

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight

#Chapter 1: Ash In The Snow - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 1: Ash In The Snow

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They said nothing in Nordhav's gutter quarter stayed where it fell.

Not coins, not corpses, not even the cold.

Soren had learned to walk like a thief in his own shadow, eyes down, steps light.

A half-brick rolled out from under his heel, caught in the crust of last night's freeze. Soren's arms pinwheeled, but his boots kept him upright.

He spared a glance down the alley. The maker's children hadn't been by yet; the barrel was still ringed with hunks of char and the brittle, gray-offal cakes that passed for a poor man's coin.

He crouched, selected the warmest fragment, and let it roll between his palms, blackening the lines of his lifelines.

In a moment, the blood would creep back to his frozen fingers, prickling angry. Soren held the coal close, then knelt beside the slick where gutter runoff pooled beneath the barrel.

With a careful swipe, he palmed the soft ash, dusting over his cracked knuckles until they looked slightly less like a corpse's.

He stepped out, blinking against the wind's fresh insult.

The city's wall loomed to his right, every block the same pitted basalt, scabbed over with old mortar and banners so sun-starved their sigils were little more than worn ghosts.

At intervals along the parapet, torchmen made their slow patrols, faces hidden behind cloth and boiled leather.

They never looked down, not this far from the main gate, not unless shouted orders tumbled from the ice-damp towers above.

The only voices here were Soren's boots sloshing through melt, the crows, and today, a brittle keening that made the air warp around it.

He froze in the mouth of the alley. Down in the gutter, three guardsmen in black-iron scale had boxed in a fourth figure.

The man was hunched, his cloak little more than a bloodstained rag. A whip of hair, dark and matted, hung over his face.

At his feet, a sword, no, an entire arm and the sword within it, twitched in the snow, wrist bent at some impossible angle, blade edges chittering against the cobbles with a sound that didn't belong to metal.

Each time the fallen man's hand spasmed, the sword seemed to answer, flexing upward as if thirsty for the sky.

"Drop it, you sodding ghoul," the tallest watchman barked. His accent chewed the words, growing thicker with annoyance. "Don't make us take it off you piece by piece."

The hunched man looked up. No older than twenty, by Soren's guess, though the crust of frost and splatter made it hard to tell where skin ended and suffering began. He rasped, "She's not dead, you little nothing. She sleeps, and then" He coughed a thick clot into the gutter. "and then she speaks again."

The sword shrilled. There was a tremor in the air, like mallet-on-glass, and Soren flinched.

He'd heard of the blade-mad, the Remnant-bonded, children's stories, or else the punchline of a joke when someone went off his head, but in all the years combing this quarter's filth, he'd never seen one.

He wanted to step away, now, but his body had locked at the heels. He watched.

The leader of the guardsman waded forward, raising his truncheon high. "Another Remnant lunatic," he spat, and brought the club down.

But the sword whipped up, somehow, though the owner's wrist was limp as a fish, caught the haft, and for a moment it was just the iron hiss of steel over wood.

Then another guard lunged from behind, booted the man's wounded knee. He went down screaming.

The truncheon smashed again and again, and the blade's song curdled, dropped into a series of choked, metallic sobs.

After a time the keening faded. The body went still the way a lever goes slack when the gears behind it snap.

Soren mustered the unfrosted end of his coal, turned to leave.

After scenes like this, patrols swept the alleys, dragged bystanders off for questioning, if they were lucky. But something pulled his eye back to the gutter.

The body had folded around the sword. Not a greatsword, not even a full saber, just the hilt and twelve inches of battered, frost-gnawed steel, all of it soaked in a shine that wasn't quite blood.

The blade looked brittle, cheap. The kind of weapon the old stories said would break in your hand, unless you believed hard enough.

The guards didn't bother to haul away the corpse. They left it and the sword to the crows, only pausing to strip the boots and whatever passed for valuables.

Soren watched from the alley mouth, counting heartbeats, waiting for their shouts to vanish up the hill toward the richer wards.

When he judged himself alone, he approached the body sideways, feet planted careful as a stork's.

The man's face was caved in, but an eye stared up, blue ringed with gray, fixed on some distant, impossible light.

Soren bowed his head and muttered the shortest of the chapel's prayers, not because he believed, but because there was no one here to judge him.

He bent to the sword. It felt... warmer than metal ought.

Not burning, not even feverish, but as if it had spent the day in a sunbeam. Soren wiped the hilt on his coat, then nestled it inside his satchel beneath the slab of cooling coal.

The urge came out of nowhere, smooth and total: He had to take it. Had to carry it home, today and not another. He didn't question the feeling, some parts of the city you listened to instinct or you starved.

The wind howled as he left the alley, carrying with it a bitter drag of woodsmoke and secrets. Soren pressed his satchel close and made for the crumbling curve of the old chapel, shortcutting through graveled alleys and the backs of empty barrows.

If there were faces in the windows, they turned away when he glanced up. That was the wisdom of Nordhav, never count witnesses, never speak what you saw unless you meant it to be your last word.

His loft perched in the ribs of the tannery's outbuildings, a den lashed together from crate lids and canvas.

Soren folded himself in, legs drawn tight to chest, and set the satchel in his lap. He pried it open with slow care, as if expecting a rat to leap from the lining, but the sword lay against the coal, humming a sound only his nerves could register.

For a moment, Soren thought he saw a faint film of breath, white as salt, emerge from the blade's edge, then vanish.

He held it up, turning it in the gray-tinted window light. Not a real sword by anyone's oath, too short, too pitted, the tang chewed by rust.

But the warmth lingered, as if the thing resented the room's cold and pushed against it. Soren considered it a while, then wrapped it in a rag and tucked it beneath the loose board where he kept his kindling.

That night, after the city's bells had cowered into silence, Soren lay staring at the rafters, the sound of the sword's earlier keening stuck somewhere behind his ear.

Three times he nearly rose to check the hiding place.

Once, he thought he heard the smallest intake of breath, from under the floorboard, not from himself.

He didn't look. He simply rolled tighter, face pressed to the canvas, and waited for the cold to finish what it always did.