

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 71 - 70 - Kolma Begins to Fall

Teclos' thoughts were no longer his own, spiraling in violent, chaotic waves that refused to settle, each one darker than the last. They twisted together—rage, grief, and crushing self-blame—until he could barely tell them apart, and every second stretched into an eternity.

He knelt there, unmoving, in front of Gillard's body.

In his left hand, hanging listlessly at his side, he held an empty potion flask between his fingers. The last few droplets he had not managed to feed Gillard fell one by one to the ground, reminding him how little it had mattered in the end.

In his right hand, he still held his sword. Its edge was worn and chipped now, painted blood-red from hilt to tip, still dripping onto the soil.

Even this miracle had not been enough to save his friend.

His entire right side was drenched in blood, soaked into his clothes and painted across his skin. He wore it like a second skin—a skin of orc blood—its metallic

scent hanging thick around him, proof of the frenzy that had consumed him after those pests took something precious away.

But still, he did not move.

He remained frozen, staring at Gillard's body as if burning the image into his mind was some form of punishment.

Then his thoughts dragged him back again, forcing him to relive it—not as it had happened, but as it should have gone.

If he had been faster. If he had reacted sooner. If he had been stronger.

He desperately tried to deny the reality in front of him.

But his thoughts would not stop. They tore through him, relentless and unforgiving, dragging him deeper with every passing second.

His grip on the sword tightened unconsciously, the metal creaking faintly under the pressure as fury flared inside him—at the world, at the orcs, and at himself.

Another drop fell from the flask.

Another from the blade.

Time passed, but the image in front of him stayed the same.

This was his fault.

There was no escaping it. No twisting it into something else. No lie he could tell himself to soften the truth.

He had been there. He had seen it happen.

And he had failed to protect him.

He had to accept that somehow.

But how was he supposed to accept something that had torn him apart?

As his grief and emotions kept building with no sign of slowing, the mana around him responded in kind. Dark mist spilled out from his body, spreading across the ground and blackening the soil and roots around him. Around his kneeling figure, a thick, viscous whirlpool of pitch-black mana swirled violently, and every now and then, streaks of dark purple lightning flickered within that furious mass.

Around him, both the air and the landscape began to change.

It spread outward like a disease.

Then, without warning, his sword slammed into the ground.

His body was so oversaturated with mana that the impact erupted outward in a violent burst, clearing the mist away from Gillard and the tree in an instant. A deep scar split the ground beneath the blade, the blood coating its edge dispersing immediately from the force.

Then the tip of the sword snapped off.

The sound cracked through the forest like a whip, leaving silence in its wake.

Then Teclos sensed a presence behind him.

His body reacted before his mind could, the broken sword snapping toward the figure's throat.

But at the last second, he realized who it was.

It wasn't an orc.

It was Talmir.

His father was approaching him slowly.

Each step he took was measured and cautious, like he was approaching a beast and not his son.

Talmir's focus was razor sharp, every part of him prepared for an attack. He almost jumped back the moment Teclos twitched, but somehow, his son still seemed to recognize him.

Even so, the closer Talmir came, the more oppressive the air became. Fury, grief, and sadness saturated the mana around Teclos, pressing against his skin and making his instincts scream despite himself.

"Teclos..." he called out, keeping his voice as calm as he could.

But there was no response.

Not even a twitch.

Talmir narrowed his eyes slightly, preparing himself for anything as he continued to walk forward slowly.

"Hey..." he tried again, softer this time. "You're okay... just be calm, alright? Everything is going to be all right."

The words felt strange coming out of his mouth. Like he was speaking to a rabid animal that might snap at any moment.

Teclos still didn't react.

Which was both good and bad.

Talmir stepped within arm's reach, wind mana tightening instinctively around his body, ready to subdue Teclos in an instant if things turned violent.

Then, slowly, carefully, he reached out and placed a hand on his son's shoulder.

When Teclos still did not move, not even by a millimeter, concern began to overtake caution.

Without hesitation, Talmir grabbed him and turned him slightly, just enough to see his face—

And what he saw made his blood run cold.

For the briefest moment, even Talmir—a seasoned and hardened veteran—felt fear.

Teclos's face...

Was twisted into something filled with a malice so intense it bordered on monstrous, something inhuman. And yet, at the same time, his eyes...

They were empty.

Hollow.

Pitch-black tears streaked down his face, staining his skin as they fell. There was no light in them, no focus.

Only a deep, unending void.

And they weren't looking at him.

They were fixed on something else.

Following that gaze, Talmir saw him.

Gillard.

His lifeless body lay there.

Broken and bloodied.

A grimace tightened across Talmir's face as the realization of everything settled into his mind. It explained everything—the massacre, the mana, and the state Teclos was in.

He felt sorry for Drada, but there was nothing more he could do now.

He threw a marker onto the ground, one with a few shining runes carved into it, then turned to Teclos.

"Snap out of it, son," he said firmly, his voice cutting through the stillness. "We have to get back. The town is under attack."

But there was no response.

Talmir's jaw clenched slightly, but he continued.

"Ralph sent us here, hoping we could find you two..." he said, more quietly now. "I'm glad you're alive, son." His gaze flicked briefly toward Gillard before returning to Teclos. "We'll give him a proper burial, I'll make sure of it. But we have to move."

Teclos remained exactly as he was.

Talmir exhaled slowly and tried again.

"Orcs—"

He didn't even finish the sentence before Teclos reacted instantly.

His head snapped toward Talmir with an unnaturally quick motion. It was sharp and jarring, as if only that part of him had come back to life. His body remained perfectly still.

His eyes locked onto Talmir.

For the first time, there was something else besides the void inside them.

"Where are they..."

The words came quietly, distorted by the mana oversaturating his body.

Teclos slowly rose to his feet, his gaze drifting back to Gillard for one brief moment before he turned and began walking toward the village.

Talmir's expression hardened instantly.

He understood the sinister intent behind Teclos's sudden cooperation.

This was not him agreeing to return peacefully.

This was someone walking toward death on purpose.

"Kosak!"

Kosak understood instantly.

Without hesitation, stone plates surged up from the ground, wrapping tightly around Teclos's body and locking him in place before he could take another step.

At the same time, Talmir appeared behind him in a blur and struck the back of his neck.

Teclos went limp instantly.

Unconscious.

After a second, Kosak turned to Talmir, outraged.

"What the hell was that, Talmir?!" Kosak demanded, his voice sharp as he approached. "Since when is your kid that strong? And that mana... what the hell was that?"

Talmir shook his head slightly, still watching Teclos carefully.

"Beats me," he muttered. "I don't know what happened during this past year... he hid it well." His gaze darkened briefly before he forced himself to refocus. "But that doesn't matter right now. We need to get back to the village."

Kosak grimaced, then tilted his head toward the body lying nearby.

"What about the kid?"

Talmir hesitated for a second.

Then he exhaled slowly, his expression hardening.

"Leave him," he said quietly. "We'll come back for him after this is over. I marked this place."

Kosak didn't argue.

Talmir hoisted Teclos over his shoulder without another word, adjusting his grip as he turned toward the direction of Kolma.

They ran back toward the village.

—

The situation at the village was dire.

Orcs had begun scaling the walls in multiple places, their massive hands gripping the edges as they hauled themselves upward with brute strength. Some were cut down before they could crest the top—arrows piercing their throats, spears driving through their chests—but for every one that fell, two more took their place.

The defenders were holding.

Barely.

Along the northern flank, a group of hunters stood shoulder to shoulder, shields and weapons raised, breathing hard as they held back wave after wave.

Steel met flesh in a brutal rhythm. Blades carved into green skin, axes chopped into bone, and the sickening crack of breaking limbs joined the screams and chaos of the clash.

One hunter propelled his spear with fire and drove it through an orc's jaw, the tip punching out the back of its skull. But before he could reset, another orc grabbed him by the arm.

The creature yanked him forward and tore his throat open with a savage bite, spraying blood across the wooden planks.

He dropped dead.

Nearby, a veteran swung his sword in a wide arc, the blade catching an orc across the neck and taking its head clean off.

With a roar, he searched for another target and moved immediately, splitting another orc's skull open in one fluid motion.

But before the body even hit the ground, another orc slammed into him from the side, tackling him off the wall.

Both of them crashed down below with a dull, final thud.

And then there was the magic surging across the battlefield, making the chaos even worse.

A hunter slammed his foot down, mana flaring bright beneath him—and the earth answered. A pit opened beneath a cluster of advancing orcs, swallowing them whole as they plunged into darkness. But before he could celebrate, a wind slash tore through the air and severed his body in two.

Another hunter raised both hands, veins bulging as he roared, and a massive tornado erupted from his palms, hurling every orc on his flank down from the wall.

But in the next second, a fireball exploded against his face and melted his head clean off.

Further out in front of the wall, a crude stone golem lumbered forward, its form uneven but massive. It swung one heavy arm, smashing the orcs in front of it into paste, but it was being bombarded by all kinds of spells.

Little by little, the golem began to crumble.

And the human inside slowly turned to ash.

The humans were killing them.

That was the cruelest part.

Orcs fell from the walls. Bodies tumbled into the mud below, split open by blades, arrows, and magic. Fire consumed them. Lightning tore through them. Spears punched through throats and skulls. Every section of Kolma's defense fought with everything it had, and for every heartbeat, another orc died.

But the humans were dying faster.

One by one, gaps opened in the line. A hunter fell, and no one was there to replace him. A guard screamed as he was dragged over the wall. A priest raised a shield, only for a boulder to crush him beneath it. The defenders would not hold for long as the orc horde pressed forward, their numbers swallowing and overwhelming them.

Each flank began to buckle.

Even Father Pella's side.

Green life mana roared around him as he split orcs apart with brutal swings left and right, his wounds closing almost as quickly as they opened. And for a while, he looked unstoppable.

But then Kui'ri appeared above the battlefield, her massive bow drawn, wind spiraling around an arrow larger than a man, ready to be released.

Beside her, Gor'kes descended in a flash of lightning, black armor crackling with power.

Pella looked up, his expression darkening.

"How can a race that prides itself on battles gang up on a frail old man?" he said to them.

But the two attacked him without another word.

Two commander-class orcs had come for him.

Chapter 72 - 71 - A Loosing Battle

The ground shook from the explosions erupting all around them, and several sections of the wall had already collapsed beneath the onslaught.

The townsfolk whimpered with every tremor that rolled through the square.

Some argued with the few escorts trying to lead them to safety, dragging heavy luggage behind them and slowing the entire evacuation down.

"Drop that chest!" Tom shouted at a middle-aged man and woman struggling with a large trunk. "You don't need that to survive, goddammit!"

"This is our livelihood! You don't get to decide what we need or don't!" the man snapped back.

"Then die here, you stubborn idiot!"

The man stared at him in shock, as if he could not believe what Tom had just said.

"What?! How can you say that?!"

Tom's expression did not change.

"You have two options," he said, his voice and eyes stone cold. "Either I knock you out right here, leave you behind, and you die... or you drop the luggage and go down the tunnel."

The man shuddered.

For a moment, he looked like he might argue again, but then the fight drained out of him. Reluctantly, he let go of the chest.

There were many more cases like that, and Tom and the three other escorts had to deal with each one by themselves.

It was a monumental task.

Holding back human greed.

In the end, once almost everyone had entered the tunnel, Ezekiel gave the signal for all ten escorts to move. Each of them had an earth affinity, and their task was clear—widen the tunnel where needed and reinforce it against attacks.

"What about the hunters and guards, sir?" Tom asked.

"They'll come after us and seal the entrance once I give the signal that we're far enough away," Ezekiel said. "Hopefully, some of them make it."

Tom's expression darkened, but he only nodded.

'Most? Hah... what a nice joke. They would be lucky to see even one of them come back.'

Axel thought that while leisurely watching Kolma burn from a rooftop, as if none of it had anything to do with him.

They moved through the tunnel.

As the civilians passed beneath Kolma, the tunnel shuddered around them. Tiny clouds of dust drifted from the ceiling, and small rocks loosened, falling onto the frightened crowd below.

The people were scared, but for now, the situation remained under control. All ten escorts and Ezekiel kept the tunnel stable, reinforcing it with earth mana as they moved.

It went well for a while.

Then Ezekiel suddenly tensed.

"All escorts to the left side of the tunnel!" he ordered. "Brace the wall as much as you can!"

They moved immediately.

A second later, a thunderous boom resounded from the left side of the tunnel.

The wall cracked.

A spiderweb of fractures spread across nearly a hundred meters of stone and packed earth, dust bursting into the air as the civilians screamed.

Ezekiel and the escorts reacted at once, pouring mana into the damage and mending it before the tunnel could collapse.

"Two of you escort the people away. We'll hold them off. Go! Now!" Ezekiel commanded.

Ezekiel reinforced the wall with his mana the next second, but the orc broke through like a torpedo.

Debris shot everywhere, forcing Ezekiel and the escorts to raise their defenses at once.

When the dust settled slightly, a sinister-looking orc revealed himself. He had a thick, bushy black beard and long, tangled black hair, while his eyes carried a crazed, almost gleeful look. With the amount of mana pouring from his body, there was no doubt he was one of the orc army's commanders.

"Whaa'giii, huh huh... Sharakka!"

It screamed happily, almost dancing in place, laughing through jagged teeth as it pointed its spear at Ezekiel.

There was no mistaking it.

It was a challenge.

"Be prepared to die here..." Ezekiel said, his expression grim as more orcs poured through the wall and he looked at the crazed orc.

The others steeled themselves for the inevitable—but they would take out as many orcs as they could before that happened.

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Up above ground, Pella struck down with all his might, but the orc in front of him blocked it easily with his greatsword. Lightning crackled from its other hand and struck Pella's abdomen.

He was blown away, electrocuted so violently that his life mana struggled to heal the damage.

He crashed into Kolma's wall with a thunderous boom, turning a few orcs climbing it into mush. As he picked himself up, he barely dodged an arrow that pierced through the wall with a quick sidestep, coughing up blood.

"Cough... damn, they aren't giving me time to recover..."

On the other side of the wall, a massive explosion erupted. It burned half the wall, humans and orcs roasted alike.

Gunvald fought off the fire commander—they were almost evenly matched. Still, the orc was stronger, and it used the humans' need to protect the town to its advantage.

"Noo! You damn bastard!" Gunvald screamed as he saw the hunters being roasted alive.

"Wah hah hah wah! Puny human! No match for U'rtak, Chief of Fire Munchers!"

It reveled in Gunvald's misery, smiling, and like a true pyromaniac, it launched a continuous stream of flame, targeting the top of the wall.

Gunvald tried to shield the wall from the flames with a lightning net, and he managed to block most of it.

Sadly, some of it still slipped through, melting the skin off the hunters and orcs standing in its path.

Gunvald had no choice but to attack the orc directly in a strength-versus-strength clash... to maybe divert his attention.

Like a crack of lightning, he almost teleported in front of the orc's face. Drawing his sword, he tried to slash across the orc's eyes, but the strike was met with one of its battle axes.

Stopping his surprise attack with one hand, the orc gathered heat into the other axe until it glowed bright red and began to burn. U'rtak countered toward Gunvald with all his might.

Gunvald's quick reactions saved him as he repositioned instantly, turning into lightning once more.

He appeared behind U'rtak and slashed downward in a horizontal strike.

But the orc only laughed and released a massive jet of flames from its back, propelling itself forward and escaping Gunvald's slash while simultaneously burning him.

The explosion of their mana rang out through the air, and Gunvald was thrown back in a cloud of black smoke. He protected himself at the last second from the worst of it, but still got burned pretty badly.

U'rtak, meanwhile, spun around and hurled one of his axes straight at the puny human's head, propelling it forward with blazing mana.

Barely having any time to react, Gunvald managed to dodge at the last second. The surrounding mana burned him further, but at least he avoided the certain death blow.

Blisters covered his hands and face, pus oozing from them.

Talmir and Kosak finally arrived at the carnage, carrying an unconscious Teclos. They stood at the edge of the forest, still obscured by the trees.

"Dammit! The town is falling apart!" Kosak said.

"We can't do anything about it now. We have to reach that tunnel and get out of here..."

"Why can't we just run from here?"

"And leave the fate of our family to chance? Saldia is in that tunnel... Marie and Alissa are in that tunnel too."

Kosak couldn't argue with that.

"So, where do we get in?"

"Find a flank that's already been breached," Talmir said. "And one without those commanders nearby."

Kosak nodded, and the two rushed off in a wide arc around Kolma.

It did not take them long to spot a breach in the wall.

They moved toward it quickly.

"Let's punch through them!"

The orc backline had not noticed them yet, so Kosak planted his feet and anchored himself to the ground with a wide stance. He stretched both hands out in front of

him, palms pressed together, then slowly began to pull them apart. Strain showed clearly on his face as sweat dripped down his brow.

In front of them, right beneath the orc backline, the earth split apart.

The entire battalion dropped ten meters into the ground, where jagged spikes waited below.

Several orcs died instantly, their skulls and hearts impaled as blood and brain matter spilled across the stone. Others were luckier—or skilled enough—to survive the fall with only minor injuries.

Only for Kosak to bring his hands back together.

The earth closed.

And the orcs were buried beneath the soil.

Meanwhile, Talmir leapt into the air with Teclos slung over his shoulders. Drawing his sword, he slashed in a wide arc, sending a thin, razor-sharp line of wind cutting through the rows of orcs breaching the walls.

The sudden counterattack halted the orcs momentarily and gave the defenders enough room to push back.

Without stopping, the two of them moved forward toward the wall, cutting down orcs along the way—Talmir slicing them apart, while Kosak crushed them into paste with earth magic.

As the orcs were suddenly surprised and pinned from behind by two capable fighters, their morale shattered, making them panic and divide their focus.

One of the cornerstones of that flank didn't miss the opportunity. Sera went on the offensive, breathing fire like a hellish incarnation. Propelling herself forward, she cut and burned down many orcs, giving Kosak and Talmir the chance to connect with them.

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While all this was happening, Axel was watching from afar, atop a tree. He had almost escaped already when he noticed Teclos.

"Hah! The kid is still alive?..."

He couldn't care less about this town, but strangely, he found himself considering taking Teclos away to Lupos. A gem like that would be a waste to leave here to die.

Merging with the tree below, he slipped back toward the town through the grass.

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"Talmir! Where have you been?!" Sera shouted as she cut off an orc's head.

Talmir split another orc straight down the middle before answering. His reply was simple. He nodded toward Teclos.

"I'm going into the tunnel! I'll come back! Until then, Kosak will help you hold this side!"

Kosak just shook his head, but he did as Talmir asked, while Talmir blitzed through the lines of both orcs and humans, rushing toward the tunnel.

Sera was speechless.

With Kosak there, they could hold the line against the orcs for some time now, as the push on that flank had been halted.

As Talmir neared the tunnel, a hunter was thrown out of it and slammed into the wall of a house, cracking and destroying part of it.

An orc with a massive cleaver rushed toward that hunter, but was suddenly sliced in half by Talmir.

"Toby! What the hell happened? Where are the people?" Talmir panicked when he saw an orc run out of the tunnel.

Toby coughed up blood and grabbed a flask from his belt, drinking it. "They are safe, but Elder Ezekiel is losing ground against that psycho orc—"

Talmir didn't know what was going on, but he felt somewhat relieved that the people seemed to be safe... the only problem now was how he would reconnect Teclos with Saldia.

He gave another potion to Toby and picked him up. "Can you continue to fight?"

"Yeah... I have a broken arm, though, so I won't be that useful..." he said. The potion couldn't mend broken bones, as it wasn't potent enough.

"Just get me to the townsfolk. I'll leave Teclos there with Saldia and then join up with the rest, covering our escape."

"Sounds good to me... first we have to help Ezekiel, though, otherwise no one escapes that crazy orc."

They rushed into the tunnel and already saw bodies of orcs and hunters lying around, all ground up and bloody.

Toby created a separate passageway so they could arrive at the scene more quickly.

But when they did, the situation looked almost hopeless.

Ezekiel seemed to have protected the hunters somewhat, but he paid a heavy price, with his left arm torn off at the shoulder.

The rest of the escorts were also looking anything but fine—bloody and barely alive. They still held the orcs back somewhat, but they were clearly on a timer.

Talmir and Toby joined the fight to even the odds.

And sure enough, just as an escort would have lost his head to a crushing hammer blow, wind suddenly pushed him away.

The orc froze.

A strange line appeared across his vision.

Then his sight split in two.

For one brief, confusing moment, the upper half of what he saw began to slide away from the lower half.

The orc had not realized it yet.

But his head had been cut cleanly in two.

Toby protected his fellow escorts who were just about to die by encasing them in hard spherical shells, which would shoot out spikes if the orcs got too close.

The crazy orc turned its head toward Talmir as he was slicing through his soldiers. Another delicious meal appeared on the battlefield.

But the puny human in front of him would have to be first, as an earth spike flew toward him. Ba'hraka shattered the earth spike with one hand and hurled his spear right at Ezekiel.

"Khorru'l! Chwi an kasha!"

Ezekiel's eyes widened, and he barely dodged the spear by a hair's breadth. It crashed into the tunnel wall and embedded itself deeply. Spiderweb-like cracks spread across the surface, and a loud boom resounded.

Then, in that instant while Ezekiel was recovering, the orc practically appeared out of thin air in front of him and drove its hand through his chest.

Ezekiel coughed up blood, eyes wide, not expecting such a sudden shift in speed.

'This bastard was toying with me!?'

Ba'hraka smiled and tried to pull his heart out—but Ezekiel, with the last effort he could muster, slashed into the orc's arm, almost severing it.

The orc barely saved it by encasing it in hard, gem-like skin.

"Waaaahhh! Kasha!"

The orc screamed in pain.

Talmir launched wind blades toward him, trying to finish him while he had the chance Ezekiel created—but the attack was blocked when a rock wall suddenly rose from the ground.

In the next second, a furious Ba'hraka bit off Ezekiel's head.

"Shit, it got Ezekiel!" Tom screamed from behind.

The situation had just turned hopeless.

Chapter 73 - 72 -Ashes on the Wall

With Ezekiel dead and them being outnumbered, it was already bad enough—but to top it all off, they still had that commander to deal with.

Talmir had an especially hard time now. He had to protect Teclos on his back while dodging the lightly injured Ba'hraka, who wore a wide grin on his face, as if he had just eaten a delicacy and was about to enjoy another.

Talmir had to move constantly, dodging left and right. Spikes formed where he would have landed had he not altered his course just at the right time. The spear whizzed past his head as the orc closed in on him, spikes flew toward him, pitfalls formed all around him.

It was a mental battle—staying ahead of the orc's tricks and traps. And of course, he had to do it cleanly, because his son was literally strapped to him, and he couldn't afford even the smallest mistake.

Meanwhile, Toby blocked most of the attacks aimed at his comrades. Some of them were so badly injured that it was a miracle they were still alive, yet they still fought back—even in that condition.

He picked up a mace and rushed toward one of his friends, just in time to block a downward slash from an orc. His broken arm screamed in pain, dangling almost

lifelessly at his side. Every movement, every block—hell, even the use of mana—sent waves of agony through his body.

Dodging a diagonal slash by ducking, he pivoted his body and extended his arm with the mace.

The strike connected with the orc's knee and shattered it. As the orc screamed in pain, Toby followed through with an upward motion.

The mace crushed the orc's lower jaw and shattered its skull. Teeth flew out of its mouth, and blood splattered everywhere, the orc just collapsed.

The rest of the escorts who were only lightly injured fought valiantly as well—but unlike Toby, who had taken a potion, they were running on reserves and exhaustion.

One hunter slashed upward with his blade, meeting an orc's axe head-on. His blade splintered, and the axe buried itself into his shoulder. The orc grabbed him by the head and slammed him into the rocks, breaking his skull and killing him instantly.

Another hunter launched earth spikes at three orcs charging him. They simply raised a rock wall in front of them, blocking the attack, and continued forward. Panic overtook him, and he raised a defensive wall around himself, cutting off his

vision and isolating himself. It did him no good—within seconds, the orcs broke through and hacked him to pieces. He died screaming in fear.

It was looking grim, and the situation was worsening by the second.

Talmir tried to support the others by sending slashes toward the attacking orcs, but he was constantly interrupted by the commander behind him.

He sent out one wind blade, helping Toby by decapitating an orc from behind—but the next second he had to duck as a spear sliced past his head, striking the wall and splintering the rock, it sent dust and debris flying everywhere.

He blocked the debris with a sphere of wind wrapped around himself and then rushed forward along the wall, just as another slab of rock slammed down where he had been a moment earlier.

'Goddammit, that bastard is persistent!'

Ba'hraka stayed close on his heels. The only saving grace for now was that Talmir was just slightly faster.

But Ba'hraka was slowly growing annoyed.

His prey refused to fight back.

It only ran.

And sure enough, he suddenly stopped.

His expression twisted with fury as he slowly stretched both arms outward. Then, after a second, he brought them down together.

With that motion—

The entire tunnel began to collapse.

Stone and packed earth groaned above them, cracks spreading violently through the walls as the ceiling started to give way.

Ba'hraka knew Talmir would have nowhere to run once he was buried.

And after that...

He could hunt down the rest of the weaklings at his leisure.

Talmir noticed what he was doing and was forced to make a decision.

Either run toward the survivors and try to outrun the collapsing tunnel—

Or make a stand here.

Just as he turned to call out to Toby—

A figure appeared behind Ba'hraka.

Axel.

He thrust his knife toward the orc's skull, certain he had him.

But Ba'hraka leaned forward at the last second.

The blade missed its mark and sank into his shoulder instead, the assassination attempt barely failing.

Axel clicked his tongue.

"Tch... well, shit."

"Oooooaarrghh!"

Cold sweat broke across Ba'hraka's forehead.

With a furious roar, the orc swung his spear around with terrifying speed, fast enough that even Axel was forced to defend.

A tiny knife met a massive spear.

And as expected—

The knife lost.

But Axel was not sent flying. He only skidded back a few meters, boots carving shallow lines through the dirt before he came to a stop.

Axel's lip curled as he looked at the orc.

"I guess you don't like being stabbed, orc?"

He said the word orc with such disgust that Ba'hraka understood the intent, even without knowing the language.

But instead of reacting with blind rage, the orc held back and properly took a stance—spear raised above his head, one leg bent back, the other stretched forward.

It came as a surprise to Axel.

"Hoh! And here I thought you were just a dumb beast, haha!"

Though Axel looked relaxed, a frontal fight wasn't his forte unless the opponent was weaker. He wouldn't die here—but depending on how things went, he might have to abandon the kid.

Ba'hraka, however, felt something entirely different.

The murderous aura radiating from that human... it reminded him of a massive predator of the desert—a two-hundred-meter-long king snake, coiled and waiting to strike.

And for the first time—

He hesitated to make a move.

Seeing that, Talmir immediately unstrapped Teclos from his back and rushed toward Toby.

"I'll hold them and protect everyone here as best as I can. Bring my son to the people... to Saldia, please."

He spoke with a serious expression—almost begging, though his voice remained firm. Toby, however, shook his head.

"It won't be me that brings him back. There are plenty more injured people here who can't fight anymore, but carrying a boy to safety won't be a problem. I'm needed here."

Talmir was initially shocked at the refusal, but after hearing the reasoning, he nodded. There was no time to argue... but first, they had to save the few hunters that were still alive.

"Alright. You defend them—I'll attack the orcs."

This time Toby nodded, and they rushed into action, trusting that Axel would keep the commander occupied.

—

Outside, Pella and Gunvald were in a miserable state. They were being battered by bad matchups on all sides.

Gunvald had lost almost every man on his flank.

U'rtak had burned everything—hunters, walls, even his own soldiers. Charred bodies lay fused into the stone, blackened and twisted beyond recognition. The air stank of cooked flesh and smoke, and now that nothing living remained around him, the orc moved freely through the ruin he had made, his mind drowned in rage and madness.

Gunvald stared at the remains of his comrades.

Something inside him snapped.

Fury swallowed reason.

With a roar, he charged at U'rtak, abandoning defense completely.

—

Meanwhile, Pella was being battered by both commanders.

Even with his massive reserves, if the battle continued at this pace, he would lose.

The female orc kept him at bay with terrifying precision, each arrow forcing him into worse and worse positions. The male orc, Gor'kes, was an awful matchup for his healing abilities—fast, relentless, scorching him with lightning and striking with the force of a battering ram.

More than once, Pella had no choice but to take the hit.

While his flank looked vastly better, with hunters and priests holding back the horde, he himself was far more exhausted than Gunvald—and if he fell, the rest would follow shortly.

'Oh, Aurelion, mighty sun god... show me the way to protect my people from these wretched heathens.'

The prayer did little, but it steadied his heart at least.

He swung his battle axe again, meeting Gor'kes head-on.

The impact erupted in a violent burst of mana, sparks scattering as a deafening shockwave tore across the wall.

Both humans and orcs were thrown from the battlements, their bodies tumbling into the chaos below.

Not even a second later—

An arrow screamed toward Pella's skull.

But he couldn't step back.

Gor'kes was already mid-swing, his greatsword descending with crushing force. Retreat meant death.

So Pella didn't retreat.

No.

Like a madman—and a veteran of countless battlefields—he stepped forward instead.

Mana surged into his forehead as he drove his head straight into Gor'kes's face.

"Wraaahg?!"

The crack was sickening.

Bone shattered under the impact.

Gor'kes's nose caved in, cartilage crunching as blood burst outward and sprayed across Pella's face. The orc recoiled, his vision blurring as blood flooded his eyes.

Even Kui'ri flinched at the hit from above.

But she fired anyway.

The arrow sliced between them, forcing Pella to abandon any follow-up.

"Tch... ganging up on an old man isn't very nice. Where are your MANNERS!"

With a grunt, he hurled his battle axe with full force.

If he couldn't advance—his weapon would.

Mana flared violently around the spinning axe as it tore through the air. Gor'kes barely managed to raise his greatsword in time.

The impact detonated.

A violent mana storm erupted as steel met steel. And Gor'kes was flung backward, his boots tearing into the soil, while Pella's axe was deflected and buried itself deep into the ground.

Pella moved to retrieve it—

—but another arrow slammed down in front of him, stopping him cold.

"Holy shi—... I shouldn't swear, khm!"

He glanced up at Kui'ri, narrowing his eyes.

'Maybe it's time I switch targets.'

If not for the lives hanging in the balance, the old man might have even enjoyed fighting such strong opponents.

—

Back on Gunvald's side of the battlefield, everything had been reduced to ash.

The wall was scorched black. The air shimmered with heat. The ground below was littered with half-burned corpses—some still twitching, others fused into molten shapes.

Gunvald pressed the orc relentlessly.

His sword moved in unpredictable, chaotic patterns, forcing the fight into a stalemate. But getting close to U'rtak was nearly impossible.

You would think fire had the weakest defense.

Not here.

Not with that monster.

U'rtak blocked with his axes when needed, but more often he simply unleashed waves of searing heat the moment Gunvald approached. The air itself burned, skin blistering before contact was even made.

It didn't matter how Gunvald attacked.

He burned.

Again.

And again.

And again.

It was like trying to strike the sun itself.

His skin was literally melting from his muscles. Flesh peeled away in strips, revealing raw, blackened tissue beneath.

One eye had already been destroyed, melted into uselessness.

And still—

That thing just laughed.

After it burned everything. Even Its own soldiers.

It was a monster.

And Gunvald refused to accept letting it live.

Lightning cracked violently around his fingers, arcs snapping and dancing as he condensed them into a dense sphere. He compressed it further and further until the air screamed under the pressure.

This time U'rtak frowned.

The power radiating from that sphere was immense.

The orc extended one arm. At the tip of his battle axe, a sphere of flames formed—small, but violently concentrated.

Gunvald scoffed internally.

That wouldn't stop his judgment lightning.

Thinking the orc had made a mistake, he released his attack.

A continuous beam of lightning erupted from him, tearing through the battlefield.

It reached U'rtak in an instant.

Before it hit him though, the orc released his flame sphere—

—and it was obliterated immediately.

But U’rtak suddenly vanished.

Gunvald’s remaining eye widened as his instincts flared at the danger.

He reacted too late.

The orc reappeared directly beneath him, so close there was no room to dodge, no space to reposition, and no time to raise a proper defense.

A heartbeat later, a massive firestorm erupted upward.

"AARRRGHHH!"

Gunvald screamed as the flames consumed him. His flesh burned, split, and blackened instantly, the heat searing deep into his bones.

With a desperate burst of lightning mana, Gunvald barely escaped, launching himself away from the firestorm and crashing into the wall with brutal force.

When the flames finally cleared, he was barely recognizable.

His body was charred black, smoke curling from his burned skin, and from the knees down, there was nothing left.

His legs had been burned away completely.

Chapter 74 - 73 -The Signal to Retreat

Teclos woke up.

He was leaning against some sort of wall—it was jagged, rough, and deeply unpleasant against his back.

It felt wrong.

He couldn't quite recall what had happened or why he wasn't in his own bed.

The moment he tried to move, however, a massive wave of pain tore through him. Every vein, every muscle, even his skin and bones felt as if they were being ripped apart from the inside.

The pain forced his eyes open, but even that hurt.

They burned—literally burned—and his vision returned in a blurred, unfocused haze.

Somewhere nearby, he heard loud noises... like fighting.

'What? Where am I?'

He tried to feel his surroundings with his darkness—but there was nothing.

Nothing at all.

He didn't even have a speck of mana left. Whatever remained—whatever had replenished—was being used to mend his body, draining away at an alarming rate.

'Wait a second...?'

Then, suddenly, pain split through his skull, sharp enough to steal the breath from his lungs, and the memories came rushing back all at once.

The orc chief.

The cockatrice hunt.

The frantic run through the forest.

Ralph's desperate escape.

And then—

Gillard.

His mind froze, refusing to move past it.

Gillard.

A harrowing memory surged forward—the sickening crunch of ribs collapsing under an axe, the grotesque smile of that damn bastard...

And worst of all—

Gillard dying right in front of him.

Tears began to stream down his face.

'No... no, no, this can't be...'

He tried to deny it again, but his mind wouldn't let him. The image replayed relentlessly—as he uncorked the potion and tried to make Gillard's lifeless body drink it.

'Argh!?! Why am I in so much pain?!' he thought as he tried to move.

He slowly, painfully forced his eyes open again and looked down.

Black veins bulged beneath his skin.

Aside from that... he looked just fine.

Which made no sense.

Why did it hurt so much?

He stopped for a moment, rewinding that thought.

'Wait... what?!'

Indeed, his entire body was covered in visible veins, each one tinted pitch-black. He could not move his mana at all, and every vein felt as if someone had sliced into him and was slowly carving them out from the inside.

He wanted to scream.

But no sound came out.

His mind worked—but his body refused him completely.

He lifted his gaze again, his vision slowly returning.

And the first thing he saw was bodies and blood.

Broken forms were scattered across the ground—human and orc alike.

Some of the humans were still fighting.

But they were hopelessly outnumbered.

He saw his father.

Talmir was holding the horde back almost alone, cutting through orcs in brutal arcs, each strike tearing bodies apart. Toby was the only real support nearby, along with Zarik and Tom—but the rest were barely standing, bloodied and broken.

Teclos turned his head slightly.

And saw an orc clad in the same despicable black armor as that bastard.

And Axel.

Axel was moving like a shadow, carving into the orc again and again. Small cuts, mostly—but they were no doubt sapping the orc's strength away. He had the upper hand.

Seeing that... Teclos almost felt relief.

It filled him with a strange sense of satisfaction—watching the orcs fall, ripped apart by his father’s blade.

If only...

If only he had stayed home today.

Everything would have been fine.

Gillard would still be alive.

...What was he going to tell Ralph?

What was he going to tell Gillard’s parents?

These thoughts hollowed him out.

His emotions drained away, replaced by a vast, suffocating emptiness.

At least the orcs would pay.

Now that his father and his master were cutting them down—

They would all pay.

—

Outside.

Kosak decapitated one of the last orcs on that flank, blood spraying in a wide arc as the body collapsed at his feet.

He turned toward Sera, already about to suggest they reinforce another section of the line—

When he sensed something through the ground.

A heavy impact shuddered through the wall, followed by the unmistakable weight of a body tumbling down against it.

It was Gunvald.

Kosak's expression darkened instantly.

Only one thought cut through his mind.

'Shit.'

In that instant, everything changed.

He could still feel that the guild master was alive—but with those injuries, not for long.

So he made a decision.

He would send the signal for retreat instead of the elder, and for that, he needed to go to the town square where the tunnel was.

"Where are you going?!" Sera called out.

"It's bad... we need to run, right now. I'll give the signal instead of Ezekiel—I don't know what that geezer is waiting for, goddammit!"

"What?! You can't decide that on your own! Are you mad?!"

"Sera, listen to me!" He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "The guild master is about to die, and one of those monsters is going to be set free—you know, the one burning everything to a crisp? Yeah. We have to evacuate into the tunnel now!"

Kosak's voice carried urgency—desperation.

They were the highest-ranking hunters left on this flank.

"What?! No way... that geezer wouldn't die just like that."

He tightened his grip.

"It's true! I can feel it through the ground. Move your ass and gather as many survivors as you can!"

"What about Ezekiel? He'll send the signal when they're safe—you can't just make that call!"

"We're all going to die here if we don't fall back now!"

Sera hesitated.

Kosak was not usually the serious type.

But now?

Now his face was grim.

And if Gunvald had fallen...

Her mind made the connection before she could stop it.

"What if he's dead?"

Kosak's jaw tightened.

"He's not dead yet," he said grimly. "But he will be soon. We have to get out of here."

"No... Ezekiel... What if Ezekiel is dead?"

Kosak froze.

"What? No... they haven't breached the tunnel—"

"There are orcs that control earth," she cut in. "And if a monster like that flaming bastard has alliesthe same as him..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

She didn't have to.

Cold sweat ran down the backs of the remaining hunters.

Their families were down there.

In that tunnel.

"You give the signal," Sera said at last, her voice serious. "We'll go with your plan."

Kosak nodded once and sank into the ground, moving rapidly through the earth toward the guild hall, where the signal flare was stored.

Moments later, he reached it.

And as he approached—

His fear was confirmed.

He sensed a body layin in the tunnel.

An orc.

"Oh, come on..."

He grabbed the flare, infused it with mana, and hurled it into the air.

A loud boom echoed across the battlefield.

The signal for retreat.

—

When the signal exploded, the hunters all around the walls rejoiced somewhat. Finally, they too would try to escape this hell—the only problem now was making it out alive.

Brahm, Darnel, and Ulmak started organizing a systematic retreat on their flank, and they managed to hold fairly well. They had only lost a little less than half their men and women there, so there was still plenty of manpower left for the retreat.

Ulmak set up a firewall and pushed it toward the orcs.

"Haha! Finally, we can get out of here... I was starting to worry Ezekiel had abandoned us."

"Shut your trap, kid, and fall back. I'm not in the mood," Brahm snapped.

"Haha! Why not, you old geezer?! Half my comrades died, you lost an arm, our homes are being destroyed, and that bastard only gave the signal for retreat now, when it's almost impossible to pull off with his shitty plan... why wouldn't I be happy and joking around?"

Tears streaked down Ulmak's face as he looked at a particular spot where many of his friends had fallen.

Just then, Darnel crashed down beside them, two drowned orcs in his hands. He looked up, saw the tears on Ulmak's face, and scoffed.

"We all lost someone to these pests. For now, focus on getting out of here alive. Get your revenge later, when the kingdom starts conscripting people."

Although he said that, there was a subtle fury beneath his tone.

Ulmak, Darnel, and Brahm held the front while the first group of hunters fell back behind them. Once those hunters reached a safe distance, they turned and formed the next line of defense.

Only then did Ulmak, Darnel, and Brahm begin to retreat.

The two lines moved like that, taking turns. One held the orcs back while the other withdrew.

It was slower than simply running, but far safer. The retreat remained controlled, and the orcs were forced to fight for every step forward.

—

Everything hurt, burned beyond recognition. With his face melted away and his legs missing below the knees, a glint of hope ignited in his remaining good eye.

He heard the flare—the people would finally fall back from this hell.

He couldn't speak anymore; his vocal cords were done medium rare.

Still, a happy thought crossed his mind.

'Hah! Finally, old friend... took you long enough for that signal. Hopefully the rest can get out safely.'

He still had mana reserves to spare, and the orc looking toward the flare wouldn't be able to reach it for as long as he lived.

Lightning crackled, and his badly burnt body levitated off the ground. He had one good arm remaining, and he would use it to hinder that bastard as best as he could.

U'rtak was shocked. The humans and even most orcs were beneath him, but this warrior deserved respect.

He crossed both hands with his battle axes and thumped them over his chest in an orcish salute.

This was one of only two times he had ever done that in his lifetime—once for the previous chief, who died gloriously on the battlefield, and now... for a puny human... no, a human warrior.

It would be impolite to turn his back on this magnificent warrior, so he would face him with all his might now.

—

Evading a downward slash by a hair's breadth, Pella slammed his battle axe against Gor'ke's sword. At the same time, he thrust his other hand toward Kui'ri and released an eradicating blast of life mana, destroying the arrow flying toward him and counterattacking in the same motion, forcing her to dodge.

Just then, the signal resounded.

And both orc commanders made a mistake.

They took their eyes off Pella.

Usually, a flare like that would stop everyone in their tracks for at least a second. But Pella never looked at it.

He had been on the back foot throughout the entire exchange.

But that did not mean he was helpless.

And above all—

Never underestimate this old man.

A fist crashed into Gor'ke's ribcage. It was so fast he didn't even register it—he just suddenly flew toward a tree, blood spilling from his mouth.

As soon as the punch landed, Pella was already preparing to leap at Kui'ri.

As she saw Gor'ke blasted away, Pella suddenly appeared before her.

"Tshk!"

She dropped the bow and pulled two knives from her belt, defending herself with crossed blades.

Pella had his axe fully wound back above his head, holding it steady with both hands. His back was arched and coiled like a spring, ready to release all his might.

"Hah! Bad move, orc lady."

As he swung it down with all his might, Kui'ri's eyes widened. She braced her arms with wind while releasing some of it around her body to cushion the impact rather than block it entirely.

Yet she still underestimated Pella. True, he was slower and weaker than them—aside from that oddly massive mana pool—and they had inflicted many wounds on him, while the human had only managed to wound Gor'ke twice.

She thought she'd done enough to escape him—just take the hit while blocking it. It would push her to the ground and create distance, then she could retrieve her bow and attack from afar again.

But then the axe swing came.

Life mana flared all over Pella's body. The coiled blow was released, and the axe flew at Kui'ri with blinding speed.

Forget bracing against it—the strike shattered her knives and the bones in her arms. The cut itself was somewhat shallow, as she was blasted away before it could cleave deeper into her ribcage. The force sent her crashing into the ground a hundred meters away, breaking both her legs as well.

She spat blood and lost consciousness.

After a second of silence, Pella exhaled.

"Phew... well then. I guess I'll fall back now."

He was glad the orcs he faced had been foolish enough to let their guard down.

"Fall back!" he commanded the troops on his flank.

—

Every flank was moving inward except for Gunvald and U'rtak. Kosak felt everything through the ground as he meditated near the tunnel entrance, gathering mana.

"Alright."

He opened his eyes and erected a spherical dome made of topaz and orihalcum.

It took most of his mana, but he somehow managed it. The sphere had four entrances that he could close at will; now he only needed the people to come and go inside. The orcs would no doubt breach it, but it could maybe buy them two minutes, if they were lucky.

He created several pitfalls lined with spikes along the roads to halt the orcs' advance and maybe kill a few as well.

Once he finished all his preparations, he sat down and meditated again to replenish as much mana as possible.

The last phase of the retreat was prepared and ready.

Chapter 75 - 74 - Abandoned

Teclos couldn't move, so he had plenty of time to think—and his thoughts were torture, poison seeping slowly through his mind. Images flashed left and right, inescapable and ever-present, each one sending a sharp knife into his heart.

'Shit...'

His tears flowed freely, half from the emotional pain tearing through him and half from the physical agony he had no choice but to endure in this broken state.

At some point, his memory simply cut off. He remembered Gillard taking his last breath, and then, for a while... nothing.

The next thing he remembered was sitting in front of Gillard. A dark pool of blood surrounded them, and an empty flask rested in his hand.

Whenever he tried to remember more, pain stabbed through his skull, as if the worst migraine imaginable had split open behind his eyes. Still, small snippets flashed through his mind for a second at a time.

Hands ripping one of the orc's eyeballs out and feeding it back to him.

A blade stabbing into an orc's throat again and again.

A black mass swirling around him in waves, blood coating his hands.

The visions felt strange... blood-red, distorted, like memories not entirely his own. It was as if he were looking at the carnage through a lens, his heart tucked somewhere safe, hidden from further harm while that beast outside massacred the orcs in his place.

Teclos couldn't stand his thoughts anymore, so he forced his attention toward the fights unfolding in front of him. He watched numbly, feeling almost nothing, but even that was better than reliving Gillard's death for the thousandth time.

For one, Talmir and Toby had somehow managed to pull off a stalemate against the orcs, despite having only a fifth of the manpower. In a tunnel, no less, where the narrow space should have been advantageous for them.

Ducking under an axe, Talmir slipped sideways and countered with a slash of his own. The orc blocked it, but because its dominant arm had been forced to the wrong side, it couldn't continue the attack immediately.

Talmir tried to disengage and help the others while the orc chased him, but the creature reacted quickly, shoulder-charging him while preparing an upward slash with its axe.

Talmir sidestepped again and blocked diagonally. The orc's blow glanced off his sword at an angle, and for a moment, a path for a counterattack opened wide before him. But he didn't take it. Because the next second, a spear appeared from another orc, thrusting toward him.

Had he taken that opening, he would have been skewered.

Instead, Talmir was already moving into position. He parried the spear sideways, forcing it toward the axe-wielding orc and blocking both of them for a brief moment, buying himself just enough distance.

He seized that chance.

Wind gathered along his blade, sharp and compressed, before he released it toward them.

The axe-wielding orc stood directly in the path of the wind blade, still hindered by the spear. By the time he noticed the incoming slash, it was already too late. That single lapse in focus was enough.

The wind blade tore through his chest and neck.

The spearman ducked in time, but he was forced to release his weapon. Had he held on even a heartbeat longer, he would have lost his hand.

Still, against a speed demon like Talmir, releasing his weapon was a grave mistake.

In an instant, Talmir shifted from retreat to attack. Before the orc could recover, he closed the distance and made quick work of him.

On the other side, however, Toby, Tom, and Zarik were barely holding on.

Toby was not as fast as Talmir, and the orcs facing them were close to his level in strength. Because of that, the three of them quickly found themselves surrounded. The only reason they were still alive was that they stood back to back, each covering one flank.

Together, they blocked any attempt at earth manipulation around them and deflected most ranged attacks.

Teclos shifted his attention to the bigger fight happening at the far end of the small battlefield.

Axel was dancing around the orc, dodging every spear thrust and slash with effortless precision. Pitfalls didn't faze him at all. The moment Ba'hraka tried to kill him that way, vines shot out from Axel and latched onto the ceiling, lifting him clear of danger.

The vines weren't only defensive, either. They lashed out again and again, trying to bind Ba'hraka, but the orc spun his spear in response, slicing them apart before they could take hold of him.

Although Ba'hraka was clearly on the back foot, Axel never got the chance to kill him or deal any significant damage. Worse still, the orc possessed an uncanny battle sense. With each exchange, Axel's attacks became less effective, each cut shallower than the last.

Ba'hraka had more reach with his spear than Axel had with his knife.

To an amateur like Teclos, it looked as if Axel was toying with the orc. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, the fight was creeping toward being even.

Ba'hraka felt insulted. The human wasn't going all out against him, and for orcs—warriors who were happy to die in battle—there was nothing more insulting than an opponent holding back.

Although he was something of an outsider to his race and community, Ba'hraka was still an orc through and through.

Ba'hraka was sure of it now. Painfully sure. This human had the strength to kill him, so why was he still holding back?

'Why do I, the great warrior of the Frosty Peaks, have to endure this humiliation?!'

With a furious roar, Ba'hraka shifted from defense to offense. By now, he had adjusted to the speed of Axel's attacks, and he was confident he could avoid any strike aimed at his vitals.

An earth platform burst beneath his feet, propelling him forward at incredible speed. Axel seemed to wait for the attack, standing in place, already preparing to counter.

Of course, Ba'hraka was prepared to give it everything now. No more running. He would put his life on the line, and because of that, a half-hearted counter would be dangerous even for Axel.

As he reached him, Ba'hraka thrust his spear toward the human's skull.

Axel, unsurprisingly, dodged it by a hair's breadth and drove his own blade toward the orc's throat. But Ba'hraka stomped the ground at that exact moment, and two plates of hard rock erupted from either side.

He could lose an arm here, but Axel would be crushed between the stone slabs if he committed.

'Tch... it's getting annoying now.'

With no other choice, Axel disengaged and jumped upward, one hand still gripping the orc's spear.

With another stomp, Ba'hraka summoned spikes to his side and slammed his spear down toward them, forcing Axel to release the weapon unless he wanted to be turned into a pincushion.

Again, it left his back exposed, but it was a poisonous apple to bite into. The next second, the summoned spikes flew toward Axel like homing missiles.

Reacting immediately, Axel sprouted vines from his back and pulled himself down, dodging the spikes easily. But yet again, Ba'hraka sustained no injuries.

The next moment, a large boulder from the ceiling came crashing down toward Axel's head, and the instant he dodged it, Ba'hraka was already in his face again.

With all this pressure mounting around him, only one thought lingered in Axel's mind.

'Should I just leave the kid?'

He glanced toward Teclos and saw him watching the fight between him and the orc.

Something was wrong with the boy. The black veins across his face and arms were pulsating, dark and dead-looking beneath his skin.

'The kid might die even if I help him...'

In the meantime, Ba'hraka let out an irritated roar of fury at Axel. The audacity of this human, daring to look away during their battle.

He slammed his spear into the ground, and the entire section of the tunnel shook.

Spikes erupted from every direction in a wide-area attack, sweeping through friend and foe alike—his own warriors, the last surviving hunters, everyone caught within range.

Talmir leapt upward, avoiding the attack by a fraction of a second.

Zarik, Toby, and Tom reacted together, dragging an earth wall up from the ground just in time. The spikes crashed against it a heartbeat later, barely stopped before they could tear through them.

"Kur'snava!" Ba'hraka roared before encasing himself in diamond-like skin and charging forward.

He rushed Axel with everything he had. Every time his body struck the tunnel wall, floor, or ceiling, spikes erupted toward Axel, followed by crushing slabs of stone that tried to grind him into paste.

At the same time, Ba'hraka himself had become a literal fortress—nearly impenetrable, impossibly heavy, and strong enough to crush human bones to dust with a single flick of his finger.

Teclos fell sideways from his sitting position as tremors from the battle shook the tunnel, and the fall made him remember the pain in his body all at once.

Air scraped down his throat and hit his lungs like broken glass. His chest seized, his ribs screaming as if invisible hands had wrapped around them and started to twist. He tried to breathe shallower, but even that hurt.

At that moment, even existing was painful.

Once the pain subsided slightly, Teclos could think again. See again.

Somewhat.

Dust choked the air around him, thick enough to sting his eyes and scrape against his throat. He coughed violently, each spasm sending another wave of pain through his body.

Not long after, more detonations resounded through the tunnel.

Axel was still alive.

Still fighting.

But when the dust finally began to settle, Teclos saw the carnage Ba'hraka had left behind.

That orc had killed over half of his own subordinates.

And besides Toby, Tom, Zarik, and Talmir, no other hunter was alive anymore.

Once he saw the bloodied corpses, unpleasant memories dragged themselves back up, paralyzing his mind again.

For a moment, Teclos was not in the tunnel anymore.

He was back in the forest. Back in front of Gillard. Back with that empty flask in his hand and the taste of iron still thick in the air.

His vision blurred at the edges, the corpses in front of him blending with the images inside his mind until he could no longer tell which bodies belonged to the present and which belonged to the past. His breath hitched, and pain punished him instantly, lancing through his chest so sharply that his thoughts scattered.

Each impact sent dust raining from the ceiling. Each clash between Axel and Ba'hraka struck the air like thunder.

Teclos forced his eyes open wider, and through the settling dust, he saw Axel move.

The man was still alive.

Somehow, impossibly, he was still dancing around Ba'hraka's spear, slipping past thrusts that would have split a normal hunter in two. His vines lashed out from every angle, sometimes from his arms, sometimes from his back, sometimes bursting from cracks in the stone as if the tunnel itself had transformed into a jungle.

But Ba'hraka was not the same as before.

He defended against every possible attack, countering Axel whenever he could and forcing him to retreat occasionally.

A spear thrust cut across, almost hitting Axel's shoulder.

He twisted away, and a vine latched onto the ceiling, pulling him up just before a stone spike erupted beneath his feet. Ba'hraka followed immediately, launching himself upward on a pillar of earth, his spear already spinning for the next strike.

Axel clicked his tongue and severed his own vine before the blade could reach it, dropping back toward the ground. The moment he landed, roots erupted around Ba'hraka's legs, trying to slam him back down.

The orc roared, and the stone beneath him shattered outward and up. The roots were torn apart, reduced to green paste.

To Teclos, it still looked like Axel had the upper hand. He was faster, and the only one inflicting wounds on the enemy.

'Come on, old man... kill that bastard already.'

Then Axel's eyes shifted.

To the entrance of the tunnel, like something was drawing closer.

His gaze moved toward the darkness behind them, toward the way out, then toward Teclos.

Axel's expression changed. It was calculating, cold, and ugly, followed by something that almost looked like regret.

He dodged another thrust, stepping inside the spear's range and dragging his knife across Ba'hraka's forearm, but the cut was shallow.

Ba'hraka swung his free fist toward him, stone coating his knuckles in a jagged layer. Axel bent backward under the blow, one hand touching the ground.

Roots burst up between them, trying to tie him down.

For a heartbeat longer, the tunnel was filled with motion.

Then he glanced at Teclos one last time.

"Sorry, kid."

The words he spoke were quiet. No one could have heard them, but Teclos instinctively knew what he said.

His mind did not process the words at first. They slipped through his thoughts like fingers over wet stone.

Sorry?

For what?

Then Axel's body split apart.

Roots burst from beneath his skin, his limbs stiffened, and his face hollowed. The color drained from him as bark crawled over his features, twisting his mouth into a dead, carved line. His eyes sank inward, becoming two empty holes in the sinister wooden doll that now stood where Axel had been a heartbeat before.

Ba'hraka reacted instantly, expecting a new kind of attack.

His spear pierced the doll through the chest.

The wooden body cracked apart with a hollow snap, splinters bursting outward as the force of the strike carried through it. Ba'hraka twisted the weapon and tore the doll open from the inside, reducing it to broken chunks of lifeless wood.

There was no blood.

Only scattered pieces of wood hitting the stone floor, bouncing once before lying still.

Ba'hraka froze, shocked beyond belief.

The orc's spear remained extended, buried in the ruined doll, but his eyes widened with disbelief that did not fit his monstrous face. His head turned sharply, searching the tunnel and the earth beneath his feet, but nothing came up.

Ba'hraka looked truly robbed.

Betrayed.

The human who could have killed him had vanished.

The battle he had wanted, the death and glory he had been reaching toward with both hands, had slipped away like smoke between his fingers.

A low growl rose from his throat.

—

It was no less shocking for Teclos.

Axel had left.

The thought slowly formed in his mind.

Axel had left him.

For a second, the pain in Teclos's body vanished beneath a cold void. His chest felt hollow, as if Ba'hraka's spear had pierced through him instead. He could still see Axel's face in his mind as he chose to abandon them.

"Sorry, kid."

The words constantly repeated in his mind.

"What the hell..." Toby whispered, his voice barely audible through the dust and ringing aftermath.

Ba'hraka slowly pulled his spear free from the remains of the doll. Wood fragments fell from the blade and scattered at his feet.

Then his gaze turned toward Teclos.

The orc's expression shifted from shock to rage so pure it seemed to darken the air around him. The earth beneath his feet trembled from the pressure of his mana leaking into the stone.

It was hatred.

The tunnel groaned around them. Cracks raced along the walls, thin at first, then widening as Ba'hraka's mana poured through it.

Everyone in the tunnel was forced to the ground momentarily.

'That bastard... he left us all to die here...'

Chapter 76 - 75 - Sacrifice

Something inside Teclos twisted violently.

It was not only the pain still pulsing through every blackened vein, or the agony scraping through his lungs with each shallow breath. For one brief moment, hatred resurfaced—burning hotter than all of it combined.

The moment he understood that Axel had truly left, his emotions nearly spiraled out of control again.

His vision darkened at the edges. Rage crawled through him like fire, tangled with grief, fear, and the helplessness of being unable to move even a single finger. After everything that had happened, Axel—the one person in that tunnel who could have ended the nightmare—had chosen to abandon them.

Teclos did not notice it at all.

But Ba'hraka had moved.

The pressure grew heavier, as if a mountain had drawn a blade and pointed it down upon them. Dust trembled over the ground. Loose stones rolled away from the orc's feet. Toby and the others sucked in a sharp, terrified breath.

Then Teclos saw the shadow.

Ba'hraka stood above him, spear already raised high, his monstrous face twisted with fury. His rage was no longer fixed on Axel.

Robbed of the battle he wanted, denied the death he had been reaching for, Ba'hraka turned that hatred toward those who remained.

The mana pressure crushing the tunnel made even breathing seem impossible.

But one man moved.

Even as his body shook violently and blood ran from the corner of his mouth, he forced himself forward.

Talmir.

Just as Ba'hraka's spear began to fall, something beyond strength dragged him onward.

Desperation.

A father's instinct.

His hand reached for Teclos, wind gathering desperately around his fingers.

But even with everything he had left, Talmir would not reach him in time.

Teclos understood that.

This was the end.

The spear came crashing down, filling his vision as it descended with enough force to split both him and the stone beneath him in a single blow. He could not dodge. He could not raise an arm. He could not even turn his head away.

So he did the only thing left to him.

He stared straight into the orc's eyes.

Without flinching.

There was no prayer in his mind. No plea. No desperate begging for his life. Fear had been buried beneath too much pain, too much loss, and too much rage.

If this was how he died, then he would face the thing killing him and curse it with every fiber of his soul.

Ba'hraka saw it.

That defiance.

For the briefest fraction of a second, something changed in the orc's expression. The fury did not vanish, but something flickered beneath it.

Recognition.

Maybe even respect.

A broken, bloodied, and battered human who could no longer move, who could not even crawl away from death—yet still, he refused to lower his eyes.

Ba'hraka saw him not as prey, but as a warrior now.

As the spear descended for the final inch.

Just before it struck—

A burst of green light tore through the far end of the tunnel.

It ripped through dust, smoke, and darkness in a single violent streak, cutting across the battlefield faster than Teclos could fully understand. One moment, the spear filled his vision.

The next, that green flash screamed through the air above him.

It was a battle axe.

Wrapped in green mana and humming with enough force to make the tunnel walls shudder. A finger's width before Ba'hraka's spear could punch through Teclos's skull, the axe slammed into it.

The impact cracked like thunder.

Ba'hraka's spear was knocked aside at the last possible moment, its edge missing Teclos by so little that the force of it tore across his face. The weapon slammed into the ground instead, pinned there beneath the axe.

Teclos was blown several meters back by the pressure alone.

Through the dust and shattered stone, Father Pella emerged, one hand still extended from the throw.

His robes were torn, his face streaked with blood and dirt, but his eyes remained steady. Green mana burned around him, shrouding his entire body like a living flame.

He looked first at Ba'hraka.

Then at Teclos.

Pella lowered his stance.

And disappeared.

Ba'hraka barely had time to turn before Pella's fist slammed into his face.

The impact detonated through the tunnel like a boulder launched from a siege engine. The orc's head snapped sideways, blood and saliva spraying from his mouth as he staggered half a step. Before he could recover, Pella drove forward again, shoulder-charging into Ba'hraka's chest with enough force to hurl him back.

Ba'hraka snarled.

"Rakh-nur!"

Stone burst upward beneath Pella's feet, jagged and violent, but Pella twisted through it and drove his elbow into the orc's jaw. Ba'hraka retaliated instantly, his spear whipping around in a vicious arc. The tip punched through Pella's side and burst out the other end in a spray of blood.

But that did not stop him.

Even impaled, he stepped deeper into the strike instead of away from it, trapping the spear inside his own body for a heartbeat as his fist crashed into Ba'hraka's jaw again. The blow forced the orc back and loosened his grip just enough.

Pella tore himself free and thrust one hand out.

Green mana lashed through the air, ripping the battle axe loose from where it had fallen. It spun back through the tunnel and into Pella's hand. The moment he caught it, he turned the momentum into a swing aimed straight at Ba'hraka's neck.

The orc arched backward just in time.

The axe missed by less than an inch.

Blood dripped steadily from the hole in Pella's side, splashing onto the stone. What should have been a debilitating injury sealed itself with the next step he took toward the orc, his body already preparing for another clash.

Ba'hraka's eyes narrowed.

For the first time since Axel vanished, he looked fully engaged again.

A savage grin spread across his face.

Axe and spear collided with a sound that hammered through the tunnel. Sparks scattered across the dust. Ba'hraka and Pella both pushed against each other with monstrous strength.

Pella shifted his weight and let the pressure slide past him. His axe hooked the spear's shaft, dragging it aside before his knee crashed into Ba'hraka's ribs.

The orc grunted and struck back with his forehead.

Bone met bone. Pella's nose broke instantly, blood spraying down his mouth, but green light flared before the pain could settle. The crooked bridge snapped back into place with a wet crack, and he swung again.

His axe carved into Ba'hraka's shoulder.

Stone armor surged beneath the blade, slowing the edge before it could cut cleanly through. Ba'hraka's face twisted with pain, but he drove a frontal kick into Pella's chest and slammed him away.

At the same time, the wall behind Pella ruptured.

Jagged stone spears burst out all at once, stabbing through his back, shoulder, and thigh.

For a moment, Pella was pinned.

Then he exhaled.

Green mana burst outward in a violent pulse. His muscles bulged and coiled around the jagged stone spears piercing him, crushing them to dust. Pella tore himself free, his wounds closing even as broken rock slid out of his flesh.

Ba'hraka roared, delighted now, and attacked harder.

Teclos watched through a haze of pain and disbelief.

Pella was not like Axel. He did not dance away from death or evade by a hair's breadth. He stood in the path of destruction and refused to fall.

But unlike Axel, he was evenly matched.

Then a shout rang out from behind them.

"Forward! Secure the wounded!"

Boots thundered from the entrance side.

Hunters poured through the dust with weapons drawn, crashing into the remaining orcs as quickly as they could. For the first time in that tunnel, the humans had the advantage. Their numbers had surged to more than double the orcs still standing.

Of course, they were on a timer. A whole horde was still behind them.

Relief flickered across some of the hunters' faces when they saw no children, women, or elderly among the dead.

But Brahm's face tightened with guilt the moment his eyes landed on Teclos and the sorry state he was in.

Talmir ran beside his son.

"Stay with me," he said, voice rough, a potion already in hand. His eyes swept over Teclos in panic, searching for any fresh wound he might have suffered during the clash.

Teclos tried to answer, but only a broken sound escaped his throat.

Talmir cursed, bit the cork free, spat it aside, and slid one arm beneath Teclos's head.

"Drink."

The liquid hit Teclos's tongue, bitter and sharp.

Fire rushed through every blackened vein.

His back arched weakly as pain flared so brightly that his vision blurred again. Then, slowly, some of the veins faded, sinking into a less visible state beneath his skin.

When he breathed in again, air entered his lungs without feeling like broken glass.

Teclos dragged it in greedily, trembling as he finally managed to breathe without feeling as if he were being torn apart.

Talmir pressed a hand against his cheek, relief flickering across his face.

"Good. That's it."

Pella's voice cut through the battle. "Evacuate the injured," he said, forcing Ba'hraka's weapon aside. "Now."

Ulmak shouted, reaffirming his orders.

"You heard him!" he roared. "Wounded first! Keep the line open!"

For a few precious moments, the retreat almost became orderly.

A few hunters lifted the injured and dragged them back, while the elites massacred the rest of the orcs.

And in the middle of it all, Pella held Ba'hraka at bay.

Of course, Ba'hraka could not let the humans escape so easily.

His attacks came heavier now, each strike meant not only to kill Pella, but to break the tunnel around him. Stone slabs dropped from the ceiling. Spikes burst from blind angles. The floor rose and twisted beneath their feet, trying to trap him and the other hunters before crushing them against the walls.

Pella blocked most of the rampage.

He was pierced through the thigh and kept swinging. His ribs shattered and healed before he took his next step. A stone spike tore through his palm; he closed that hand around it, crushed it, and drove his axe into Ba'hraka's chest hard enough to send the orc skidding back several paces.

Ba'hraka laughed.

Just a deep, savage sound that made the hunters' skin crawl.

Then the tunnel filled with another sound.

Footsteps.

The remaining orc horde emerged from the darkness, weapons raised, tusks bared, eyes burning.

The first wave crashed into the human line.

Order broke almost immediately.

The human elites tried to break the charge with some success, but it was not enough. The battle shifted again, and the humans were forced onto the back foot once more.

And worse still—

One massive orc stepped forward from the backline, his arms scarred with burn marks that spread across his skin in a lightning-like pattern. Two battle axes were strapped to his back, and a wicked grin was plastered across his face.

U’rtak.

Then another massive orc emerged beside him, wearing the same armor and carrying the same dominating aura. A greatsword was strapped to his back. His nose was still caved in from his earlier fight with Pella, and dried blood ran down his face, but it did not seem to hinder him much.

Gor’kes.

Darnel, Sera, and Kosak moved to intercept U’rtak, while Brahm, Talmir, and Ulmak threw themselves in front of Gor’ke.

U'rtak released a brutal heat wave, intending to melt the bones of the puny humans daring to block his path. Darnel reacted immediately, coating the three of them in water while spreading an icy mist around their bodies to dull the worst of the heat.

Kosak attacked from below and above, opening pitfalls beneath U'rtak's feet, driving spikes toward him, and dropping chunks of the ceiling whenever he had the chance. Sera followed with fireballs, hurling them one after another to force him back.

But U'rtak fended them off with ease.

Raw force alone pushed the hunters back, and even through Darnel's misty protection, the heat still burned their skin.

Gor'ke was no easier to contain.

Lightning cracked through the tunnel as he advanced, his greatsword tearing through every attempt to stop him. More than once, a bolt came close to killing Talmir, Brahm, or Ulmak outright.

They held the two monsters back.

Barely.

The humans were one mistake away from being wiped out.

Pella noticed and tried to release a healing wave over his allies. Green mana washed through the tunnel, mending wounds and giving the hunters a much-needed second wind.

But that moment of distraction cost him dearly.

Ba'hraka made him pay for it.

The orc slammed his spear into the ground, and the floor beneath Pella erupted. Stone wrapped around his legs up to the knees, locking him in place. Pella tore one foot free, but Ba'hraka was already there.

Before Pella could fully break loose, the shaft of Ba'hraka's spear snapped upward and smashed into his jaw like an uppercut, lifting him off the ground.

And in the same motion, Ba'hraka spun, driving a heel kick into Pella's abdomen that sent him flying back.

Pella was blasted backward, flying past the struggling hunters, past Talmir, past Teclos, deeper into the tunnel. He struck the ground, bounced once, and slammed into a broken wall of stone hard enough to crack it further.

His axe skidded across the floor beside him.

Green mana flickered out, and he was knocked unconscious.

Ba'hraka then turned toward the humans.

The orc lifted one hand, and the tunnel groaned.

Teclos felt it before he understood it.

The entire passage shifted all at once. The floor trembled beneath him. Cracks raced across the ceiling in jagged lines, connecting old fractures to new ones. Every wound Ba'hraka had carved into the stone during the fight began to widen.

Talmir's face went white from shock.

"He's closing the tunnel..."

The hunters couldn't disengage from the orcs without leaving their backs wide open to attack.

Talmir looked at Teclos.

That single look told Teclos everything.

'No.'

Panic started to seep into his mind.

'No, don't.'

Talmir's expression broke for a heartbeat, a smile flashing across his face. Then he turned toward Toby, Tom, and Zarik, who were dragging Pella back from where he had landed to safety.

Violent wind suddenly gathered around Talmir.

"Dad..." Teclos rasped.

His father did not answer.

He released a massive tornado toward the back, saving some of the hunters as well as Darnel, Brahm, and Teclos by pushing them beyond the collapsing section.

Pain exploded through his body as he was launched across the collapsing passage, but the current held him, wrapping around his body gently and with care.

For one impossible second, Teclos saw everything.

Darnel and Brahm on the safer side of the collapse, picking themselves back up with shocked expressions.

U'rtak laughing among the dust and releasing waves of fire.

Gor'kes cutting down a hunter who tried to run.

Sera trapped on the wrong side, blood across her face, slicing an orc in half with her flaming sword.

Kosak beside her, encasing himself in a rock golem.

And Talmir standing beyond the falling wall of rock and debris.

On the orcs' side.

Toby caught Teclos before he struck the ground.

The impact drove a grunt from his chest, but his arms closed firmly around him, saving him from any more injuries.

Teclos tried to twist around.

Tried to reach back.

Tried to scream in desperation.

Through the narrowing gap, he saw Talmir one last time.

His father stood there smiling, Sera and Kosak nearby with more than half of the remaining hunters trapped with them as orcs closed in from all sides.

Dust swirled around the tunnel.

But his eyes stayed on Teclos.

Just enough to send him a final message.

Live.

Then the walls collapsed completely and slammed shut.

For Teclos, every other sound vanished in that instant.

Toby tightened his grip around him and staggered toward the only path still open. Around them, the surviving hunters ran. Some carried the wounded. Some limped.

Behind the wall, the battle continued in muffled fragments.

Steel.

Roars.

Screams.

Explosions.

Teclos could only stare over Toby's shoulder as he was dragged away, his eyes fixed on the wall of stone now separating him from Talmir.

Chapter 77 - 76 - The Survivors of Kolma

Kolma was gone.

Burned to ash in a single night. The town Teclos had known—the place of lantern-lit streets, noisy guild halls, familiar voices, and childish dreams of becoming hunters—had been destroyed.

Toby carried Teclos through the tunnel.

He did not know how long he had been running anymore. Time had lost meaning somewhere behind them, buried beneath collapsing stone, screams, and the muffled sounds of battle still clawing through the wall at their backs.

The tunnel stretched ahead, dim and trembling, its reinforced walls scarred by cracks and loose dust. Every few breaths, the ceiling groaned as if the earth itself was deciding whether to spare them or swallow them whole.

Around him, the remaining hunters moved in ragged silence.

Zarik limped on one side, blood running down his temple and drying across half his face. Tom supported him with one arm while still gripping his weapon in the

other. Darnel staggered ahead, soaked, burned, and breathing heavily, his eyes hollow but alert. Brahm walked near the front, one arm gone and his clothes dark with blood, yet somehow still moving like a man who had no right to fall.

Behind them, two hunters carried Pella.

The priest's body hung limp between them, unconscious, his robes torn to ribbons and soaked through with blood that should have belonged to several men. Green mana flickered faintly around him now and then, weak and unstable, as if his body was still trying to repair itself even while his mind was gone.

Toby looked down at Teclos.

The boy's eyes were open.

His head rested weakly against Toby's arm, his body limp and frighteningly light. The black veins beneath his skin had faded somewhat after the potion, but they were still there, thin and dark, crawling across his face and neck like cracks in porcelain.

"Teclos," Toby said, his voice low and breathless. "Stay with me, lad."

There was no answer.

"You hear me? We're almost through. It's going to be alright."

But Teclos just stared past Toby's shoulder, back the way they had come, toward the darkness now hidden behind layers of stone and death.

Toby tightened his grip.

"Teclos..."

Still nothing.

For a second, Toby thought the boy might have slipped away after all, until he noticed the faint rise and fall of his chest. His breathing was shallow and weak, but he was still alive.

Only then did Toby look into his eyes properly.

And that was when he stopped trying.

There was nothing there.

No panic. No tears. No anger.

Just a dead, empty stare that made Toby's chest tighten.

He had seen that look before. On battlefields. In survivors dragged from monster dens. In men who had watched too much happen too quickly and left a piece of themselves behind in the place they escaped from.

Toby looked away.

"Alright," he whispered, more to himself than to Teclos. "Alright."

Then he kept moving.

Everyone who could still walk focused only on placing one foot in front of the other.

The tunnel eventually began to slope upward.

Fresh air drifted faintly from ahead.

A few hunters lifted their heads at the scent of it. Then the tunnel widened and they reached the end.

The refugees were waiting there.

Kolma's children, women, elderly, and wounded filled the final stretch of the underground passage in a sea of frightened faces. Some sat against the walls clutching bundles of clothes, tools, food, or whatever they had managed to grab before fleeing. Others stood packed together, whispering prayers, holding children close, staring toward the returning hunters with desperate hope.

That hope broke almost immediately.

Manny eyes searched the group for their loved ones.

A woman near the front let out a sound that was not quite a word. Another covered her mouth with both hands. A child ran forward, looking past Brahm, past Darnel, past Toby, searching for someone who was not there.

Questions began to rise.

"Where is my husband?"

"Where is Sera?"

"Where are the others?"

"Did they make it?"

"Where is Talmir?"

At that name, Toby felt Teclos shift slightly in his arms.

Saldia pushed through the crowd.

Her face was pale, her hair half-loose from its tie, eyes wild with terror.

And when she finally saw Teclos.

The sound that left her throat was small and broken.

She rushed forward, nearly stumbling over a bundle left on the ground.

"Toby—"

"He's alive," Toby said quickly, because it was the only mercy he could offer. "He's alive."

Saldia reached them and placed both hands on Teclos' face.

"What happened to him?" she whispered.

Toby could not answer.

Saldia's eyes flicked behind him, searching the returning hunters, she had a bad premonition about this silence.

Her hands froze against Teclos' cheeks.

"Where is Talmir?"

No one answered.

The silence did it for them.

Saldia's face changed slowly, as if the meaning had to carve itself into her piece by piece. Her lips parted, but no sound came out.

Brahm stepped forward then.

He looked at the refugees, at the hunters, at the wounded, at the grieving faces already beginning to understand. For a moment, his own grief seemed to press down on him until even his remaining shoulder sagged.

Then he forced himself upright.

There would be time to break later.

If they lived.

"We cannot stay here," Brahm said, his voice rough but carrying through the tunnel. "The orcs may still find another way through. Everyone who can walk will walk. Those who cannot will be carried."

A few people stared at him blankly.

Brahm's eyes hardened.

"Now." He commanded.

Hunters began organizing the refugees into groups. Children were placed in the center. The elderly and injured were supported by those still strong enough to help. Families clung together, some crying quietly, others too shocked to do even that.

Brahm turned toward Eazekiels prepared exit point near the tunnel's end.

"Break it."

Two earth-affinity hunters stepped forward. Stone groaned as they forced mana into the ceiling. Cracks spread upward in a rough circle and dust rained down.

Then the ceiling burst open.

Cold daylight spilled into the tunnel.

For a heartbeat, everyone went still.

Above them was open ground.

A grey sky.

The outside world.

The hunters climbed out first, weapons drawn, scanning the area. When no orcs appeared, they began lifting people up one by one.

The refugees emerged from the earth like the dead crawling out of a grave.

Some collapsed to their knees as soon as they reached the surface. Others turned back toward the direction of Kolma, but trees and distance hid the town from view.

Smoke still rose beyond the forest.

Their homes were gone.

Their lives were gone.

And for many of them, the people they loved were gone too.

Brahm did not let them look for long.

"To Lupos," he ordered. "We move in formation. Hunters at the front, rear, and sides. Children and wounded in the middle."

His voice cracked slightly on the last words, but he continued.

The march began.

The survivors of Kolma moved away from the broken tunnel, away from the smoke, away from the grave their home had become.

There were so few hunters left.

Brahm walked at the front like a wounded stone statue, refusing to bend. Darnel guarded the side with hollow eyes. Tom and Zarik stayed near the wounded despite barely being able to stand themselves. Toby carried Teclos beside Saldia, who walked with one hand resting against her son as if afraid he would vanish if she let go.

Around them, families wept as they walked.

Some cried openly.

Some silently.

Some children kept asking when their fathers would catch up, and no one had the courage to answer them.

Behind them, Kolma burned somewhere beyond the trees.

The survivors moved beneath the trees in a long line, following the hunters through narrow paths and patches of half-melted snow. Branches scratched against cloaks. Mud clung to boots. Children whimpered when roots caught their feet, and the elderly were supported on both sides by anyone with enough strength left to lend an arm.

No one complained out loud as no one had the energy left for it.

Only the quiet sound of weeping, labored breathing, and the occasional command from Brahm as he kept the line moving.

Toby meanwhile still carried Teclos.

At some point, his arms had started trembling, but he did not put him down. Zarik and Tom had offered more than once, yet each time Toby only shook his head and continued forward.

Saldia walked close beside them, one hand never far from Teclos's arm, as if she feared the forest itself might steal him away.

Teclos barely reacted.

His eyes remained open, but empty. The trees passed above him. Faces moved around him. Voices drifted in and out of reach.

The wall of stone remained behind his eyes.

His father's smile.

Live.

The word repeated in his mind time and time again.

After what felt like hours, the trees began to thin.

A clearing opened ahead.

And beyond it stood Lupos.

The city rose behind stone walls, larger than anything Kolma had ever been, its towers cutting into the pale sky. Banners snapped in the wind from the battlements. Smoke rose from chimneys beyond the walls, and the main road outside the gate was filled with movement.

The city was already on alert.

Soldiers ran along the walls, shouting orders. Guards at the gate were letting people inside in a controlled line, checking carts, waving families forward, preparing for lockdown. Wagons stood abandoned or half-searched near the road. Civilians hurried through the entrance with fear in their eyes, clutching children, bags, and whatever they could carry.

Then one of the soldiers on the wall saw the shapes emerging from the forest.

A horn screamed.

"Movement from the eastern treeline!"

Another horn answered.

Then another.

The gate guards snapped into formation. Archers rushed to the battlements and drew their bows. Spears lowered. Men shouted over one another as panic sharpened into readiness.

For a heartbeat, the refugees stopped.

Brahm lifted his remaining hand.

"Do not panic," he ordered. "Keep walking."

On the wall, three figures stood among the soldiers.

One of them was Axel.

He stared down at the approaching survivors with an expression Teclos would have laughed at if he had been capable of it.

Surprise.

Beside him stood a tall man in radiant armor marked with the symbols of the Dawn Church. Even from a distance, his presence was impossible to miss. Golden mana seemed to cling faintly around him, restrained but powerful.

Regulus.

The paladin captain.

The third man wore fine clothes beneath a cloak trimmed with fur, his posture straight, his expression grave but controlled. Count Aweq Van Denos, ruler of Lupos and its surrounding lands.

A soldier rushed up beside him and bowed quickly.

"My lord, it seems some of the people from Kolma managed to escape."

The Count's eyes moved over the line of survivors.

Women.

Children.

Elderly.

Wounded hunters.

"Stand down," he ordered.

An older advisor beside him stiffened. "My lord, we cannot simply open the gates to all of them. If the city goes into lockdown, our stores are already strained. Hundreds more mouths will only—"

"They are my people," Count Aweq said, cutting him off with calm authority. "Open the gates. Bring them inside."

"But—"

"Now."

The advisor lowered his head.

The order rippled down the wall.

"Stand down!"

"Lower bows!"

"Open the gates!"

The soldiers hesitated only briefly before obeying. Spears lifted. Bowstrings loosened. The great gates groaned wider, and the surviving people of Kolma were guided forward.

Regulus did not wait on the wall.

By the time the first refugees reached the gate, he was already there.

His gaze swept over them quickly, professionally, taking in injuries, numbers, faces, conditions. Then he saw the hunters carrying Father Pella.

For the first time, his expression changed.

"Pella?"

The unconscious priest hung limp between two men, his robes ruined, blood dried across his face and chest. Whatever healing remained around him was faint, unstable, barely flickering.

Regulus stepped closer, concern tightening his features.

"He was beaten this badly?"

No one answered immediately.

Brahm's jaw clenched. "He bought us time."

Regulus looked from Pella to Brahm, then to the rest of the survivors.

Something in his gaze sharpened.

Father Pella was not a weak man. Regulus knew that. If someone like him had returned unconscious and broken, then the orc force was far worse than the first reports had suggested.

His eyes lifted toward the wall.

Toward Axel.

Something did not add up.

The report had been incomplete.

Or someone had not told the whole truth.

Inside the gate, the refugees were herded into a wide open courtyard near the inner wall. Soldiers guided them into groups, separating wounded from those still able to stand. Healers rushed forward. Water was brought. Blankets were thrown over shaking shoulders.

Toby finally lowered Teclos beside a stone wall.

He did it carefully, easing him down until his back rested against the cold surface.

"There," Toby muttered, breathing hard. "Easy, lad."

Teclos stared ahead.

Toby looked at him for a long moment, then lowered his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

No response came.

After a while, footsteps rushed toward them.

Saldia.

She pushed past two soldiers and dropped to her knees in front of Teclos, hands immediately going to his face.

"Teclos."

This time, his eyes moved.

For the first time since the tunnel, something inside them lit up.

Small.

Weak.

But there.

His lips trembled.

Saldia let out a broken breath and pulled him into her arms.

He did not move at first.

Then, slowly, painfully, his head lowered against her shoulder.

Her arms tightened around him.

"It's alright," she whispered, though nothing was alright. "I'm here. I'm here."

Tears gathered in Teclos's eyes again.

At first, only one fell.

Then another.

Then his face twisted, and the emptiness finally cracked.

"I'm sorry," he rasped.

Saldia froze.

Her hand stilled against his hair.

"What?"

Teclos swallowed, but the words scraped out anyway.

"I'm sorry..."

His fingers weakly curled into her sleeve.

"He's not coming back."

Saldia's face drained of color.

For a moment, she did not understand.

Or refused to.

Her eyes moved past him, searching the courtyard, the wounded, the hunters, the soldiers, the gate.

But Teclos only cried harder against her shoulder.

And Saldia understood.

Her arms tightened around her son until they trembled, as if holding him tightly enough might keep the rest of her world from falling apart.

At first, no sound left her.

She tried to hold back the tears with everything she had.

But then she bowed over him, clutching the only piece of Talmir that had returned.

Chapter 78 - 77 - Three Years Later

Three years passed.

And in that time, the city of Lupos changed quite a bit from what it had once been.

It grew several times larger, with constant construction raising new battlements and thickening its walls. The kingdom poured a great deal of money toward the Count, and he, in turn, made the city sturdier, stronger, and ready for the invasion everyone believed was inevitable.

The kingdom's army arrived before the orcs could press their advantage beyond Kolma's ruin. Banners filled the walls, soldiers crowded the streets, and peace and order slowly returned to Lupos. The city became a fortress almost overnight. Its gates were guarded day and night, and its towers were filled with archers and paladins.

But the great attack from the orcs never came.

Only small skirmishes broke out from time to time, usually when scouting parties wandered too close to what had once been Kolma.

Kolma, or what remained of it, had become the orcs' foothold.

Their den.

After a while, the kingdom sent an eradication force to reclaim it. But unlike the skirmishes, which ended half in victory and half in loss, that army was decimated. Of the five thousand soldiers sent, only four hundred returned—battered, bloodied, and barely alive.

Their reports were staggering.

The orcs were building a portal gate there.

Teclos heard the reports.

He heard that heroes had died in battle there, that skilled commanders had risen, and that a new army was being gathered by the Count.

None of it mattered to him.

Because Teclos had never truly left that fateful day.

It was as if time had stopped for him there.

His body had been carried through the gates of Lupos in Toby's arms, half-dead and marked with black veins that took months to fade. His body had survived the healers, the fever, the pain, and the long nights where every breath felt like inhaling a mouthful of rusted nails.

At fifteen, he had been a promising novice hunter with a bright future ahead of him, well connected, and with a warm home to return to.

Now, at eighteen, he was only a broken shell of his former self. Though he still kept the badge of a hunter, his training had become nonexistent.

For three whole years, he had not trained a single day.

Not once.

No sword drills. No bow practice. No mana exercises. No shadow techniques. No attempts to strengthen his body. No effort to become worthy of the badge he no longer wore, because every glimpse of it reminded him of his father.

The badge sat somewhere in a drawer, wrapped in cloth and hidden beneath old shirts.

He had not looked at it in years.

Some mornings, he thought about throwing it away.

Most mornings, even that felt like too much effort.

Life in Lupos had not been kind to the refugees of Kolma, nor to those from the other villages that had been raided. Generosity wore thin quickly when thousands arrived with nothing but wounds, grief, and empty hands.

Most of the refugees had not even been welcomed into the city.

Only those with rank, coin, family, or useful skills found a place behind the walls. The rest gathered outside them—first in military tents, then, after a while, in patched huts. When no more materials were provided, those huts turned into crooked rows of wood, cloth, and sheet metal.

The slums grew like a scar in front of Lupos.

Teclos and Saldia lived there too.

Their home was a narrow, one-room hut attached to the small herb shop his mother had opened with borrowed coin and stubborn desperation.

The shop sat on a muddy lane between a butcher whose meat was always a little too old and a cobbler who drank far more than he worked. In winter, the thin walls did little to keep out the cold. In summer, the air inside turned damp and suffocating, the smell of moldy wood thick enough to cling to their clothes while the heat seemed to cook them alive.

Saldia sold herbs, poultices, cheap teas, and whatever remedies she could prepare from the ingredients she managed to gather or buy.

The profit was terrible.

Most days, they earned enough to buy bread, broth, and perhaps a little oil for the lamps. Some days, they earned less than that. Saldia gave away medicine too often, especially to children, and Teclos no longer bothered arguing with her about it.

The last time he had spoken up, he had finally earned her fury.

She had looked at him with eyes so tired and hollow that he had taken a step back. Then her fury spilled out all at once. She cursed at him, saying this could not go on, that he needed to start working and help out, and that if he could not spare even a little medicine for sick children, then he had left his humanity behind in that village.

Saldia had changed as well.

She was twitchy all the time, always on edge. More than once, men around her had tried to have their way with her. Of course, those who tried found themselves impaled down there with an ice needle.

The graceful woman she had once been was almost gone. Now, dark circles sat beneath her eyes, making her look constantly exhausted. Her three dresses were all torn and barely mended, stitched together just enough to hold.

And she had become very irritable.

They never spoke of Talmir anymore. He remained only as a memory between them. But Teclos felt as though she blamed him for his father's death—more than even he blamed himself.

That quiet tension lived in the room with them.

Some nights, Teclos woke to the sound of her crying quietly into a folded blanket.

Other nights, she woke to the sound of him screaming from a terrible nightmare.

They never spoke about those mornings either.

After a while, Teclos spent his days helping in the shop, trying to ease Saldia's workload while keeping his own mind occupied. He carried crates, swept floors,

crushed herbs, fetched water, chopped roots, cleaned jars, and delivered small bundles to sick people who could no longer walk to them.

He learned which customers paid late, which ones never paid at all, and which children were the sickest.

Some days, he wandered through the slums like a ghost, with no particular destination in mind.

Sometimes, he heard soldiers laughing at him from the walls.

Sometimes, he heard the church bells ringing from inside the city.

Father Pella lived behind those walls now.

He had been taken into the main church of Lupos. People in the slums called him blessed, while those inside the city called him a miracle worker—a man chosen by life itself.

Teclos had tried to see him once.

Regrettably.

The main church inside the city was tall and white, with green glass windows that caught the sunlight and made it look holy. Guards stood at the steps. Clergy moved through its doors in clean white robes. Well-dressed citizens with polished shoes could enter freely.

But refugees and beggars could not.

The poor had been given a prayer shed outside the walls instead.

After all, their coin was still coin, and faith could still be exploited, Teclos thought bitterly.

That was what the church called it.

A shed.

Four wooden walls, a leaking roof, a crooked altar, and two junior clergy who spoke to the people there as if kindness cost them coin. They accepted prayers, distributed thin soup when donations allowed, and reminded everyone that Father Pella was busy with duties far too important for personal visits.

Teclos had first tried to enter the city church.

He had been denied access and thrown back toward the slums before he even made it past the steps.

Then, in the "shed," the junior priest assholes had treated him no better. They were rude, dismissive, and refused to arrange a meeting with Pella, even after Teclos told them they knew each other.

So he never went back.

Whatever gratitude he had for Pella became buried beneath distance and resentment.

He also encountered Ralph one day.

Ralph had become a mercenary under a famous company from the city, training under proper mentors, taking assignments, earning coin, and growing stronger. For a while after Kolma, he had visited them. He brought food more than once. He tried to speak to Teclos, tried to drag him outside, tried to make him hold a practice blade.

Teclos refused every time.

At first, Ralph was patient.

Then frustrated.

Then angry.

Their final conversation happened almost a year after the attack, in an alley behind Saldia's shop while rain poured heavily around them.

"You can't keep doing this," Ralph had said.

"I'm trying," Teclos had answered.

"No. You're hiding away, and you aren't even helping your mom in the shop."

Teclos had tried to walk past him, but Ralph had grabbed his arm.

In that moment, Teclos's anger boiled over. With a low growl, he said, "Let go."

"Gillard died, and you just stopped after that?" Ralph snapped as well. "He wanted to be a hunter. We all did. And now you're just—what? Hiding in that pitiful shed you call a home while letting Saldia carry everything alone? Is that how they would've wanted you to live?"

Those words hit hard.

But then Ralph said the one thing neither of them could take back.

"Maybe if you'd done something differently back then, Gillard would still be alive."

After that, Teclos only remembered seeing red.

One moment, Ralph was standing in front of him.

The next, Teclos had driven him into the mud, and the fight broke out.

"I tried everything in my power to save him!" Teclos shouted. "Everything!"

"We should've stuck together," Ralph spat back, voice bitter beneath the rain. "If we'd broken his line of sight for even a few seconds... your shadows, my wind... maybe that bastard orc would've chased the wrong trail instead of you two."

By the time the fight ended, neither of them had anything left to say.

They had not spoken since.

Teclos did not know whether Ralph still blamed him or not.

Now, two years after that—

The day everything shifted began like most days in the slums.

They had a stand erected early in the morning, in the middle of the slums.

Cold wind slid between the buildings, carrying the smell of smoke, wet shit on the "streets" of the slums, and unwashed, foul-smelling people. Customers came in small waves—an old woman with swollen joints, a boy with a fever, a laborer who needed something for a wound he insisted was not infected, even though it clearly was.

Teclos worked without speaking much.

He ground the herbs until his wrists ached. Packed dried leaves into paper bundles. Refilled jars. Counted coins twice because there were never enough of them.

By evening, he was exhausted and ready to head home.

Saldia was still cleaning behind the counter, wiping down jars that had already been wiped once. She did that often when she did not want unpleasant thoughts to surface in her mind.

"You can go," she said quietly.

Teclos looked up.

"I can help you finish up."

"I know." She did not turn around. "Go anyway."

He hesitated, then set the cloth aside.

The street outside was dim, the last orange light of the day fading behind the walls of Lupos. Lanterns had begun to flicker to life along the top of the walls, though few made it into the slums.

Teclos walked without direction again.

He turned down a narrow street and stepped directly into someone's path.

The collision was immediate and unforgiving.

Teclos hit someone as solid as a wall.

Pain flashed through his shoulder, and before he could catch himself, he fell backward into the mud. Cold sludge soaked through his trousers, and his palms slapped the ground hard enough to sting.

For a second, he just sat there, dazed.

Then a shadow fell over him, and as he looked up, he saw a man standing above him.

He was enormous.

Almost an orc-sized person with broad shoulders that filled a heavy travel cloak. A mane of red hair fell around a hard, weathered face, and a short beard framed a mouth already twisting with irritation. He had visible scars across his face and neck. His eyes were sharp, amber-brown, and utterly displeased.

A lion of a man.

By the looks of it, a mercenary. He wore heavy plated boots, reinforced leather, a sword at his hip, and the casual posture of someone who loved to brawl in pubs.

He looked Teclos over.

Mud-stained clothes.

Thin frame.

Tired eyes.

Typical slum scum.

The man's expression darkened.

"Watch where you're walking, you cockroach."

Teclos pushed one hand into the mud and tried to stand.

"Sorry," he muttered.

The mercenary's boot came down in front of him, blocking him.

Teclos stopped.

"Sorry?" he repeated, voice low and rough. "That all you have to say, brat?"

Teclos lifted his eyes again.

The mercenary studied him for another moment, and whatever he saw there seemed to irritate him even more.

"That look," the man said, almost to himself. "I hate that dead look."

Teclos said nothing.

The man's lip curled.

"People like you crawl around these streets like cockroaches. Still breathing, still eating, still taking up space, but not doing a damn thing with it."

Teclos lowered his gaze.

That seemed to piss the man off even more.

"Get up," the mercenary said, "and tell me your name."

Teclos slowly climbed to his feet, mud sliding from his coat. He didn't want to answer the man.

But something in the man's eyes told him that silence could kill him.

"Teclos," he reluctantly said.

The mercenary stared at him, his eyes suddenly narrowing.

"Teclos..."

He repeated the name slowly, as if dragging it out of some old memory.

And after a second longer, recognition flashed across his face.

Teclos felt the smallest shift in the air between them.

The mercenary's mouth twisted into a sinister grin.

"Well, well, well," he said. "The little prodigy of Kolma is in my debt now. You're gonna have to pay me for a new coat, since you sullied this one with your filth."

Chapter 79 - 78 - Family

As the mercenary stared at him, his judging gaze felt like a knife, peeling back every layer under that scrutinizing look.

Teclos felt as though the man could somehow see through his soul, especially when he repeated his name and his expression turned thoughtful.

"Teclos," the man repeated. His mouth twisted into a faint smirk. "I've heard your name before."

That made Teclos look up at him, though strangely, there was no fear in his eyes.

The man noticed and gave a low chuckle.

"Ah, yes, a promising talent, if I remember right. You have a darkness affinity... good instincts as well, apparently. The son of a good hunter. You were supposed to be someone worth watching over."

His eyes dragged over Teclos again, slower this time, and he said the next part with the most condescending tone he was capable of. "And now... you're a slum rat without a future."

Teclos's fingers tightened at his sides, and he finally reacted.

"How do you know that?"

The mercenary shrugged, as if the answer did not matter much.

"People talk when they drink, and apparently, that drunkard knew you. Well, he knew most of your village, it seemed. That annoying bastard couldn't shut his trap."

He glanced at the people walking by for a brief second.

"He was loud enough for half the pub to hear, crying into his cup like a spineless, one-armed wretch."

Some of the words stirred Teclos's memory.

Knew your father.

One-armed.

For a brief second, a face appeared in his mind.

Brahm.

That one-armed coward who had left him and Gillard to die in that forest. If not for his father, they would have been dead long before the tunnel.

The same man who had been unable to meet Saldia's eyes at the gates of Lupos when they arrived.

Teclos pushed the thought away.

"What's going to happen to me now?" he asked.

The mercenary lazily pointed a thumb toward himself.

"Well... you'll give me money every week. Or..." His smile widened slightly. "I've also heard you have a lovely mother."

At the mention of his mother, Teclos's mana stirred.

Like a bottomless abyss baring its fangs, it turned toward the man.

"Try it," Teclos said, his voice low, "and I'll rip your head off."

"Hah!"

The mercenary smiled, but there was nothing kind in it. With a sharp and sinister glint in his eye.

"Seems like you do have a spine after all. Tell you what..."

He grabbed Teclos by the throat and lifted him off his feet.

The man's mana pressed down on him instantly, suppressing Teclos's own with ease. Even so, Teclos glared at him with deep malice, which only seemed to amuse the mercenary more.

"You seem useful," the man said. "So I'm willing to offer you a job instead. Of course, the first few payments will go to me for my coat."

Teclos thought about it for a second, and for the first time, his eyes left the man.

That was when the mercenary threw him to the ground, having realized this small rabid dog would not immediately bite him.

"Wha—cough... what kind of job?"

"A job," the mercenary said. "Mercenary work, if you will. A sword for hire."

Teclos stared at him.

"If you were like that spineless wretch at the pub, I would have killed you. But you aren't, and people like you fit right in with our crowd."

"Our crowd?"

The mercenary's grin widened.

"Desperate people. Ones willing to live."

"I'm not interested."

He expected the man to be angry.

Instead, the mercenary only laughed. "Sure you aren't."

The man turned away to leave.

"Our pub is at the edge of the slums," he said. "It's called The Broken Crown. Ask for Marek, and tell him you want a bottle of black snake wine."

A short while later, the man disappeared from view.

Teclos slowly stood as well and headed home.

The entire way back, he could not stop thinking about it.

If he did not do this, their savings would be gone almost instantly, and they would be pushed into an even more difficult situation.

If he did what the man asked, however, work and coin would be waiting for him.

But by the look of it, that work would not be on the right side of the law.

By the time he reached their home again, a single oil lamp was burning inside, lighting up the room.

Teclos paused outside the door.

Saldia was already home.

That was strange. Even when he wandered aimlessly through the slums, he usually returned earlier than her.

He reached for the handle.

Then stopped.

From inside, he heard the sound of sobbing.

Teclos froze.

Through the narrow gap between the door and frame, he saw his mother seated at the small table behind the counter. Her shoulders were hunched, one hand pressed

against her mouth as if trying to hold the sound in. Bronze coins lay scattered before her in small, pathetic piles.

She counted them.

Then counted again.

Then shoved one pile aside with trembling fingers.

"Damn it," she whispered.

Teclos had heard his mother cry before.

He had heard it through the walls more than once, in the quiet hours when both of them pretended to be asleep. But this was different. This was not just grief.

She sounded defeated.

Saldia lowered her hand and stared at the coins with red eyes.

"We can't..." Her voice cracked. "We can't keep doing this."

Teclos did not move.

She wiped at her face angrily, ashamed of her tears, then reached for a scrap of paper beside the coins.

It was a list.

He walked around the building and entered through the side door, making enough noise that she had time to wipe her face before he came in.

When he reached the front room, Saldia was standing by the shelves, pretending to arrange jars.

"You're back early," she said.

"So are you."

She put on a smile.

It looked beyond painful.

"I finished faster than I thought."

He looked at the table.

The coins had been pushed into a small pouch. The list was gone.

Teclos wanted to say something.

Ask something.

Promise something.

But all the words felt useless before they reached his mouth.

So he only nodded and helped her tidy up.

The next day was ordinary.

No dramatic disaster came to push him. No landlord kicked in the door demanding money. No soldiers robbed them. The world did not need to be cruel in some grand, memorable way.

It only needed to continue the same misery it always had.

There were customers, but their money was not enough.

Saldia gave away too much to children in need. She accepted half payment from some people. She smiled at everyone until her face looked dried out from exhaustion.

Teclos ground herbs until his wrists ached. He carried water, packed cheap remedies into paper, ran multiple deliveries across the slums, and came back with one copper less than promised because the customers had "forgotten."

By evening, his back hurt, his hands were stained green, and the coin box still looked almost empty.

And now he was properly angry.

At the people exploiting them. At himself for being the "better" man and letting it go. And at Saldia, for giving herbs away for free.

The next day, Teclos made a decision as he worked until the sky began to darken, only to see the same result as yesterday.

Saldia tried to send him home early again, but this time, he refused until the last customer left. He glanced at the jar of coins and left, saying he would be home late today.

Saldia did not question it and let him go while she cleaned the jars.

He looked back once.

Saldia moved slowly behind the counter, her figure thin and malnourished beneath the lamplight.

Then he turned away, with no doubt left in his mind anymore, and headed toward that pub.

The Broken Crown sat at the edge of the slums, where the last crooked houses gave way to storage sheds, abandoned lots, and the road that curved toward the western gate. Its sign hung by one chain, with a painted crown cracked through the middle. Warm light spilled from the dirty windows, along with smoke, laughter, and the sour smell of cheap ale.

Teclos stepped inside.

The room quieted slightly at the unfamiliar face.

Men and women sat around rough, round tables, most of them armed. Some wore mercenary leathers. Others looked like gamblers, debt collectors, or people who were clearly just drunkards wasting their lives and coin away.

After a short while, the usual commotion of gambling and drinking continued, once they saw the kid was no threat.

"You came after all, brat!"

The mercenary from before hollered at him from the back of the pub. In the lamplight, he looked even larger than before, all broad shoulders, old scars, and lion-like hair. Four others sat with him, playing cards.

All of them looked shady as hell.

Teclos walked forward and stopped beside the table.

"Alright, you were right. I want in," he said.

"Good."

He pointed toward the bartender.

"Go to Marek, say the password, and he'll guide you to the back door. Let's see if the boss agrees to take you in."

Teclos did just that and disappeared into the corridor beyond the back door.

One of the men at the table glanced after him.

"Since when did you have a hobby of taking kids under your wing, Derrick?"

"Hah!" Derrick laughed. "Kid's got spine and spite. Plus, he might be useful."

Meanwhile, Teclos followed Marek through the corridor.

All sorts of sounds came from behind the various doors—some moaning, others muffled grunts, and some that sounded like straight-up torture.

At the far end, up a short set of stairs, sat the boss.

He was enormous, but not like Derrick.

Derrick was built like a lion.

This man was built like a toad.

A fat blob of a person dressed in fabrics far too fine for the slums, with rings glittering on his thick fingers and a gold chain resting against the folds of his neck. His cheeks were flushed from wine, and a jeweled cup dangled loosely from one hand. Beside him stood a woman in a dark red dress, beautiful and still as a blade, one hand resting lightly on the back of his chair.

The boss smiled as they approached.

A smile that did not reach his eyes, which seemed to be the only sharp and dangerous thing about this fatso, Teclos thought.

"Ooh, Marek. Are you here to bring me today's profit report?" he asked.

Then his gaze slid to Teclos, and his expression soured.

"Who is that beggar?"

Marek stopped at the foot of the steps.

"A new recruit, apparently, boss."

The boss blinked once.

Then he looked at Marek as if he had been insulted.

"You're serious?"

Marek said nothing.

The boss leaned forward, wine sloshing slightly in his cup.

"You interrupted a pleasant evening to show me some poor slum rat with dead eyes?" His gaze sharpened. "Who brought him in?"

The woman beside him smiled faintly.

Teclos felt a chill crawl up his neck, but he kept his mouth shut.

Marek only folded his arms.

"It was Derrick. The kid could be useful, apparently."

The boss stopped swirling his wine.

"Is that so?" he murmured.

Marek nodded.

"Derrick said he's desperate, useful, and has a rare affinity."

"A desperate rat is common around these parts," the boss said. "A useful one is rare, though."

The boss stared at Teclos for a long time and then sighed.

"Fine..."

He set the cup down.

"You get exactly one chance, kid."

He gestured lazily toward one of the ledgers on the table beside him, and the woman in red picked up a folded paper. She walked down the steps and handed it to Teclos, who did not open it yet.

"There is a church records office near the east wall," the boss said. "It's a small place that is poorly watched because of arrogant priests and lazy guards. Inside is a locked cabinet containing several documents that I need. On the list I gave you are the names of the documents and what you'll need for this job, so don't disappoint me, kid."

"That's it?"

"It might sound easy," the boss said. "But you can't be seen, you can't kill anyone, and you can't lead anyone back to us. If you are caught, we don't know you. And if you speak our names, your mother's little herb shop burns before sunrise."

He clearly warned Teclos and then leaned back into his chair again.

"Do this properly, and perhaps you are worth feeding. Fail, and Marek can explain to me why he wasted my time."

He lifted his wine cup.

"Simple enough, right, beggar?"

Teclos's fingers curled at his sides.

If he did this, there was no going back.

He remembered his mother's sobbing.

The lack of coins on the table.

The shithole they had to live in.

"Alright. When?"

The boss smiled.

"Tonight."

Teclos just nodded.

"Do this right," he said, voice lower now, "and you're part of our family."

The boss raised his cup toward him in a mocking blessing.

Chapter 80 - 79 - A Real Sewage Rat

The boss gestured for them to leave, and Marek showed Teclos to another room filled with weapons.

He handed him a belt.

It was plain leather, worn from use, with several small loops and pouches stitched along its length. The sort of thing a laborer might wear, if one ignored the faint smell of oil, metal, and old blood still clinging to it.

"Here," Marek said.

Teclos looked at it.

Then at the table.

Several items had been laid out before him.

A small gray vial filled with a thick, metallic liquid. Beside it was a folded cloak made of dull black fabric, a set of thin lockpicks wrapped in the same cloth, and a plain knife with a simple wooden handle.

Nothing ornate or impressive.

Marek pointed at the vial first. "This stuff is the most useful tool for breaking into an enchanted door or room. It's a rune-dissolver. Works on weak to moderate

wards and enchanted metals. Pour it, wait for a few seconds, and don't touch the liquid if you value your fingers."

Then he pointed at the cloak.

"It's made from a shadow fox and is useful for masking your mana. Won't make you invisible, but it'll keep you safe from any detection enchantments."

He tapped the lockpicks next.

"These are enchanted. Any lock with an alarm should be disabled for a few seconds, so you still have to be quick."

Finally, his finger stopped on the knife.

"Just a plain knife. Should be useful if or when everything goes wrong."

Teclos stared at it, wondering if he was prepared to kill an actual person.

Marek just continued explaining.

"If someone sees you, or if you kill someone, it's going to be a mess and not exactly ideal, but it will be manageable. On the other hand, if they capture you, consider yourself dead, since we'll send an assassin to silence you before you're tortured and spill everything about us."

The room seemed to grow quieter around them.

Teclos sighed and reached for the knife, but he did not put it on the belt. His fingers closed around the handle, and a black void opened beside him like a wound in the fabric of space. It was small, a pitch-black hole.

He placed the knife inside it, and the blade disappeared.

Marek's brows rose.

Teclos picked up the vial next and placed it into the same darkness. Then the cloak. Then the lockpicks, and lastly the belt. Each item vanished without a trace.

"Hah," Marek said, a slow grin spreading across his face. "Neat power, kid."

"Yeah..." Teclos let out a short, self-deprecating laugh. "All it took to learn it was reaching the end of my sanity."

Marek's grin faded slightly, and he tapped Teclos on the shoulder.

"Useful things usually cost something."

When Teclos closed the void, Marek stepped closer and handed him a folded map.

"The church records office is attached to the eastern wing. It's a relatively small building. Still, it won't be that easy. Good luck, kiddo."

With that, Marek left him alone and returned to bartending.

After half an hour of breaking his head over how to get inside the church, Teclos finally had a plausible idea.

He discarded ideas like breaking in through a window or dressing up as clergy. He had no talent for disguises, and forcing his way inside would only get him surrounded quickly because of the noise or detection runes.

No.

The simplest and most cliché way in was through the sewers.

They would not pay much attention to a sewage worker because of the smell. Maybe at first, but after a while, they would keep their distance and leave him alone. And according to the map, one of the sewage drains ran close to the records office.

He headed home quickly and climbed in through a window so Saldia would not notice him. Then he put on an old, filthy coat and gathered a few dirty rags, along with a bucket and brush.

He also took a few herbs that had been ground into a pale, sharp-smelling paste, the kind Saldia sometimes used to scrub jars clean. It smelled strongly of bitter soap and crushed leaves—unpleasant enough to pass for cleaning paste, but not strange enough to draw attention.

The church district at the edge of the slums was quiet by the time he reached it.

The streets were cleaner here, the road better maintained and illuminated by evenly spaced oil lamps.

Teclos stood beneath the shadow of a narrow alley and observed the slum church for a moment.

As usual, two temple guards stood near the entrance. They were church-affiliated warriors of the lowest rank, and usually bad-tempered assholes.

Several clergy still moved about as well, carrying parchments, books, and coin pouches. There were no believers in sight anymore, as the church had closed its doors for the day.

After observing for a while and making sure he did not recognize anyone, Teclos walked toward the entrance, where the two temple guards were chatting leisurely. A pair of junior clergy came through a side gate, laughing softly as they carried baskets of fresh bread and milk that smelled warm enough to make his hungry stomach twist.

One of the temple guards saw him before he reached the door.

"You there."

Teclos stopped, bucket in one hand.

The guard lifted his lantern. "What are you doing here?"

Teclos lowered his head slightly, letting exhaustion settle over his shoulders, pretending he had endured a rough day with too little food.

Which was true.

"Cleaning job," he muttered. "Drain's clogged again."

The guard's face twisted. "At this hour?"

"Priests complained about the smell near morning prayer last time." Teclos lifted the bucket a little. "Said if it happened again, they'd have someone whipped for it."

He smiled and bowed to the guard, pretending to be harmless.

The guard stared at him for a long second.

Then he stepped back like he smelled trash and did not want to touch this filthy rat.

"Get it done, then. And don't make a mess."

"Yes, sir."

The guard showed him the waste trap at the back of the church and left quickly, clearly eager to be anywhere else.

Teclos waited until the footsteps faded, then hurried to the drain and crouched near it.

Iron bars blocked the entrance, each one etched with faint runes.

He summoned the black void and pulled out the gray vial.

The moment he uncorked it, a sharp, metallic scent bit into his nose, making him recoil. He poured the liquid across the bars and stepped back.

The reaction was immediate.

Gray foam spread over the iron, hissing as it sank into both metal and rune lines. The runes flared once, bright enough to make him nervous for a second, but then dimmed. The bars softened, sagged, and began to dissolve.

Within moments, the entrance was open.

And just as he was about to enter, the smell hit him even harder than the vial had.

Teclos turned aside and vomited before he even climbed in.

The drain reeked of rot, waste, mold, shit, and things that had probably died down there. Brown-green water crawled beneath the entrance in a slow current, thick with filth. Something pale floated past—a dead rat, half-decomposed, its ribs showing through patches of fur.

Teclos wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Hol—holy shit... ugh... this better be worth it."

Then he climbed inside.

The water reached his knees.

He froze for a second as it soaked through his trousers, warm in some places and cold in others. It was not fully liquid either. There were proper chunks of... something floating in it. His whole body shuddered at the sensation.

The tunnel was narrow and low, forcing him to crouch in places. The bucket became useless almost immediately, so he left it behind and pressed forward, following the direction of the church. The air grew more toxic the deeper he went, each breath tasting like decay.

Eventually, he found the first drainage grate above him.

It was not the right one, but he wanted out of this hellhole.

He braced one shoulder beneath it and tried to push.

Nothing.

Something heavy sat on top of it. A crate, perhaps. Whatever it was, it did not budge even by the slightest millimeter.

Teclos cursed quietly and moved on.

The second grate offered a view into a lit courtyard.

No chance.

He would be spotted immediately there.

By the time he found the third entrance, he had emptied his stomach twice more and nearly fainted from the fumes once.

Luckily, this one was the right grate.

He could finally escape this hell.

He pushed it open carefully.

Teclos pulled himself up and rolled onto cold stone. For several seconds, he did not move and just tried to suck in fresh air.

He was in a dark corridor somewhere beneath the church. The lanterns along the walls had been extinguished.

Before he moved onward, he summoned his pocket void and pulled out the mana-masking cloak.

The fabric settled over his shoulders like cold, dark smoke, masking his mana completely until the feeling itself seemed eerie to him.

With help from the map, he knew he was not far from the records room.

He passed a library with books stacked two stories high, bound in leather and arranged along polished shelves that climbed nearly to the ceiling. Green-glass lamps cast soft light over the reading tables.

After a brief look, he moved on.

Farther ahead, he passed the kitchen.

And stopped dead in his tracks.

Hunger was gnawing at him.

The door was partly open, and beyond it were counters covered with food. Real food. Roasted meat glazed in herbs and spices. Fresh bread cooling on racks. Bowls of fruit. Thick sauces. Cheese. Wine.

It was enough for a goddamn feast.

'These bastards! I see how it is... and we're left to starve...'

His stomach growled loudly, and Teclos stepped back at once.

A chef looked toward the corridor. "Hello?"

Teclos pressed himself against the wall and hid himself in the darkness with his mana.

The chef stepped out.

Then recoiled.

"Ugh. That damn drainage is leaking again."

He muttered something about useless maintenance workers before retreating into the kitchen and closing the door behind him.

Teclos remained there for another moment, jaw clenched, knife in hand.

Then he exhaled and moved on.

He finally found the records room near the eastern wing.

The lock was alarmed.

He pulled out the enchanted picks and slid one into the lock.

He was nervous that somebody would come at that exact moment, and it took him longer than he liked.

Then the lock finally turned, and he was in.

Inside, the room was full of coin, potions, and documents.

Teclos stood frozen in the doorway.

Why were people starving outside?

The slums were full of children with hollow cheeks and old men coughing blood into rags. His mother cut portions shorter every month. Refugees begged outside a prayer shed.

He shook off his anger and went to the desk.

Most of the ledgers were useless. But then he finally found some useful documents. Storage counts. Acquisition notes. Temple accounts. He read through them quickly, but left them scattered exactly as he found them.

Then he sensed someone approaching and hid.

He slipped behind a stack of crates just as the door opened.

"I swear to Aurelion, those fat pigs don't deserve an ounce of food," a clergy member grumbled as he entered. "Eat everything, work not a single day in their lives. Slum scum. Refugee filth. Bah. World would smell cleaner if they all disappeared."

Teclos went still.

The clergyman continued complaining as he crossed toward the desk, then suddenly stopped.

"Holy Mother of Aurelion... what is that foul stench?"

His eyes narrowed and he turned around, looking for the source.

Teclos saw his chance, stepped out from the shadows, and struck him with the pommel of the knife.

The blow landed cleanly at the side of his head. The clergyman was knocked out and collapsed.

For a few seconds, Teclos stood over him, knife in hand.

The urge to stab him was almost irresistible.

All this food. All this wealth. All these clean robes and polished halls, while the people outside starved and froze. And this man dared blame them for existing?

He exhaled and calmed himself down, then searched the clergyman, taking his keys. After that, he dragged him toward a large empty chest near the back wall. He bound his wrists and ankles with strips of cloth, gagged him tightly, and shoved him inside.

The lid closed with a dull thud.

The keys seemed to open something in this room, but what?

Teclos searched every part of the room until he found a safe with some really nasty documents inside... from stealing money to kidnapping orphaned kids and turning them into soldiers of "god."

He summoned the pocket void again and took all the ledgers that looked useful.

Then, suddenly, the bells started ringing, and he heard shouting from outside.

He reached the drainage entrance faster than expected, sliding down into the filth without caring anymore. At least, not until he heard voices near the original exit.

He stopped just before the final stretch and wrapped himself in darkness mana until his presence was nonexistent.

He heard them talk.

"The bars are gone," one guard said.

"Then he came through here... Watch it. If the bastard crawls out, break his legs first."

Teclos froze now that a guard was standing watch.

'Dammit. What now?'

Behind him, distant footsteps echoed through the tunnel.

It seemed that they had entered the drainage path too.

He had only a few moments before they discovered him.

'I hate my life...'

Teclos drew in a breath and submerged himself.

The filth closed over his head, and his entire body revolted.

Waste slid across his face, into his hair, beneath his collar. He clamped his mouth shut so hard his jaw ached as something soft brushed against his cheek.

He stayed beneath the water, holding himself still as his senses and darkness mana helped him remain hidden, guiding him just enough so the guards would not step on him.

Two guards moved through the sewer tunnel, their lanternlight rippling across the filthy surface above him.

After a tense moment, they finally passed.

Teclos rose slowly and silently, just enough to breathe.

The sewer guards met with the ones outside. After a tense exchange, most of them left to search another route.

Only one stayed behind.

The man leaned against the wall beside the breached entrance and yawned.

"Damn bastard. If we catch you, I'm going to bash your head in... making me work longer," he muttered.

Teclos waited until the guard's eyes drifted toward the street.

Then he moved.

He came out of the drain like a shadow dragged from the abyss. One hand clamped over the guard's mouth. The other drove the knife pommel into the side of his skull.

Once.

Twice.

And the guard went limp.

Teclos lowered him carefully, then slipped into the night.

By the time he returned to the pub's back entrance, no one wanted to stand near him.

Marek opened the door, took one breath, and stepped back.

"Ugh... Gods."

Teclos stood there dripping sewage water onto the floor.

"I got them."

"I believe you," Marek said, covering his nose. "I can smell your effort from here."

The boss refused to see him until he had bathed.

A tub was dragged into a back room. Buckets of water were brought, dumped, replaced, and dumped again. Teclos scrubbed until his skin turned red and still felt unclean. His clothes were taken away and burned. Someone tossed him a plain shirt and trousers that smelled faintly of smoke but, mercifully, nothing else.

Only then was he brought before the boss.

The fat man sat in the same chair as before, wine in hand, the woman in red beside him. His expression was irritated at first.

Then Teclos opened the pocket void.

Documents spilled onto the table.

Dirty ledgers. Letters. Shipment records. Sealed packets. Account books.

The boss's irritation faded.

He set down his wine and reached for the nearest ledger. His eyes moved across the page. Slowly, his smile widened.

"Well now..."

The woman in red picked up one of the sealed letters, broke it open, and read silently. She frowned and looked disgusted.

The boss looked through another ledger. Then another.

"This," he said at last, "is worth far more than what I asked for."

Teclos said nothing.

The boss laughed softly.

"Ambitious little beggar, aren't you?"

For a moment, the boss stared.

Then he laughed again and nodded happily.

Marek also grinned.

The boss reached into a drawer and tossed a small pouch onto the table. It landed heavily enough for Teclos to know there was real coin inside.

"Ten silver," the boss said. "Consider it a welcome gift."

Teclos stared at the pouch.

Ten silver... that was more than his mother could make in months.

More than enough for food. Herbs. Rent. Lamp oil... maybe even steak.

The boss raised his cup.

"Welcome to the family, kid."

Teclos looked at the coins in his hand one last time and thought, 'Maybe this isn't so bad after all.'

