innocently, though the slight curve of her lips gave her away.

"I'm just saying," she continued, stirring the pot. "You can't spend your whole life hunting, you know."

"I can try."

She snorted.

The door opened not long after, heavy steps echoing faintly on the wooden floor.

"I'm back."

Talmir was back from a hunt.

Dinner followed soon after, the three of them sitting together—something that had become rare over the past year.

"I got promoted," his father said simply.

Teclos blinked. "Seriously?"

A small nod.

"I'm a senior hunter now. I'll be leading a group of hunters."

"...Like a captain?" Teclos asked.

"Something like that," he replied. "Like I said, fewer beasts trying to kill me every day, more organizing, and better pay."

Saldia smiled, pulled him into a hug, and pressed a small kiss to his cheek. "And less coming home half-dead," she added.

He grunted.

"No promises on that, honey."

Teclos let out a quiet breath.

"That's... good."

And it was.

It really was.

Saldia spoke again after that, talking about her helper, about how things were improving, how everything was slowly settling into place.

Everything felt—

Right.

Teclos hesitated for a moment before speaking again.

"The old man finally told me his name."

It caught their attention.

"Oh?" Saldia said. "And?"

"...His name is Axel."

A brief silence followed.

"Hm," his father muttered. "Took him long enough."

Teclos huffed lightly. "Yeah."

He couldn't say more, as if the words clogged themselves in his throat.

He didn't mention the offer or leaving the town.

Laughter followed soon after, light conversation filling the space once more, the warmth of the food and the familiarity of it all wrapping around him.

It should've made the decision easier for him, to stay and reject the offer.

But somehow—

It only made things harder.

After dinner, Teclos stepped back out into the village, the cooler night air brushing against him.

He made his way toward the tavern, the familiar building coming into view as lantern light flickered across its exterior.

He was meeting Ralph and Gillard for a round of beers.

It was Ralph's idea.

They hadn't properly spent time together in a while, only exchanging brief greetings in the mornings before heading out on their separate paths.

Tonight was different.

Tonight, there was time.

And as usual—

Teclos was late.

The warmth hit him the moment he stepped inside, along with the layered noise of laughter, clinking mugs, and overlapping voices.

And in the far corner—

He saw Gillard and Ralph.

Waiting.

"I swear, we have to do something about you always being late..." Ralph said the moment he approached.

"He's right, you know? It's a bad habit, man," Gillard added.

Teclos just smiled, something in his chest easing slightly at the familiarity of it.

"Sorry, guys."

It felt normal.

They ordered drinks and settled into their corner table. It was worn out with knife marks and dents, tucked just far enough from the noise to talk comfortably.

For a while, they just talked, catching up on everything that had happened over the past year.

Gillard spoke first, talking about his progress in forging, the pride in his voice clear as he described how shaping mana into metal was starting to feel natural to him.

"Hunting though..." he admitted, scratching the back of his head. "Not so much. My tracking's still shit."

Ralph snorted immediately.

"It was shit before too."

"Yeah, yeah," Gillard waved him off. "And my mentor doesn't really push me either. He's too easygoing. I don't know if that's good or bad."

Then Ralph took over, as expected, his voice louder and more animated than Gillard's.

"I'm telling you, this has been the best year of my life," he said, leaning back with a grin. "I've been learning all kinds of new wind techniques. You wouldn't believe the stuff I can do now."

Teclos raised a brow. "Really?"

Ralph's grin widened.

"I even took down a stone boar. Alone."

Both of them stopped drinking and looked at each other.

"Yeah, no, you didn't," Teclos said flatly.

"Not a chance," Gillard added.

"Oi! I did!"

"You'd be dead in a second if you tried that."

"I'm serious!"

"We don't believe you."

They caught him in the lie within seconds, and Ralph eventually huffed, crossing his arms.

"Fine. My mentor did most of the work... I only had to kill it with the final blow."

Still—

He wasn't lying about enjoying his time there.

Eventually, their attention shifted to Teclos.

"So?" Ralph asked. "What about you?"

Teclos leaned back slightly.

"...Old man's a pain in the ass."

And just like that, it started.

He told them everything—the insults, the constant pressure, the lack of explanations, the near-death situations Axel had thrown him into without hesitation.

"And then," Teclos added, taking a sip of his drink, "he finally acknowledged me."

He said it with a smile.

"We even shared a drink," he continued. "And he told me his name."

They stared at him blankly.

"Dude..." Ralph said slowly. "Do you have a fetish for suffering or what?"

Gillard just shook his head.

After that, they didn't let it go, throwing jabs at him one after another. It ground his gears, but he could do nothing about it.

For a while, it stayed like that—laughter, noise, familiarity.

Until it didn't.

The last drink sat in front of Teclos, half empty, the liquid inside barely moving as he stared into it.

He had decided.

Throughout the course of this conversation, he made up his mind.

"I'm gonna miss this... you know?"

The words slipped out of his mouth.

Both of them perked up at the choice of words from Teclos.

"Miss what?" Ralph asked, his lighthearted tone turning serious.

Teclos exhaled slowly.

"I decided..."

He paused.

"I'm going with old man Axel to Lupos. And from there... once I get enough money, I'm gonna travel. Be an adventurer for a few years..."

Suddenly, a heavy silence fell over the table.

"What?!" Ralph leaned forward after a second, shocked. "You can't be serious, right?"

Gillard didn't react at first, but his expression shifted, the tension building slowly before it broke.

"Dude... we promised each other we'd do things together..."

"I know," Teclos said. "But I want to do this."

That didn't lighten the mood at all. On the contrary, it made Gillard angrier.

"After one year, you forgot that promise?" Gillard's voice sharpened. "When were you gonna tell us?"

"I just decided today," Teclos replied. "I've been thinking about it for a few days. It's just too good of an opportunity to pass up. Axel can get me work. Guaranteed."

Gillard leaned back slightly, then shook his head.

"Man... if all it took was some words from that geezer to make you leave..."

He stood up.

"Then go."

"Gillard—" Teclos tried to stop him, to no avail.

"I'm out."

A few coins hit the table, and just like that, he was gone.

The space he left behind felt... awkward.

There was an awkward silence between Teclos and Ralph, uncomfortable and heavy.

"I guess he's mad, huh?" Teclos said, trying to lighten the mood.

Ralph didn't respond immediately.

"Yeah."

He paused for a second, brooding for a bit.

"Listen... I get it," Ralph said. "You want this. Otherwise, you wouldn't have said it here."

He leaned forward slightly.

"And thanks for that. Knowing you, you could've just left without telling anyone."

Teclos stayed quiet, cold sweat pouring down his back, as he had indeed considered that.

"And I don't blame you," Ralph continued. "You're chasing your own path and dreams. It's just... you know how Gillard is. He always dreamed of us doing this together."

"I know..." Teclos said quietly.

"It's just..." he continued, his gaze drifting. "The idea of it... it pulls at me. Traveling. Fighting stronger monsters. Becoming something... more."

A small pause.

"Not being tied down to Kolma and being my own boss."

Ralph let out a short laugh.

"You almost sound like me."

Teclos huffed lightly.

Ralph continued.

"You're already decided."

Teclos didn't deny it.

"So here's the deal," Ralph said. "Don't forget us." A faint smirk formed on his lips.

"We're still your friends."

Another pause.

"And make it up to Gillard before you go. That one's gonna hold onto this for a loooong-ass time otherwise."

He leaned back into his chair, relaxed and smiling again.

"Those are my conditions. For my blessing."

Chapter 65 - 64 - One Last Hunt

Two days passed after he decided to go.

And with each passing day, the dread grew heavier, because sooner or later, he would have to tell his parents that he was leaving town.

For now, he chose the coward's way and put off telling them, quietly packing his things for the journey and carefully setting aside a few essentials.

He had already packed quite a lot, hidden underneath a loose floorboard: a waterskin, flint and steel, a spare bowstring, a whetstone, a coil of cord, dried meat, a pouch of barley, a few healing herbs wrapped in cloth, and lastly, some clothes.

It still didn't feel quite real yet.

But he was really doing this. His first adventure was drawing close, and beneath the dread, excitement began to stir.

Once he dealt with the two major problems still standing in his way, he would be ready to go.

One was, of course, his parents, and the longer he waited, the more it gnawed at his conscience.

Talmir should take it... reasonably well, at least. He, of all people, should understand his desire for adventure. But Saldia—

Teclos rubbed the back of his neck as he thought about it.

She wouldn't take it lightly.

Not at all.

He could already imagine the look of disbelief on her face, the way her voice would rise in protest, and the way she would question him over and over, asking if he was really sure while trying to force him to change his mind.

"...Yeah... that's gonna be a rough talk," he muttered under his breath.

The second problem was Gillard.

He was royally pissed at him. Every time Teclos tried to apologize, he was brushed off, and more than once, he had to endure some harsh but fair words from him—words that stung more than he wanted to admit.

It was a godsent miracle that Ralph managed to convince him to go on a hunt together.

Teclos still didn't know how he had pulled that off, and honestly, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. It was probably better not to question how much he owed him now.

All that mattered was—

They were going.

And he was given a chance to reconcile with Gillard through a leisurely hunt.

Teclos finished gearing up, tightening the last strap of his equipment before stepping out of his room. As he passed through the kitchen, he spotted Talmir sitting at the table, calmly drinking his tea as usual, the morning light filtering in through the window behind him.

Talmir looked up as Teclos entered.

"Huh? Did you start hunting again today?"

Teclos walked over to the drawers, pulled out a cup for himself, and began preparing tea without much thought.

"No," he replied, a small smile forming. "I'm going hunting with Gillard and Ralph today."

Talmir raised an eyebrow, clearly not expecting that answer.

"And your mentor?"

Teclos shrugged lightly, pouring hot water into the cup.

"Dad, we're all about to get promoted anyway. We're basically done with the trainee year... and we're in a group of three this time. That's more than enough."

Talmir didn't look convinced.

In fact, he interrupted him before he could continue.

"And did you run it by the guild master?"

Teclos paused mid-motion.

"...No?"

Talmir shook his head.

"Then do that before you leave, or you'll have hell to pay."

Teclos let out a small laugh, trying to brush it off.

"Haha... you're joking, right?"

Talmir was serious.

"You've seen our guild master," he said flatly. "He is strict about safety, so if you don't want to be punished, you better get his permission first."

Teclos swallowed.

"...Yeah. Alright."

He drank his tea a bit faster than usual, the warmth settling in his chest before he set the cup aside and headed out.

By the time he reached the guild hall, Gillard and Ralph were already waiting near the entrance.

Ralph was the first to notice him.

"For once you're not late... color me surprised."

Teclos smirked faintly as he approached, giving them both a nod.

Gillard ignored him.

The tension was still there, but it should get better over time, Teclos thought.

"Listen," Teclos said, getting straight to the point before things could get awkward. "We need to run today's hunt by the guild master, or we'll get punished, apparently."

Ralph blinked in confusion.

"What? Why?"

"Dad told me," Teclos replied. "So just trust me on this one."

Gillard let out a quiet scoff.

"Hard to do that these days..."

The words hung in the air for a moment.

Teclos didn't respond, and neither did Ralph.

Instead, they just went inside in silence.

The guild hall was already alive with activity, hunters moving about, voices overlapping as assignments were taken and groups formed. The usual rhythm of the place was in full swing.

At the reception, they asked about meeting the guild master.

It was possible, but they would have to wait for an hour.

So they waited.

They took a seat at one of the tables closest to the stairs. The conversation between them was light and mostly carried by Ralph, who seemed determined to keep things from getting too awkward.

Teclos responded when asked, while Gillard mostly stayed quiet, occasionally nodding or giving short replies.

The time dragged on... and Ralph was almost at his wits' end.

But eventually—

They were called up.

The moment they stepped into the guild master's room, he was leisurely writing on some parchment and stamping some documents, focused on the task at hand.

They greeted him and explained why they were there.

Teclos handled most of the talking, his tone steady and composed, almost like he was presenting a request in a formal setting rather than asking for permission to go on a hunt.

The guild master stopped his quill and looked at them for the first time. A long silence stretched between them before he answered.

After a while, he nodded, as if finally reaching a decision.

"You can go."

Relief washed over them.

"Under one condition," he added.

They straightened slightly.

"You stay within range of a senior hunter patrol team," he continued, his voice firm. "And you carry emergency flares with you. All of you."

A pause followed.

"If something goes wrong—send the signal immediately."

Teclos nodded without hesitation.

"Yes, sir."

Ralph grinned.

Gillard kept his expression steady, but the slight shift in his posture gave him away. He was pleased, even if he was trying not to show it.

This had been their dream since they were kids.

"Don't make me regret it," the guild master added, already turning his attention elsewhere.

They didn't need to be told twice and left the room immediately.

By the time they stepped back outside, the tension between them had eased just a little. It wasn't gone—but at least it wasn't as suffocating and awkward as before.

Ralph stretched his arms with a satisfied grin.

"Well... that went better than expected."

Teclos nodded, adjusting his gear slightly.

Gillard remained quiet.

But when they started moving, his steps seemed lighter than before. There was an unusual spring in his step.

A hint of excitement.

They left the village not long after.

The gates of Kolma were behind them as they stepped onto the familiar dirt road leading into the woods, the last traces of the village's safety fading with each step they took forward.

For a while, none of them spoke.

The sound of their boots against the damp ground, the rustling of branches in the light wind, and the distant murmur of the river ahead filled the silence.

Gillard walked slightly ahead at first, still tense and holding onto that frustration.

But as the trees grew denser and they reached the river, he seemed to have cleared his mind a bit.

"...So," he muttered after a while, breaking the awkward silence at last, "what are we even hunting today?"

Ralph smirked slightly.

"Finally! There he is, our shy and angry little princess."

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

"Anything decent," he replied. "I didn't take a specific request. Figured we'd scout the area first."

Gillard grunted in acknowledgement.

"Figures."

It wasn't much, but at least he replied to him now.

They crossed the river not long after, the steady sound of flowing water growing distant as they walked further into the forest.

They slowed near a clearing marked on their map, eyes scanning the area for a decent hunting ground near a patrol.

"Alright," Ralph said, hands on the map as he looked around, "before we go—"

He glanced at Gillard.

"Stop being such a butt-hurt sack of sulking misery."

Gillard shot him an annoyed look.

"Oh, shut up already! Is it so wrong to dream like we promised?!"

Ralph didn't back down.

"Of course not," he said. "But this is what he wants to do. And at least he told us a few days in advance."

Teclos shifted slightly, then spoke up.

"It's not like I'll never come back. I'll probably be working under Axel for a few years first... which means I'll be in Lupos. I can stay in contact with you two."

Gillard's expression didn't change much, but he relented a bit.

"You better," he said after a moment. "If you break even that promise... don't bother coming back. I'll beat you up the second I see you."

Teclos blinked, slightly caught off guard by how quickly that turned around.

Then a grin spread across his face, pure relief spreading throughout his body.

"Yeah, I will," he said, his tone lighter now. "I'll write as many letters as I can too. And we can meet up sometimes... who knows, maybe you'll even come adventuring with me someday?"

Ralph snorted.

"Alright, alright, hold your horses there, pal."

Teclos frowned slightly. "What?"

"We agree to meet up," Ralph said, shaking his head with a grin. "Not to follow you around and beg on the streets for spare change."

Teclos blinked.

"What do you mean?"

Ralph raised a brow.

"Oh, come on, man... you're a dreamer."

He crossed his arms, still smiling—but there was a bit more weight behind his words now.

"Sure, everything sounds great if it all works out. Fame, money, adventure... but it rarely goes that smoothly, you know."

Teclos didn't interrupt.

"You're basically trading a stable job in a town that knows you," Ralph continued, "for an unknown job that some geezer you barely knew for a year offered you."

A small pause.

"And on top of that, you're planning to leave that job too... just to go adventuring."

Teclos scratched the back of his head.

"...Well, when you put it like that..."

Ralph grinned.

"Yeah. Sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?"

Teclos let out a quiet huff, glancing toward the river as the current rushed past.

For a moment, he said nothing.

Then—

"...I'm still gonna do it."

Ralph chuckled.

"Figured."

Gillard shook his head, but the frustration behind it had dulled.

"Idiot," he muttered.

Teclos just smiled.

They crossed the clearing and entered the forest on the other side, the open space behind them vanishing beneath a wall of trunks, shadow, and tangled roots.

They were now entering the deeper parts, and the scenery changed slightly.

The trees grew taller and closer together, their branches choking out most of the light and leaving the path ahead dim and uncertain. Strange plants crept between the roots, and the undergrowth was thick enough to hide anything from a rabbit to a predator.

The air felt cooler there, heavier somehow, filled with the scent of wet bark and old earth. It was beautiful in the way dangerous things often were.

For Teclos, however, the place did not feel unfamiliar anymore.

Not completely.

There had been a time when entering this part of the forest would have made his shoulders tense and his hand drift toward his weapon. The deeper woods had always felt like a boundary, a place where children, farmers, and careless people did not belong.

But after months of being dragged through these paths by Axel, chased by beasts, tossed into danger, and forced to survive, the fear had dulled.

And now he strangely felt comfortable here.

A small spark of excitement stirred in his chest.

This time, he was not alone.

Gillard and Ralph were here with him.

For once, the deeper forest did not feel like another test waiting to crush him. It felt like a small adventure.

Maybe one of the last hunts they would share together.

Or maybe the beginning of their adventuring days, if he could somehow convince them to leave with him.

But no matter what came next—

This moment still belonged to them.

Chapter 66 - 65 - The Day Everything Changed

Once they entered the deeper parts of the woods, the mood shifted.

The earlier chatter slowly died down, replaced by focus and alertness. What remained were only occasional whispers... and long stretches of silence.

They advanced slowly through the foliage, stalking through the undergrowth as they searched for prey.

Teclos was at the front of their formation.

His eyes scanned the terrain while his senses stretched far beyond what either of the other two could perceive.

A few times, he caught traces of small beasts at the edge of his perception, but they posed no real challenge, so he ignored them and kept moving.

After a short while, he spoke.

Whispering.

"There is nothing large within two hundred meters," he said, not even turning back. "A few small creatures... rabbits, a fox farther east. No real threats."

Ralph and Gillard exchanged a glance.

"...Wait, you can sense that far?" Ralph muttered.

Teclos didn't answer.

Instead, he simply vanished.

Not completely, of course.

They could still see him standing in the same place as before, but only barely.

His form had blurred, blending into the surroundings, while his presence faded until it felt almost nonexistent. Like he was there, but at the same time, not quite.

Like their senses were being tricked.

Gillard frowned, his eyes narrowing as he tried to focus on him. "Damn, I can barely see him."

"Yeah..." Ralph muttered. "That's a cool new trick, man."

"I'll scout ahead. Just head to the marked location on the map. I'll come back if I find a beast worth hunting."

Teclos turned around and disappeared into the canopy with shadow steps, quickly and silently vanishing from view. But even as he scouted ahead, he kept them within range, always aware of where they were and adjusting his position accordingly.

"...Guess there was a reason he was so confident," Ralph said quietly, watching the spot where Teclos had just disappeared. "Declaring he'll be a famous adventurer."

Gillard snorted.

"Yeah... let's go."

They picked up their pace.

—

Two hours had passed.

The forest grew denser the deeper they went, the sounds of small wildlife thinning out slightly as the terrain entered more dangerous territory.

The silence made Ralph and Gillard nervous as they slowly made their way forward.

Then—

Teclos reappeared in front of them, without any warning.

Gillard flinched slightly.

"Holy shit!... Don't do that..."

Teclos ignored him and told them he had found something.

Both of them perked up immediately.

"What?" Ralph asked.

Teclos met their gaze. "It's a cockatrice."

"...You're kidding, right?"

Teclos shook his head.

"Don't worry, it's alone."

Both of them stared at him.

Flabbergasted.

Cockatrices weren't something you just stumbled upon.

They were rare, elusive, and dangerous.

Their wind-based sensing ability made them incredibly hard to track or catch, similar in nature to Teclos's own shadow sense.

Most hunters avoided them entirely, not because they were impossible to kill—but because finding one usually meant finding a whole group.

And groups meant certain death.

"You might start rivaling Kosak in scouting at this rate," Ralph said with a half-laugh, still trying to process it.

Teclos shook his head. "No, I still have a long way to go before that."

A short pause.

"Anyway, ambushing it won't work. Not with its ability."

Gillard crossed his arms. "So... how do we hunt it, then?"

Ralph let out a breath. "Well, I haven't hunted one yet. Only read about them." He glanced at Teclos and Gillard. "You two?"

Gillard shook his head.

"Nope. Barely done five proper hunts since I got stuck with that lazy-ass mentor."

Teclos shrugged. "Same. I've mostly been clearing pests."

Ralph blinked in confusion.

"...Pests?"

"Kobold camps or goblin camps."

They were stunned... he said it like it was an easy feat.

Gillard stared at him, curiosity taking over.

"...How?"

Teclos answered like it was obvious.

"I took out their leader first. Quietly. After that, I used the chaos to pick off the rest while they were panicking."

Ralph rubbed his face in disbelief.

"The problem is that... I know you're not lying."

"I hate my mentor even more now..." Gillard added, wondering if he had just wasted his time so far.

Teclos just shrugged again. "Anyway," he said, shifting the focus, "I'm thinking a quick frontal assault. There's no use hiding from it."

Ralph nodded slowly.

"Yeah... not like we have many options."

"Alright," Gillard said, rolling his shoulders. "Hit it fast, hit it hard. I like simple plans."

They quickly laid out a basic plan, with Gillard taking point.

He would charge in first and act as the vanguard, drawing its attention and holding it if the beast charged at them.

Ralph would support them from range, using his wind mana to disrupt the cockatrice's own wind abilities while firing arrows to pressure it.

And Teclos—

"I'll aim for its blind spot and try to kill it if I get the chance," he said. "And I'll bind it whenever I can."

With the basic plan set, all that remained was to execute it.

It was simple, but maybe that was exactly why it could work.

There was only one problem.

They had to catch it first.

A cockatrice had a nasty habit of running when it was alone.

And once it did—

Once it started moving, catching sight of it again would be difficult.

It was simply that fast.

Teclos looked ahead, his expression hardening into that of a focused hunter.

"Let's not give it the chance to run."

And with that, they rushed toward it with all the speed they could muster.

Ralph seemed to have been telling the truth at the tavern. He had learned new tricks, and he was the fastest among them now.

All three of them were fast in their own right, each having developed their own way of moving through the forest, but Ralph—

Ralph seemed uniquely talented when it came to movement techniques.

Wind mana constantly surged from beneath his feet, propelling him forward with startling speed. He didn't need to run anymore—as he was basically flying through the forest. With uncanny control, he weaved between the trees as smoothly as a fish swimming through water.

The air itself bent around him, lightening his body and stripping away resistance, making him even faster.

Gillard had also improved his own method from the last time Teclos had seen him.

His explosive, forceful power was still there, each step driving him forward with raw strength and speed that could rival Ralph's. He could control those bursts to a degree now, adjusting his direction to avoid slamming into the trees, but his movement lacked the same fluidity.

He was still fast.

There was no doubt about that.

But in the forest—

He was the slowest of the three.

His strength was in straight lines, in open ground where he could fully unleash his speed without obstacles getting in the way.

Teclos moved like he always did.

Shadow tendrils lashed out from him, catching onto tree trunks and branches, pulling him forward like a slingshot as he shifted from one anchor point to the next. At the same time, he pushed off bark and stone with precise shadow steps, turning every surface around him into a foothold.

He tried to close the distance with Ralph, but couldn't.

Neither of them could.

Ralph was already ahead, his figure darting between the trees, barely disturbing the environment as he moved. Leaves rustled and branches swayed in his wake.

When it came to pure speed, he was above both of them.

Teclos narrowed his eyes slightly as he followed, then looked back toward Gillard.

"Don't lose him," he called out.

Gillard snorted, his breathing still steady despite the pace.

"Easier said than done."

Meanwhile, the cockatrice was tearing into a horned rabbit when it felt a disturbance in the air.

Its reaction was slow at first, as it assumed some small animals were approaching.

But when they drew closer, it lifted itself upright, looked toward the disturbance—

And froze.

Its pupils shrank in panic. Three fast shapes were rushing toward it, humans...

With a sharp, scraping caw, it jumped back and bolted away.

But it was too late.

Ralph caught sight of it as it broke into a clearing ahead.

"Found it!"

The creature ran in panic, its long legs carrying it forward in uneven, frantic strides. In its haste, it forgot to use its wings and fly away—instead, it simply ran.

All three of them saw it clearly.

Its body was built like a lean, predatory runner—long legs, a forward-leaning posture, and a tail stretched out behind it for balance, much like a velociraptor, Teclos noted. Red and yellow feathers covered its frame, shifting with each movement as it sprinted.

Its head, however, looked like a chicken's pulled straight from a horror story, with beady eyes, twitching feathers, and a beak lined with jagged teeth that snapped nervously as it fled.

Claws dug into the ground with each step, kicking up dirt, while the tail behind it ended in a straight, needle-like stinger.

And despite the panic—

It was fast.

Three meters of lean muscle and instinct trying to escape. But they were catching up to it.

Ralph made the first move.

He sprang into the air in one smooth motion, already pulling his bow from his back as he rose. The movement was quick and fluid—something he had done countless times before.

An arrow was nocked in an instant.

Wind swirled around the arrowhead as he drew the string back—

Then released.

The arrow flew true.

Ralph had already predicted the cockatrice's escape path, leading the shot just enough to intercept it.

But at the last second—

The cockatrice reacted.

Its wind barrier flared, twisting the arrow off course at the last second.

The shot missed the cockatrice by more than a meter.

"Damn!"

"Hah! So much for your awesome skills!" Teclos called from behind, a teasing grin plastered on his face.

"Shut the hell up and follow it, god damn it!" Ralph snapped back, clearly embarrassed now.

Both Teclos and Gillard laughed.

"We're trying, but your circus act isn't helping!" Gillard called back. "I'm dying back here, hahaha!"

"Oh yeah?!" Ralph barked. "Then go ahead—you stop it!"

And Gillard did.

The moment a clear line opened between the trees, he leaned forward and ignited the mana inside of him.

Flames burst from his feet, propelling him forward in a straight, explosive line like a launched projectile. His sword was already in his hand as he closed the distance, aiming to end it in a single strike.

The cockatrice noticed him too—and dodged at the last second.

Just as Gillard reached it, the creature twisted aside, avoiding his charge and making him overshoot completely.

He flew past it—

Straight into a tree again.

The impact echoed through the forest.

Teclos facepalmed.

"Dude, are you serious?!"

"Bwahahaha! And you call me out?" Ralph laughed, nearly losing his footing.

Gillard groaned from the distance, trying to recover, but despite his failure—

He had done one thing right.

He stopped it.

The cockatrice's retreat had been cut off, and Teclos didn't waste the opportunity.

He turned toward Ralph and shouted—

"Ralph! Eyes up! We can get it now. I'll lock it down—take the shot!"

"Alright!"

Teclos closed the distance just a little more, then raised his hand.

Darkness rose from the cockatrice's shadow.

Tendrils formed and surged forward, wrapping around the cockatrice's legs, wings, and tail, binding it in place before it could react. At the same time, darkness spread over its eyes, blinding it completely.

The creature thrashed around, letting out a panicked cry—

But it couldn't move.

Ralph was already in position.

He jumped again, rising just enough to get a clear angle over the trees. The bow was drawn mid-air, wind gathering around the arrow once more.

The arrow shot forward, cutting cleanly through the air—

And struck true.

Straight through the cockatrice's skull with a wet cracking sound.

The body jerked once and then went still.

And just like that, the hunt was over.

They gathered around the dead cockatrice, inspecting the body. It had been an almost clean kill, and everything—except the head—was intact, making it a valuable haul.

Ralph crouched slightly, looking it over.

"Hmm... you could rake in massive profit with that shadow bind, man," he said, nodding toward Teclos. "The body's still intact—we could sell this for a nice amount."

"Everything except the meat!" Gillard added quickly, eyes locked onto the carcass. "This thing's supposed to be delicious."

He was practically salivating as his eyes roamed over the corpse.

"Hold your horses, you fat—"

"Wait." Teclos cut them off sharply. "Be quiet."

His shadow sense had picked something up.

Rushing toward them.

His body tensed instantly.

He didn't know what they were yet, but every instinct in his body screamed at him to run.

Humanoid shapes were rushing toward them at insane speeds, more than twenty already, and the number was still rising.

"What is i—" Ralph tried to ask.

"Shit!" Teclos snapped. "Run! Both of you!"

There was no time to explain.

No time for hesitation.

Confusion would cost them seconds.

Seconds that they didn't have.

Shadow tendrils snapped out instantly, coiling around Ralph and Gillard before either of them could react.

Then—

With everything he had, Teclos threw them away.

Hard.

Their bodies were launched into the forest, away from the clearing, crashing through branches and brush.

"Are you mad?!" Gillard shouted, the words barely leaving his mouth before he disappeared into the trees.

Teclos tried to follow them a fraction of a second later, launching himself into the air as well.

That was when he felt it.

A crushing presence.

Killing intent slammed into him like a sledgehammer, thick, suffocating, and violent enough to make the very air feel hostile.

Still airborne, Teclos twisted his body and looked back.

And saw him.

A green-skinned figure stood where the cockatrice had fallen.

He was massive, clad head to toe in black plate armor.

Two enormous, double-bladed battleaxes were strapped across his back, their edges polished to a deadly shine and etched with glowing red runes.

Long white hair, braided tightly, hung behind him and swayed faintly with each step. Two tusks jutted from his lower jaw, and a scar cut across his forehead.

It was an orc.

And in that moment—

Teclos remembered the conversation at the butcher's stall.

The war they had spoken about so casually had finally reached their doorstep.

Chapter 67 - 66 -A Promise Fading into Silence

Teclos, Gillard, and Ralph tore through the forest as fast as they could. Branches whipped past their faces and snapped against their shoulders, the forest blurring around them as they fled at full speed.

Panic was written clearly across Teclos's face.

'Shit, shit, shit... how the hell are orcs here?!'

His mind raced just as fast as his body, every instinct screaming at him to get away.

Ralph, still not fully grasping the situation, called out between breaths, his tone half-joking despite the speed they were pushing.

"Dude, why did you piss your pants suddenly?"

Gillard shot Teclos a quick glance as he ran, his brows furrowing as he also began to notice just how serious Teclos looked.

"Yeah... what's with you?" he added, though there was already a hint of unease creeping into his voice.

Teclos raised his voice just enough for them to hear him clearly, his tone sharp and urgent.

"Listen up... we're in serious trouble. Orcs somehow breached through the mountains. There were a lot of them—and their commander, captain, or whatever that thing was... saw me."

"What?!" they both exclaimed at once, color draining from their faces.

"Yeah," Teclos continued without missing a step, "so both of you grab your flares and shoot them right now!"

He didn't wait for a response. His hand was already moving, pulling the compact orb from his belt—a small, smooth sphere etched with faint runes. The moment he fed mana into it, the runes flared to life, glowing softly in his palm.

With a sharp motion, he hurled it high into the sky.

The orb shot upward, cutting through the canopy before detonating with a thunderous crack. A burst of shimmering particles exploded outward, then froze

unnaturally in place, forming a glowing sphere that pulsed slowly, like a massive heartbeat hanging above the forest.

The signal was unmistakable and visible from far away.

Gillard followed a few seconds later, his own flare streaking upward before blooming into a second radiant sphere beside the first. Two pulses now echoed in the sky, ominously.

Only Ralph remained.

He fumbled with his satchel as he ran, fingers slipping over straps and gear, panic finally catching up to him.

"Shit!"

The small orb slipped from his grasp and vanished into the undergrowth as he stumbled forward.

"Leave it!" Teclos snapped immediately. "With two flares up, help should be here soon."

For one brief moment, it almost felt like they might make it, then Teclos's senses screamed at him.

"Duck!"

All three dropped instantly.

A blazing arc of energy tore through the forest in the next heartbeat, roaring past them with a deafening hiss. It carved through the trees ahead and behind them as if they were nothing more than dry reeds, slicing through trunks thicker than a man's torso without resistance.

After a split second of silence, the forest collapsed.

Massive trees groaned as their severed trunks gave way, tilting at unnatural angles before crashing down in a thunderous cascade. Branches snapped, leaves exploded into the air, and the ground shook as one after another slammed into the earth. Splinters and debris rained down around them, forcing the three to shield their heads as they scrambled forward again.

Where the attack had passed, the clean cuts smoldered faintly, thin lines of charred wood glowing along the severed trunks. Some had already begun to burn,

small flames licking hungrily at the exposed bark as smoke curled upward into the canopy.

The path in front of them and behind them had been torn wide open.

And through that opening—

The orcs came running.

The commander stood unmoving in the distance, his massive frame outlined by the smoldering ruin he had just created. His presence alone felt suffocating, yet for some reason, he did not pursue them himself.

Instead—

He gave a short command.

"Seh'la vel... thrak'zul."

The language was harsh, guttural, carrying easily through the broken forest.

And his warriors obeyed.

Several orcs broke into motion instantly, their heavy steps barely slowed by the terrain as they surged forward, each cloaked in their own type of mana.

They were faster.

Much faster than them.

Teclos glanced back once—and immediately felt his stomach drop.

While the orcs gained ground behind them, Teclos came to a terrible realization.

This wasn't just a scouting party.

This was an army.

And the moment those flares went up—

They had signed the death warrant of every hunter coming to help.

After a split second of thought, Teclos shouted, "Ralph! Run ahead!"

"What the hell do you mean, run ahead?!" Ralph shot back, clearly thrown off. "I'm not leaving without you two. This sure as hell isn't the time to play hero!"

"Just focus on running!" Gillard added, pushing forward beside them. "Help will come since we got the flares up!"

"No, god damn it!" Teclos snapped. "There's a whole army behind that thing that burned half the forest down just now. I'm sure of it. The patrols will just be wiped out along with us if we try to fight them!"

"How can you be so sure?" Gillard asked.

Before Teclos could answer, Ralph answered instead, after a brief second of silence.

"No... he's got a point," Ralph said, his voice lower now. "Lately, there's been a lot of talk about war in Kolma... those green-skins made it through the mountains..."

This was bigger than anything they had imagined.

Ralph let out a short, hollow chuckle.

"Well... guess we're dead meat, haha."

"Listen to me," Teclos pressed, forcing his voice to be steady despite his panic. "We still have a chance. We just need a messenger. A fast one—and you fit the job, Ralph. So—"

"No," Ralph cut him off immediately. "I'm not leaving you."

"Oh, for gods' sake, Gillard!" Teclos snapped. "Talk some sense into him, please!"

Gillard didn't answer right away.

Instead, he turned his head slightly toward Teclos, his expression hardening as he ran.

"What's your plan?" he asked.

The orcs were getting closer with every passing second.

"We stall them as best we can while still moving," Teclos said. "Ralph gets to Kolma and informs the chief. With the guild master, Pella, and Axel, we might at least have a chance to escape. And he can send help back to us. Someone fast."

"Dammit!" Ralph barked, frustration rising. "You stubborn idiot! I'm not leaving you two. How many times do I have to repeat myself?!"

That was when Gillard made his choice.

In one sharp motion, flames burst from his feet as he accelerated forward, closing the small gap between him and Ralph in an instant. Before Ralph could react—

Gillard slapped him hard.

The sound cracked through the forest.

"We don't have time!" Gillard snapped, forcing Ralph's attention onto him. "And his plan makes sense. You just need to get to Kolma and send help back. We'll be fine—stop being an idiot and trust us!"

Ralph stared at him, stunned.

Even Teclos was caught off guard.

"...Aren't you mad at him?" Ralph asked, still trying to process it.

"I was," Gillard admitted without hesitation. "But this isn't the time. And it's as good a plan as any."

Teclos let out a short breath.

"Thanks for trusting me, man."

"Hah!" Gillard snorted. "You owe me another hunt and a few beers at the tavern next time!"

Teclos managed to smile despite everything.

"Yeah... I promise."

"I swear to god," Ralph muttered, shaking his head as he gathered himself, "if you two dumbasses don't pull through, I'm gonna revive you and kill you again..."

Wind mana surged around him.

Ralph launched himself upward, his body lifting as the air coiled tightly around him. With a sharp burst from his feet, he propelled himself forward, accelerating rapidly as he shot ahead through the forest, weaving between the trees with growing speed.

In just a few seconds—

He was already pulling away.

"All right... what do we do now?" Gillard asked.

Teclos's mind raced through every possibility, but each one ended horribly.

"We stall them," he said at last, settling on the only plan that might keep them alive a little longer. "And we keep them from going after Ralph."

Both of them glanced back.

And sure enough, several orcs had already split off from the main group, breaking formation and going after Ralph.

"Got it..." Gillard muttered, eyes narrowing. "Only—how do we do that?"

Teclos hesitated for half a second.

"Hah, well... we dodge everything they throw at us," he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. "And we hit the ones chasing Ralph. You've got more firepower, so disrupt them. I'll cover your back as best I can. And don't hold back... you can kill a few."

Gillard let out a short, humorless chuckle.

"Hah... I hope it's as easy as you make it sound."

It wasn't.

But they had to try anyway.

Gillard twisted his body mid-run as flames surged into his palm. Without breaking his stride, he hurled a fireball toward the pursuing orcs.

The blazing sphere tore through the air and exploded just ahead of the orcs.

The orcs had to slow down a little. The flames licked across their armor and skin—

But that was it.

They didn't even flinch.

"Yeah... that's reassuring," Gillard muttered under his breath.

Teclos couldn't respond. Every ounce of focus he had went into defense.

Darkness wrapped around them, tendrils snapping from tree to tree as he redirected both himself and Gillard with sharp, unnatural pulls of momentum. More than once, they were yanked sideways or forward just in time to avoid incoming attacks.

A blade of wind screamed past them, slicing cleanly through multiple trees.

The trunks split apart almost instantly, severed in one smooth cut before crashing down in opposite directions with a deafening roar. Splinters burst outward, forcing both of them to duck as debris rained down.

Another attack followed right after.

A chunk of earth tore free from the ground and shot toward Gillard like a projectile, but Teclos reacted just in time, yanking Gillard out of its path. The projectile slammed into the ground where he had been a heartbeat earlier, erupting into a spray of shattered stone.

At the same time—

Teclos struck back.

One of the orcs surged forward suddenly, flames bursting from beneath its feet as it propelled itself ahead of the others, closing the distance with alarming speed.

A tendril snapped upward from the ground, coiling around the orc mid-stride like a lasso and tightening violently.

Because of its momentum, it hit the ground face-first with a heavy impact.

Teclos tried to bind it in place with more tendrils, but the orc's strength tore right through them. Still, he had achieved his goal.

He had slowed it down.

Then Teclos had to throw himself to the side.

A wind slash tore through the space he had just occupied, cutting through two more trees behind him as if they were paper.

Meanwhile, Gillard started casting more fireballs, but Teclos didn't let him finish.

A tendril snapped around Gillard's arm and yanked him upward.

He was pulled off the ground mid-cast, the forming fireball flickering and collapsing as he was thrown into the air.

A split second later—

The ground where he had just been running erupted.

Massive walls of earth surged upward from both sides, slamming together with crushing force, sealing the space shut with a thunderous impact.

Had he been there—

He would've been crushed instantly.

Gillard landed roughly a few meters ahead, rolling once before forcing himself back up, breathing heavily but alive.

"...Okay," he panted, glancing back at the collapsed earth. "I take it back. This plan sucks."

Teclos somewhat agreed, as his mana pool was dwindling fast, but what more could he do?

"Well... we're still alive... so the plan doesn't suck that much," Teclos tried to stay positive, as he had to twist his body just in time to avoid a fireball.

The fireball roared past him and detonated against a tree ahead. The explosion tore the trunk apart, sending a storm of burning splinters back toward them. Teclos raised an arm instinctively and raised a wall of darkness, deflecting most of the debris, though a few sharp fragments still cut across his cheek and shoulder.

They were both getting battered.

Cuts lined their arms, bruises spread beneath torn fabric, and their breathing had grown heavier with each passing minute.

"I guess..." Gillard exhaled harshly, ducking under a stray wind slash that carved through the air above him. "If we can stall them like this... help should come soon, right?"

Teclos nodded. "...Yeah," he said. "I hope so."

They moved in sync, and their desperation bought them precious seconds.

Gillard launched another wave of fire toward the orcs pursuing Ralph, forcing them to slow down or dodge.

Meanwhile, Teclos covered every opening he could, darkness snapping into place—dragging, pulling, binding—just enough to disrupt them or avoid their retaliation.

The seconds dragged on, each one harder than the last, until somehow, nearly five minutes had passed.

Five long, brutal minutes.

Ralph had to be far away by now.

"Hey..." Teclos spoke suddenly, his voice cutting through the chaos as he twisted around a low branch and landed beside Gillard for half a stride. "Sorry... by the way."

Gillard blinked, barely keeping up as he adjusted his footing.

"For what?"

"For springing that on you back at the tavern," Teclos said, breathing roughly. "So suddenly."

Gillard snorted as sweat ran down his face.

"Yeah, yeah... all forgotten, man," he said, swinging his arm back to fire another fireball at the orcs. "Just remember the beers... and another hunt. Preferably a cockatrice again." He huffed. "Such a waste... leaving all that meat behind..."

Teclos let out a short, incredulous laugh despite everything.

"Are you seriously worrying about food right now?"

"Well, I haven't eaten in a long time!"

Teclos shook his head, a faint grin breaking through.

"Fine... I'll get you that chicken meat, don't worry. I'll even—"

The words died in his throat.

As a presence appeared in front of Gillard.

"Fu—!" Teclos's eyes snapped wide open. "Watch out!"

Shadows erupted instantly, tendrils snapping around Gillard's torso as Teclos tried to yank him upward, to pull him away from the danger that had appeared out of nowhere.

At the same time, more tendrils lashed forward, wrapping around the towering figure in front of him—trying, desperately, to restrain it even for a single second.

But it wasn't enough.

Not even close.

And time seemed to slow down suddenly.

Gillard turned his head—

Just enough to see it.

The orc commander stood right there, its massive frame casting a shadow over them both. Black armor gleamed faintly beneath the flickering light of the burning trees, and the twin blades of its axes rested heavy at its sides.

It smiled.

A grotesque, twisted expression stretched across its scarred face as its gaze shifted past Gillard—

And locked onto Teclos.

"Zra'harka selk, t'orpad."

The words meant nothing to him.

But the intent was clear.

In the next instant—

One of its axes came down in a smooth, effortless arc.

Gillard didn't even have time to react.

The blade slammed into his ribcage with a sickening crack, the force of the impact tearing through flesh and bone alike. The momentum didn't stop there—the strike carried through, lifting him off his feet as if he weighed nothing.

He was thrown through the air with violent force.

And his body crashed into a tree behind them with devastating impact, the trunk splintering violently as wood shattered outward. The sound echoed through the forest like a gunshot.

Gillard slid down slowly—

And didn't get back up.

Blood spread beneath him, dark and murky, pooling against the broken bark.

For a heartbeat—

Everything went silent.

Teclos's world—

Stopped.

"GILLARD!"

Chapter 68 - 67 - A Flare, The Start Of War

A vast void was suddenly torn into Teclos's heart the moment he saw Gillard struck down like that.

For a brief second, everything else faded—the forest, the orcs, the chaos—and all that remained was that single image burned into his mind.

Rage surged up violently, dark mana spiraling around him as his vision dimmed at the edges and his eyes slowly turned darker. He nearly lost himself to it, nearly gave in to that raw, overwhelming hatred, ready to throw his life away just to reach the commander and tear him apart.

Then—

A wet cough broke through that haze.

Gillard spat out a thick chunk of blood, his chest rising unevenly as a broken, rasping breath forced its way out of him. The sound was horrible—wrong—but it meant one thing.

He was still alive.

"Gillard! Stay awake, man! I'll come and help you!" Teclos shouted, his voice strained, desperate, but there was no reply—only that uneven breathing.

The commander's gaze shifted toward Gillard for a moment before returning to Teclos, and a bone-chilling smile slowly crept across its face. It spoke something to its soldiers in that guttural tongue, then, to Teclos's shock, turned its head fully toward him and forced out words in his language.

"Puny human... weak. You die today."

The voice was rough and sounded unnatural, as if it wasn't meant to form those words in his language, but their meaning was clear.

Without another word, the commander vanished in a deafening blast of heat, the air distorting violently where it had stood. A moment later, it reappeared high above the forest, hovering for only a brief instant as it scanned the distance.

Then, as soon as it found what it was looking for, a sonic boom erupted, and it shot off in Ralph's direction with terrifying speed.

"Shit! That bastard!" Teclos cursed, his body tensing as he instinctively wanted to give chase, but he couldn't—he was too fast anyway, and Gillard needed him right now. His jaw clenched tightly as he forced himself to stay focused.

'I really hope you're fast enough, Ralph...'

Turning back, his attention snapped to Gillard—and to the soldiers now slowly closing in.

One of the orcs stepped forward and stopped right in front of Gillard, lifting its massive cleaver and tapping him lightly on the head, almost casually, as if checking whether he was still alive.

Gillard responded with another weak cough, more blood spilling from his lips as his breathing became even more strained.

The orc let out a low, guttural laugh and said something to the others, and soon several of them joined in, their laughter carrying through the forest.

Teclos's hands trembled with fury, but he didn't move. He knew—knew—that if he rushed in blindly, he would die instantly. Each one of them was stronger than him, and he could feel it now more clearly than ever.

Their presence pressed down on him, their shadows heavier, larger, and deeper than his—something he had discovered during Axel's training. He could somewhat distinguish how strong someone was based on the vastness of their shadow.

It was just a feeling, but so far, it had not been far off.

Still, he forced himself to think.

Even as two orcs suddenly broke from the group and charged him.

Teclos reacted immediately, twisting his body to avoid the first slash before ducking under a second strike aimed at his neck. A wind blade tore through the space behind him, cutting through the trees with ease.

He kept moving, barely staying ahead of their attacks. Then the ground shifted beneath his feet, forcing him to leap aside as it split open.

Another strike came immediately after, and he redirected himself mid-motion with a shadow tendril.

All this time, he didn't stop thinking.

The orcs were coordinated—there were always at least two near Gillard, never leaving him unguarded. Trying to lure them away wouldn't work, and going straight through them was suicide.

His mind raced for a solution that didn't exist, even as he continued to dodge attack after attack.

After a while, something began to change, slowly but surely.

At first, every movement had been desperate, barely enough to keep him alive. But now there was a fraction more space, a fraction more time.

His body reacted faster, his mind sharpened, and his movements became cleaner.

He hadn't realized it in the middle of all the chaos, but he was adapting. With each passing second, his movements became more precise, letting him slip through their attacks like a slippery cockroach that refused to die.

The orcs noticed this.

Smirks spread among them as they adjusted, recognizing that the human in front of them wasn't just prey—he was fighting back.

Though brutal and aggressive, they valued strength, and Teclos, slowly but surely, was earning a measure of their respect.

But none of that mattered to him.

Because Gillard was dying.

Teclos could feel his mana draining rapidly now, desperation pushing him further as his movements grew more reckless. He began to counterattack, striking where he could, forcing the orcs to react, even if only for a moment.

"...cough..."

Gillard stirred weakly, blood spilling down his tunic as he forced out broken words. "...run... you idiot..."

Teclos's eyes widened. "GILLARD!"

He leaned back just in time to avoid a cleaver that passed within a hair's breadth of his face. Then he jumped and twisted mid-air as a battle axe swept beneath him, nearly taking his legs off. In the same motion, he extended his blade, forcing the orc in front of him to defend instead of attack.

He was fighting like a madman now, his reflexes honed to their limit, his body moving without hesitation. His entire focus narrowed to a single thought—save Gillard.

"...cough... I said... run..."

The orc standing above Gillard looked down at him, then back at Teclos, and a cruel smile spread across its face as it slowly lifted its sword, preparing to pierce him.

"NO!"

Teclos unleashed everything he had.

Darkness exploded outward as tendrils surged from the ground, wrapping around all six warriors at once, tightening around limbs, torsos, even necks as they

strained to hold them in place. For a brief moment, the bindings held, threatening to even snap their bones under the pressure.

Still... it wasn't enough. That would at most hold them for a few seconds.

Using that small window of opportunity, he drove his blade into the nearest orc's eye in a swift, decisive motion.

The orc collapsed—dead, but the others were already breaking free from his bindings, cutting through the tendrils with just their brute force.

And worst of all, the sword above Gillard was already coming down.

Teclos launched himself forward, shadow steps carrying him across the distance as tendrils latched onto nearby trees and pulled him faster, faster still—

The blade descended, and Gillard's leather armor gave way.

The steel pierced through his chest, driving straight through his heart and body, embedding itself into the splintered tree behind him.

Teclos was still mid-air, feeling helpless and frozen.

Unable to reach him in time.

Gillard's body went still, his final breath leaving him as the pain finally ended.

The orc lifted the sword, with Gillard's body still impaled on it, then shook it violently, throwing the lifeless corpse aside.

His body hit the ground heavily and lay there, unmoving.

Gillard was dead.

—

Just as all of this began, deeper within the forest, a small camp had been set up.

Tessa and Pierce sat by a modest fire, the flames crackling softly as a pot of simple porridge simmered above it. The smell was plain, almost comforting, a quiet contrast to the tension slowly building in the woods around them.

Pierce stirred it lazily, glancing around with a faint frown. "Nothing yet... this is promising to be a slow and uneventful day," he muttered, clearly dissatisfied.

Tessa gave a small shrug, trying to keep things light. "We'll get there. The day has just started, no?"

"Well, I hope so, little missy," Pierce replied, scratching his white goatee thoughtfully. "It's just that there aren't many beasts around today... actually, I haven't even seen one yet." His gaze lingered on the treeline a moment longer than usual, his gut telling him that something was off.

"Maybe yesterday's hunting team cleared the beasts in this area?" Tessa offered.

"Crill and Tony?" Pierce scoffed, shaking his head. "Hah, those drunkards are barely keeping their licenses afloat. They only hunt minimal, small game."

Then—

A loud boom echoed through the forest.

Both of them turned their heads at once as a flare lit up the sky in the distance.

"Huh," Pierce muttered, already standing up. "Guess someone bit off more than they could chew... all right, let's go help." He moved quickly now, grabbing his gear and kicking dirt over the fire to extinguish it.

Tessa looked at the pot with clear disappointment. "Oooh... but the food... we were just about to eat."

"Don't worry, lass, we'll eat once we—"

Boom.

Another explosion.

Another flare.

Pierce froze.

Two flares?

His gut twisted violently this time, alarm bells ringing loud and clear in his mind.

"Missy," he said, his tone shifting completely, "just in case... stick very close to me. Two flares in rapid succession... something isn't right."

Tessa nodded immediately, her earlier lightness gone as unease took over.

They gathered their gear and left the camp at a run, heading straight toward the flares. The forest blurred past them, branches snapping underfoot as they pushed forward—but then something shifted in the bushes to their side.

Pierce didn't miss it.

"Hold, lass!"

He stopped instantly, slamming his foot into the ground as a rock wall surged upward in front of them.

A second later—

Two fireballs crashed into it.

The wall shattered violently, stone exploding outward as debris rained down on them, forcing both of them to brace against the impact.

And then they saw them.

Orcs.

Dozens of them.

Pierce felt it through the ground, the sheer number pressing down on him like an inescapable net.

"Run!" he shouted without hesitation. "I'll stall them—run, lass!"

Tessa didn't argue.

She turned and fled.

That was when lightning struck.

A blinding flash tore through the clearing, slamming down where Pierce had stood just a heartbeat before.

From that crackling impact point, a towering figure emerged—an orc clad in black armor, the left side of his face marked by a jagged tribal tattoo. His head was shaved clean, and a thick white beard was braided tightly down his chest. Arcs of energy danced across his armor, as if the metal could barely contain the power within.

A massive greatsword rested on its back.

Pierce died instantly, flattened by him, his spine crushed into nothing more than a paste of mush before he even had time to react.

The orc lifted its arm lazily, almost bored—

And a massive bolt of lightning tore through the air and struck Tessa mid-run, engulfing her completely. Her body seized for a single instant before collapsing, burned beyond recognition.

She couldn't even scream.

—

Elsewhere in the forest, around the same time, another team moved silently through the undergrowth.

Kross followed closely behind Gerath, their steps careful as they tracked a dire wolf through its territory.

"Keep quiet, boy," Gerath muttered, raising a hand in front of his lips. "We're in its territory."

Kross rolled his eyes behind him, barely containing his irritation. 'Just a few more weeks and I can get rid of this demented fool,' he thought bitterly.

The anticipation of that moment had been the only thing keeping him sane. Gerath's compulsions were unbearable—everything had to be perfect, clean, precise. How to walk, how to hunt, where to stand, how to hold a blade—it was endless.

Kross felt like he was losing his mind.

'Honestly... I could just stab him right now,' he thought, almost wistfully. 'Ooh, how nice that would feel...'

He let out a silent sigh. 'Just a few more weeks...'

"Now crouch," Gerath instructed, oblivious. "Keep your sword in your hand so it doesn't scrape the ground."

'For the love of—'

He really wanted to stab him.

But something beat him to it.

In a single instant, an earth spike erupted from the ground and impaled Gerath cleanly, punching through his body before either of them could react.

Gerath coughed up blood as something rose from the ground beneath him.

An orc.

Its appearance was grotesque. Long black hair hung wild and tangled around its face, while a bushy, untrimmed beard framed a twisted grin. Three deep scars ran down its face, and its eyes were wide and unhinged with something close to madness. Its black armor was stained and filthy, and in its hand, it carried a long spear.

It leaned forward—

And bit Gerath's head clean off.

Kross froze.

For one horrifying second, his mind went blank.

Then sheer terror hit him like a tidal wave, and he turned and ran.

Behind him, the orc chewed thoughtfully for a moment before spitting the remains out with a sour expression.

"Bleh! Kurna'k kwee! Bleh!"

Then it lifted its spear casually and threw it.

The weapon tore through the air with devastating force, piercing straight through Kross's head and ripping it clean from his body before embedding itself deep into the ground with a thunderous crack. The earth split outward from the impact in a spiderweb of fractures.

The orc chuckled to itself, prancing over to retrieve its weapon.

"Mmm... huh huh huh... Sharakka!"

It yanked the spear free, took another bite from the new head—this time savoring it—then sank back into the ground, disappearing as if it had never been there.

Farther north, another team moved along a patrol route.

Sammara walked beside Obin, clearly flustered.

"I'm telling you, if you say one word to him, I'm going to stab you in your sleep!"

Obin laughed loudly, clearly enjoying himself. "Haha! A headstrong lass, being shy about liking a boy."

"Obin! Stop!"

"Come on, you should tell him," he continued, grinning. "That boy has nothing but training on his mind. Some tender company would do him good—and besides, you'd get what you wished for."

"I swear to god, if you don't drop it, I'm going to tell the guild master you stole wine from the guild's cellar!"

Obin froze mid-step. "Woah, woah there, missy... that ain't fair. It was just a lapse of judgment. You can't tell him that—I'll be suspended for more than a month!"

"Then shut up about Teclos!"

"Hah! Sure, sure, I'll—"

Boom.

A flare exploded in the distance.

Both of them turned instantly.

"All right, playtime's over," Obin said, his tone shifting completely. "Let's go see what's up."

They were already moving when a second flare lit the sky.

That made them exchange a quick glance—and pick up the pace even more.

Obin caught something in the corner of his eye and looked up.

A deep, crushing dread settled over him.

"Duck!"

He slammed his hand into the ground, a rock wall surging upward in front of them as he began forming a golem around himself—

But it didn't matter.

A massive arrow tore straight through the wall as if it were nothing, punching clean through the stone and into his chest. The force carried it through his heart and pinned him in place instantly.

The arrow was enormous—nearly as large as he was—and infused with roaring wind mana.

"Obin!" Sammara screamed, her voice breaking as she looked up.

Above the canopy, an orcess hovered in the air.

Her presence was overwhelming.

Her long black hair was woven into a tight braid, her black armor gleaming faintly in the sunlight breaking through the trees. The bow in her hands was massive, nearly as large as her own body, and the arrow she drew matched it in size.

Wind spiraled violently around her, gathering with terrifying intensity as her muscles coiled and pulled the string back once more.

Sammara tried to move, summoning water beneath her feet as she attempted to glide away—

But it was useless.

As the arrow released.

It didn't even take a second to reach her.

A deafening sonic boom tore through the forest as the projectile crossed the distance instantly, piercing straight through Sammara's chest and killing her on the spot.

Her body was pinned lifelessly to the ground.

Chapter 69 - 68 -The Wall of Diamond

Ralph ran as fast as he could, his body pushed far beyond what he thought possible as the wind howled around him.

It had been five minutes since he broke away.

Those five minutes felt like an eternity in his mind.

His thoughts spiraled uncontrollably, colliding with each other as panic and urgency twisted together in his chest. He was worried about Teclos and Gillard—terribly worried—but at the same time, another heavy thought loomed over him. The scale of this... whatever this was... didn't feel right.

That one slash from that massive orc.

The memory of it burned into his mind—the way it had carved through the forest, cutting down trees like they were nothing more than grass. Even now, thinking back on it made his stomach churn.

'I'm not even sure...' he thought grimly, pushing forward. '...if all of Kolma comes... would it even matter?'

All of those thoughts lingered in his mind, dark and suffocating.

But right now, he had to push them to the back of his mind and run.

He had to trust the plan they had thrown together in desperation. Had to believe that Teclos and Gillard were still alive, still holding on. If he stopped now—if he hesitated even for a moment—then everything they had risked their lives for would be for nothing.

He pushed himself harder, compressing the violent wind swirling around him while releasing powerful, tornado-like bursts from beneath his feet.

With no one chasing him anymore, he had taken to the sky above the canopy, abandoning the tangled forest below.

And without the trees slowing him down—

He became faster.

Much faster.

This was the fastest he had ever flown in his life, his body screaming under the strain as he poured everything he had into speed.

But that was fine.

Exhaustion, pain, fear—none of it mattered right now.

Because finally, the village came into view in the distance, its faint outline unmistakable. A glimmer of hope shone in his eyes.

Just a few more minutes.

That was all it would take.

But then, he suddenly felt a strange heat behind him.

It brushed against him lightly at first, subtle enough that he almost missed it—but his instincts screamed.

Ralph's head snapped back, and his blood ran cold.

A massive fireball was tearing through the sky toward him.

It was enormous.

As large as the guild hall itself.

"Holy—!"

There was no time to think.

Ralph immediately dove down, abandoning his path above the canopy as he forced his body into a sharp descent. At the same time, he veered hard to the left, twisting mid-air as wind mana exploded beneath his feet to change his direction as violently as possible.

A second later—

The forest exploded.

The fireball struck the ground with catastrophic force, and the resulting detonation ripped through the landscape. A massive crater formed at the point of impact, trees in the immediate area simply... vanished—evaporated by the heat before the explosion even fully bloomed.

The shockwave tore outward, flattening everything in its path as the surrounding forest was ripped apart. Trees splintered violently, trunks snapping and shattering as flames engulfed them almost instantly.

Debris filled the air.

Flaming shards of wood, shattered earth, and burning fragments were thrown in all directions, peppering the surrounding area with overwhelming force.

Ralph barely escaped the center of it.

But not the aftermath.

The shockwave hit him mid-flight, slamming into his body like a hammer and throwing him off course. He crashed into the ground, tumbling uncontrollably as dirt and debris scraped against his skin.

He rolled several times before finally coming to a stop.

For a moment, everything spun around him, dizziness crashing over his senses.

After a second or two, he forced himself up, ignoring the pain that flared through his body as he staggered forward. His limbs protested, bruises already forming from the earlier impact, but he didn't stop.

Couldn't stop.

Thankfully, the trees between him and the blast had taken the brunt of the shockwave, softening it just enough that it did not kill him outright.

After that, he kept low beneath the canopy, no longer daring to rise above the trees.

'Holy hell...' his mind raced in panic as dark thoughts started forming. 'It's that guy again...'

That monster.

And if he was targeting him like this—then what about Teclos? What about Gillard?

The thought twisted his stomach violently, but he forced it down and pushed forward, weaving between the trees as fast as he could. He zigzagged now, changing direction constantly, making it harder for that thing behind him to track his path.

But it came at a cost.

Every second mattered already, but now he was forced to slow down and was losing time.

'Are they even still alive...?'

The thought slipped in before he could stop it.

Then—

Another explosion echoed behind him and closer this time.

Ralph barely had time to react before a second fireball slammed into the forest, the impact sending another violent shockwave tearing through the trees.

He tried to shield himself with a wind barrier, but it wasn't enough.

The force hurled him forward, and his body slammed into a tree with a sickening thud.

Pain exploded through him as he dropped to the ground, momentarily stunned. A nasty ringing filled his ears, drowning out the world around him.

He groaned and pushed himself up.

Luckily, he wasn't knocked out.

After a few unsteady steps, he forced his legs to move again, breaking back into a run as blood trickled from his nose and burns stung across his skin.

Bruised and battered.

And still running toward Kolma.

—

Elsewhere.

In a quiet room, tucked away within one of the larger houses in Kolma.

It wasn't lavish by any means, yet it carried a certain dignified air—comfortable, but practical, with the subtle weight of authority woven through it. There was no gold adorning the space, no excessive display of wealth, apart from a few modest silver ornaments.

But the room itself was filled with character.

Shelves lined the walls, packed tightly with different kinds of books—some clearly worn down through the years, while others were pristine and untouched.

Alongside them rested pipes for smoking, each one different in shape and size, their polished wood and worn stems showing years of use and careful upkeep. Nearby, bottles of old, valuable alcohol stood neatly arranged, their labels faded with age, though the contents inside had been preserved with obvious care.

Lastly, a few ornamental swords hung on the walls.

It was a private room.

Elder Ezekiel's room.

He sat comfortably on a large sofa, leaning back as he slowly exhaled a stream of smoke from the pipe in his hand. In front of him, on a low wooden table between two sofas, a cup of tea steamed gently, accompanied by small snacks carefully prepared—no doubt by his wife.

"So... to what do I owe the honor of hosting such an esteemed guest in my humble home?"

The words themselves were polite.

The tone was not.

A thin layer of sarcasm clung to them, barely veiled and impossible to miss.

Across from him, sprawled in a similarly relaxed posture, Axel sat with his boots casually resting on the table, completely ignoring any sense of etiquette.

He was munching on a cookie, utterly at ease as if he owned the place.

"Come on, old chap..." Axel said between bites, his voice light, almost amused.
"You aren't still mad I killed your friend back then, right? It was a contract from an important person..."

He spoke as if the matter was trivial.

As if that death meant nothing.

Ezekiel didn't react to his provocations. He took another slow drag from his pipe before answering, his voice calm.

"Well... I might be containing my rage for now and at least hear you out on why you dared to step into my home." His sharp and cold look settled on Axel. "If the reason is shallow, though... I won't care for the famous 'Ghost of Alvar' and will kill you on the spot."

Axel chuckled at that, though something darker flickered beneath the surface of that amusement.

"Haha... you might have been stronger than me back then," he said, his tone shifting just slightly. "But now... I'd watch my tone if I were you."

For a brief moment, a sinister aura crept into the air around him—a faint pressure that was barely restrained. Then it vanished as he leaned back again, completely relaxed.

"Listen," he continued, waving it off. "I'll finally be out of your hair soon anyway. This mission is drawing to an end. I still don't know why my lord had me come here... just to find and kill off some bandits in the forest." He shrugged. "He knows our relationship is... strained."

Ezekiel let out a quiet breath of smoke, watching it dissipate slowly before answering.

"Well, I'm glad you'll be leaving soon," he said dryly. "And those weren't 'just' bandits. Adam was leading them." A faint pause followed before he added, "How was fighting the Butcher of the South, by the way? Did you sustain any injuries?"

Axel smirked.

"Hah... wouldn't you like to know." He waved a hand dismissively. "His fame was exaggerated."

Then he leaned forward slightly, his tone shifting again—more focused this time.

"Anyway... onto the second reason I came here."

Ezekiel raised an eyebrow.

There was more?

"At first," Axel continued, "I thought you were punishing me by having me look after some no-name brat... but now I see he's quite the gem." His eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "You wouldn't happen to be against the idea of me taking him to Lupos, would you?"

Ezekiel blinked once.

Then let out a short, disbelieving huff.

"What?" A faint grin tugged at his lips. "I can't believe it. You? Taking on a disciple?" He leaned back slightly. "Have you grown fond of that boy in just a year or what?"

Axel's expression didn't change.

"He's got talent," he said simply. "For... my kind of work. He'll be a useful tool for my lord."

That answer made Ezekiel pause.

He thought it over, tapping his pipe lightly against the armrest.

"Hmmm..."

After a moment, he nodded slightly.

"Well, if it's what the boy wants, then he can go," he said. "But I'll be informing Laenor about this in a letter. Don't think Count Aweq will be able to gain a hidden blade just like that. The Church will press him down a peg if he oversteps his authority again."

A sinister smirk spread across Axel's face at that, though he didn't voice what he was thinking and simply nodded.

"Of course."

Then—

The atmosphere changed instantly.

Both of them turned their heads toward the window at the exact same moment.

In the distance—

A massive fireball erupted into the sky, several kilometers away from Kolma. Even from here, the scale of it was massive, a pillar of flame rising above the treeline.

A few seconds later—

The sound reached them too.

A deep, resounding explosion that echoed all the way to the village.

Ezekiel stood up immediately, all traces of leisure gone.

"Look into what's happening," he said sharply. "I'm getting the mayor. Gunvald probably noticed it as well."

Axel nodded.

The next moment—

Both of them vanished from their spots.

—

Ralph was running like his life depended on it—which, in fact, it did.

Meanwhile, U’rtak was preparing another fireball. He had to admit, this little cockroach was quite persistent at staying alive. He waited for the human to run out of the forest and into the clearing. Then he’d have nowhere left to run and would perish.

Ralph, not knowing that, rushed forward. Soon, the forest began to thin, and he saw Kolma again, hope blooming in his mind.

’Just a little further... come on... I can do it!’

He gathered all the mana he had left and prepared himself for a final sprint.

The moment he cleared the forest, he blasted himself forward. His speed felt incredible—because it truly was—and under normal circumstances, he would have been overjoyed by the rapid progress in his control.

But a gut-wrenching feeling gnawed at him, forcing him to turn his head.

Dread instantly flooded his thoughts. A fireball, even larger than the previous ones, was hurtling toward him—and he was dead center in its impact zone.

He had maybe a few seconds left to live.

'Hah... I'll be damned. Guess I wasn't fast enough after all...'

Then, suddenly, a massive wall erupted from the ground, gleaming like polished diamond.

The impact was earth-shattering.

The fireball crashed against it and detonated, flames and force spreading across its surface, but the wall held firm. It blocked the blast completely, and not even the shockwave reached Ralph.

He stood there, stunned, shocked, and extremely relieved all at once.

"Holy shit... thank God—huff, huff... I actually made it!"

"Don't thank God, kid. I was the one who protected you."

The voice came from behind him.

Ralph turned around and saw Elder Ezekiel standing there.

And then collapsed with a smile.

Chapter 70 - 69 - When Rage Takes Over

Kolma was in disarray. All the townspeople had gathered in the town square, pale faces everywhere, fear hanging thick in the air.

Ralph had made it back and immediately went to speak with Mayor Brahm, ignoring his battered and injured body. Bruises covered him, his breathing was uneven, but he didn't care.

He had to ask for help—Teclos and Gillard were still out there, fighting for their lives.

But Brahm barely entertained the plea. He sent Ralph to the church to be healed instead, telling him his strength would still be needed for the evacuation. Charging back into the forest now would be nothing but a suicide mission, and most likely, all they would find were bodies.

The news itself was devastating.

But what frightened them more was what the orcs' presence truly meant.

Not only could it mean that a whole army had come, judging by the strength of the one that had nearly killed Ralph—it also meant there was a breach through the deadly mountains. A breach that had never been possible before.

Kolma could very well be on the front line of the war now.

The first to hear about the situation were Brahm, Axel, Gunvald, and Ezekiel.

Brahm reacted immediately. He ordered Gunvald to raise the alarm and gather every guard, then turned to Ezekiel and asked if he could raise a jagged rock wall in front of Kolma's existing defenses. They needed more protection, and they needed it now.

At the same time, they had to start planning an evacuation.

Ezekiel and Gunvald nodded and got to work at once.

Axel then tapped Brahm on the shoulder and slowly shook his head.

"I'm afraid there is no escape here, old chap. They have us surrounded already."

The words crushed every hope he had almost.

And his words proved to be right soon.

Just as the alarm bell rang, echoing across Kolma, shapes began to appear beyond the edges of the settlement. And as those shapes walked ever closer, it was clear who and what they were.

Kolma was surrounded on all sides by a massive army of orcs.

There were hundreds of them.

And worse still, each flank had its own commander—each one radiating a presence comparable to the flame-slinging monster Ralph had barely escaped from.

Even Axel didn't think he could punch through them.

He immediately recognized that those orcs were strong, and he only had old men way past their prime for help.

Back in the square, chaos spread quickly, panic rippling through the gathered crowd.

Voices rose. People shouted. Some began to cry.

"Calm down!" Brahm shouted from a hastily built platform. "We have capable people working to get you to safety! Trust us! We will pull through!"

His words barely reached them. The danger was too close, and fear had already spread too deeply through the crowd.

Still, some managed to calm themselves.

Then the hunters gathered in the town square, weapons in hand, their expressions grim and focused. Whatever fear they felt, they buried it beneath duty and resolve.

Their families were behind them, and they would protect them at all costs.

—

Separate from all this, six parents rushed toward the church, dread clawing at their chests.

What they saw there was disheartening, to say the least.

Ralph was laying there, all bandaged, and receiving healing from Pella. His body was battered, but he was concious and alive.

When he saw them, the only words he could manage to say were, "I'm sorry..."

His voice was weak, but filled with guilt.

He hadn't lost hope yet—but judging by the Brahm's reaction... help wasn't coming.

Ralph's parents rushed forward and embraced him tightly, relief breaking through their fear as they thanked God he was alive.

The others...

Broke down.

Both mothers cried out at once, a shrill, broken "No!" tearing from their throats as tears streamed down their faces.

In that moment, the truth ripped their hearts out.

Their sons were not coming back, and their worlds collapsed.

The fathers however were furious.

They stormed outside so as to not destroy the church.

Drada shouted in anger—his fist crashed into a nearby house, tearing through the wall as if it were nothing, splinters and debris scattering across the ground inside.

Talmir tried to contain his rage, but his mana betrayed him.

A single tear streaked down his face as wind erupted around him, howling with enough force to tear a well from the ground and rip through three nearby houses. Wood and stone were shredded apart as if caught in the heart of a storm.

Then Saldia ran out, radiating a sharp and cold aura.

"Talmir!"

He turned around and immediately, expected anger, expecting her to scold him for the destruction.

But that didn't happen.

"Where is Brahm?!" she demanded, her voice low and laced with fury. A chilling mist spread from her, the air around her grew heavy. "I'm going to rip his head off!"

He frowned, confused. "Why?"

She told him what Ralph had said. Every word.

She was understandably angry, but to Talmir, her words meant something entirely different.

"You... you mean they could still be alive?" he asked, his voice breaking slightly as hope returned—fragile, desperate, and painful.

That stopped Saldia in her tracks.

He was right.

As much as rage burned through her, something mattered more right now than ripping Brahm's head off.

Without another word, she stepped forward and pulled him into a tight embrace.

"I know I can't stop you..." she whispered, her voice trembling despite her earlier anger. "But can you promise me that both of you will come back safely?"

"I promise..." Talmir said.

Even if it was a lie, he would make it true somehow.

"Be careful..." she whispered, holding him tighter.

At that moment, Drada stepped closer, having overheard their conversation. His face was wet with tears, and his breathing was uneven.

He grabbed Talmir by the collar.

"Listen here, Talmir!" he choked out. "I have a mythrill sword mixed with cold iron and mythrill armor reinforced with black steel in my workshop... take them. Do whatever you can to bring back my boy too...I beg of you!"

He was shaking, barely holding himself together, as he also clung to the hope that Gillard was still alive.

Talmir couldn't bring himself to refuse so he just nodded.

And gave him his word.

Then he rushed off. He needed Kosak for his plan to work—and he needed that armor and sword.

—

Meanwhile, back in the town square, the guild staff began distributing spatial rings filled with top-tier gear—armor, swords, bombs.

This was war.

It would take no prisoners.

So they used everything at their disposal.

All warriors were ordered to hold the wall and form a line of defense. Meanwhile, under Brahm's command, a select few gathered at the center, preparing to dig a tunnel beneath the orc encirclement.

Ezekiel stood among them, leading the effort. He was one of the few capable of resisting counterattacks from earth-attributed orcs, which made his presence there essential.

If everything went well... Kolma's people might still escape.

—

Kosak stood at the gates, staring grimly at the orc army, mentally preparing himself for the battle ahead.

When Talmir suddenly descended beside him, clad in epic grade armor, and a matching sword at his side.

Kosak let out a short laugh.

"Haha... that's some blatant favoritism, isn't it?"

But the moment he saw Talmir's face, the humor died instantly.

"Oh no... what crazy thing are you planning now?"

"There's no time to explain," Talmir said firmly. "I need to rescue my son, he's outside...."

Kosak froze.

Outside? Where outside?

He pointed toward the orc army, with a nervous laugh escaping his lips. "Ha... haha... surely you don't mean there."

Talmir nodded.

Kosak slowly shook his head, disbelief written all over his face.

"And how the hell are we supposed to get past a horde of orcs?!"

"You'll figure something out," Talmir replied without hesitation. "If it comes to stealth, you're the best earth mage we have."

Kosak opened his mouth to argue, to protest, and to call him insane—but the look in Talmir's eyes stopped him.

That unshakable stubbornness.

He sighed.

There was no talking him out of this insane idea.

—

Meanwhile the evacuation had already begun.

People were moving in tight groups, guided toward the tunnel Ezekiel had carved beneath the town. The air was thick with fear, children clinging to their parents, voices hushed but trembling. No one needed to be told what would happen if they failed.

Above them, the battle had suddenly erupted.

A thunderous clash shook Kolma as the first line of defenders met the orc army head-on. Steel rang against crude iron, arrows streaked through the air like dark rain, and magic tore across the battlefield in violent bursts of light and sound.

The humans were already losing ground.

But as long as they were buying enough time, it was fine to lose.

Nearby, Pella and Gunvald fought like mad beasts.

Pella's magic surged through his body, strengthening him as he threw himself fully into the offensive. He cleaved through orcs left and right, driving them back with brutal force. While the priests behind him healed his wounds and formed shields around the hunters and guards just in time to stop crushing blows.

Their flank held, for now.

Gunvald held the other flank, lightning cracking violently around him. With a single gesture, bolts tore through the battlefield, frying rows of orcs before they could even reach the wall.

—

Amid the chaos, Kosak made sure to avoid the commander-class orcs and instead chose a weaker flank to breach through the horde.

The battlefield was too frantic, too chaotic, and that played right into their hands. With mana clashing everywhere and warriors dying on all sides, even a commander would struggle to notice them approaching.

"Now," he said.

Talmir didn't argue and followed after him.

Kosak slammed his foot into the ground. The earth split open beneath them, forming a narrow tunnel barely wide enough for them to squeeze through.

The tunnel was narrow by design—large enough for them to pass through, but small enough to stay hidden from the earth-bending orcs in the chaos above.

"Stay close," Kosak muttered.

They moved out quickly.

Above them, explosions tore across the battlefield, and the heavy march of orcs thundered over their heads. The tunnel barely held, dust and loose soil raining down with every violent tremor.

When the last heavy footsteps faded above them, they knew they had passed beneath the orc line.

Behind them, Kolma burned and roared with battle, steel and magic clashing together in a desperate symphony.

But right now, only one thing mattered.

Bringing the boys back.

So they made haste.

Branches whipped past them, roots threatened to catch their feet, but neither of them slowed down. There was no time to lose.

"Where did he say?" Kosak asked between breaths.

"Near the clearing past the river," Talmir replied as he ran. "Where the forest starts thinning."

Kosak submerged into the soil and sped up, while Talmir took flight.

They rushed forward as fast as they could. At first, the forest seemed normal, but after some time the signs began to appear.

Scorch marks scarred the earth, and the trees around them stood splintered and burned.

Deep gouges ran through the ground, as if a massive explosion had torn through the area without restraint.

Kosak slowed slightly, his eyes narrowing.

"...Yeah," he muttered. "We're on the right track, all right."

Talmir's pace quickened.

Burned patches scarred the ground. Trees had been sliced apart, pitfalls split the earth open, jagged spikes rose from the soil, and shattered boulders lay half-sunken in the damp mud. The forest had been utterly ruined.

Then, somewhere along the path, the air shifted.

A subtle mist began to spread between the trees.

Dark mist.

Talmir felt it immediately.

That mana...

It was familiar.

Something like this had happened before—back in Ragla village.

Hope surged through him, it was his son.

Teclos, he had to be alive!

Only...this...

It wasn't quite the same thing as Ragla...

This mana was furious.

Sinister.

Still, even when he knew that something was wrong Talmir pushed forward.

Nothing mattered more than finding his son.

Kosak, on the other hand, was different.

His expression hardened, unease and nervousness settling deep inside his chest.

"...what the hell is this?" he muttered quietly.

Kosak glanced around, stretching his senses outward.

"This feels like... death," he muttered. "Like undead mana... but somehow worse?"

The mist grew heavier with each step.

And finally after a while—

They reached it.

The epicenter of this sinister aura.

Teclos

He was kneeling in front of a tree, not moving an inch.

Around him, pitch-black mana swirled violently, thick and suffocating, almost beastlike in its intensity. It felt like pure rage, hatred, and sadness had been mixed together into something dark and viscous.

It almost obscured his entire figure.

The darkness twisted and pulsed like something alive, reacting to nothing—

And everything.

Talmir took a step forward—

But Kosak did not move.

His eyes widened slowly, horror settling over his face as he took in the scene before him.

Around Teclos...

Lay six orc corpses.

Or what remained of them.

Their limbs had been torn clean off. Jaws were ripped apart, eyes gouged out, and necks twisted at unnatural angles. Their bodies had been beaten so badly they were barely recognizable, while thick, dark blood soaked the ground beneath them.

These were not the marks of a desperate fight for survival.

This was slaughter.

Brutal and excessive Murder.

Kosak staggered back, his stomach twisting so violently that he barely managed to turn away in time.

Then he vomited.

Talmir averted his gaze, his jaw tightening as he forced himself not to look too closely.

Even if they were orcs...

This wasn't something normal.

Teclos was still kneeling there, surrounded by that dark, bloodthirsty mana.

He did not respond to their presence.

Did not react to Talmir's calls.

He was just... there.

And for the first time, Talmir hesitated.