

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 11: A Memory In Muscle - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 11: A Memory In Muscle

Chapter 11: A Memory In Muscle

The day began with a lie in his bones. Soren pried himself off the cot with the certainty that he'd already missed something, that the waking world had collided headlong and left him behind in the splinters.

At his ribs, the familiar bruise conducted a slow symphony of pain; in his hands, the ache had evolved.

Not the dumb throb of impact or the raw grind from endless drills, but a precision-tuned ache, as if someone had sunk a wire through each tendon and now plucked it for the sound.

Tavren was already out. Soren could trace the path of his bunkmate's scent, sour, alive, thick as tavern drippings, all the way across the barracks, through the space Glen now filled, hunched tight over his boots and muttering an inventory of curses under his breath.

Rhain lingered by the window, eyes lost to the colorless glaze of dawn, either haunted or, more likely, just bored.

Soren dressed without a thought, left sleeve first, then the patchwork coat. He double-knotted the right boot, the one with the split sole; his left thumb twitched at the memory of old frost bite, and for a second he wondered if the nerves had simply never healed right.

He didn't bother with water, whatever they called water here, the stuff poured from last year's rust, and instead swiped the surface of the basin with a cloth, half out of ritual, half out of spite.

No voice in his head. Not yet.

He took the stairs three at a time, skipping the one that chipped every heel that ever tried it, and landed in the yard just as the instructor called the first round.

The chill bit clean, honest, and Soren relished it. Here, at least, the numb was democratic, the pain distributed in perfect equity.

The drills began in silence, then unravelled into chaos. Tavren yammered about his stances, Glen grumbled about the cold, and Rhain, always the outlier, held his tongue, letting the movements do the talking.

Soren waited for the voice, the quick jab of correction or the wry aside, but there was only the sound of sword against sword, the scrape of boots, the wet splat whenever someone failed to stay upright.

At the first command, Advance, Soren's body moved before his mind did: right foot glided out, off-hand snapped to the balance, weight shifted with the exactitude of measured clay.

The sword angled low, just so, and he felt the torque in his waist, the bite in the left shoulder, the exact distribution of mass as if he'd rehearsed it his entire life. He hadn't.

He froze, blade half-raised. Behind him, Rhain's voice: "Keep going."

He obeyed. There was the clatter of the line following suit, but for Soren, every motion felt double.

There was his body, awkward, habit-trained, full of compensations—and there was the other, the overlay, crisp as a diagram in a book, always a step ahead, always exact.

Next drill: feint, then pivot. Soren's hips locked, then unlocked at the last possible instant, the blade flickering through space ahead of the tempo.

He watched Tavren overshoot, watched Glen overcorrect, watched Rhain land each step as if trying to prove the existence of inertia itself.

Tavren called him a show-off, Soren ignored it. Glen tried to trip him, it wasn't even close, Rhain just watched, face blank, but his eyes said: You don't bleed the same as the rest of us.

Still no voice. Not until the third rotation.

"Balance isn't a privilege, it's a weapon. Yours. Don't waste it."

The words arrived beneath the ribs, close and low, ice-cold compared to the usual pulse of Valenna's presence.

Soren let the sentence run, then tried to test it: he shifted his balance mid-drill, heel just barely grazing the sand, felt the entire body recoil and, on the correction, slide back into place, smoother than any day prior. He didn't remember learning this part. He wasn't sure he remembered learning any part.

The instructor noticed. Of course he did.

"Thorne," he barked. The name still surprised Soren, a relic of some census that must have existed before he did. "Explain that last step."

He tried, but the mouth produced nothing. His tongue wanted to say "Because it works," or "Because it's right," but neither of those were answers. He stalled. "I just moved, sir."

The instructor grunted. It was close to approval. "Again."

He did it again. This time the line watched. Tavren's face crumpled into a sneer, Glen's eyes went narrow, and Rhain, Rhain studied him with the analytical distance of cattle in a new field.

Soren moved, if anything, smoother than before. He felt the thing inside him, the other rhythm, the ghost of discipline older than the patchwork of Nordhav. His hands stopped shaking.

The rounds blurred. He forgot the rubric, lost track of who he was fighting. Everything became sensation, pressure, pivot, the geometry of the cage around him.

Only when the instructor called a halt did he realize how much time had passed, how many times he'd repeated the movement, how little it hurt.

He expected to feel proud, or at least less abject. Instead, Soren felt hollowed, emptied out and replaced with someone else's hands, someone else's posture. He realized, with a start, that this was not teaching at all. This was memory, grafted into muscle.

He retreated to the back of the pack, only then noticing the sudden absence of Tavren. The yard was emptier than before.

Boys funneled in and out of the drill, and the instructor had begun to call new names, strange ones, Kelton, Overyk, the kinds of stock bred in midlands nowhere.

Soren caught Glen eyeing him a few times, the look growing less derisive, more calculating. He didn't care to interpret it.

The instructor paired him with Rhain for a round of close work. The two faced off, swords at low guard.

Rhain was slower, but not dumb; he watched Soren's feet, mirrored them, waited for a tell. Soren tried to do it wrong, to bungle the sequence, but the overlay refused, his body corrected at every slip, the memory of the drill snatching his weight back to center.

He tripped anyway, forced it, barely catching himself so Rhain could tag in and make it look even. The instructor shook his head.

"Again."

Soren's arm twitched at the command, and for a split second he felt the brush of Valenna's laugh, softer this time, almost forgiving.

"You don't have to fake it, little knife. They will catch up, or they won't."

He was tempted to answer, and in the moment of temptation, Rhain drove in and landed a light touch at the elbow. Point for him.

Soren blinked, stunned by the breach, then laughed, quiet, barely a sound, but it felt more honest than anything since the morning.

They cycled through three more rounds. Glen swapped in at one point, and when Soren tried to trip him, Glen anticipated, dodged, and for a moment the entire drill teetered on the edge of real violence.

Glen's eyes met his, hard, uncompromising, and Soren decided to let the other boy win one, just to see what would happen. He lost gracefully.

After the session, the instructor waved him over. Soren expected to be chewed out for arrogance, or maybe for lack of it, but the man just stood there, weight canted forward as though daring gravity to betray him.

"You're learning," he said, not quite a question.

Soren hesitated, then nodded.

The instructor's face was unreadable. "Not all learning is safe. Careful, or you outgrow the patience of those who train you."

Soren considered the words, then tucked them away, another graft. The cold had finally gotten to his inside; it numbed even the voice, which now hovered like the taste of salt on old bread.

He walked the long corridor to the dormitory, shaking out each leg to loosen the flexors.

At the foot of his bunk, the mattress had shifted, the mark of Tavren, who, it turned out, was back and stripping off his sodden shirt with an air of triumph.

"Word is, you're the new darling of the yard," Tavren said, eyes daring Soren to contradict.

Soren shrugged. "Only if you let them see."

Tavren grinned. "That's the trick, isn't it?"

Glen slumped in, saw them, and paused. "You make a habit of showing off, Soren?"

"I make a habit of not getting hit," Soren replied, surprised by the ease of it.

Glen's eyes measured him, but he said nothing, just flopped onto his bunk.

Rhain appeared last, moving with that strange, diffident care, as if he expected every wooden slat to disapprove his existence. He nodded at Soren, not quite smiling, but as close to it as he ever seemed to come.

The evening meal was bread and something approximating stew. Soren ate quickly, then excused himself, walking the perimeter of the barracks until the air bit through his coat and reached his skin.

He found a quiet patch by the shed, braced against the wall, unwrapped the ragged sword hilt from its bundle, and waited. Soundless, the overlay returned; he let it, and ran the sequences again, slower, precise, each movement bleeding into the next, no voice needed.

He thought of the instructor's warning, then set it aside.

If this was memory, it was better than most of his own.

He ran the sequence again, then again, and by the third time, the ache in his hand felt less like borrowed skill and more like, almost, belonging.

When he closed his eyes, the world rotated with him, and the overlay did not disappear, only grew more natural by increments.

He stood there, breathing the icy air, wondering how long it would take before the drill and the body and the memory could be convinced they were all the same thing.

By the midnight bell, he still hadn't found the answer. But when he crawled into the bunk and closed his eyes, the voice returned, just once, warm and tired:

"Now you're learning."

He didn't bother to answer. He slept.

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Chapter 12: The Shape Of The Cut

The clang made Soren's eardrum buckle. He saw the trainer's smirk, then the instant blanch in Rhain's face as the practice blade dug an angry stripe above his collarbone.

Soren's forearms buzzed from the hit; he let go, barely in time, and the training sword clattered to the ground.

It left behind a raw silence, scuffed only by Rhain's shallow breathing and the hot, rotten scent of blood where the wooden blade had caught exposed skin.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Rhain dropped to a knee, hand pressed flat to the wound, blood seeping through the thin weave. Tavren hooted, mock-anguished, "That's three for gutterboy!" and kicked a clump of sand at Glen, who didn't bother to dodge it.

The instructor ignored the lot, already bending to inspect the mess Soren had made of the other boy's shoulder.

Soren's own hand wouldn't stop trembling. Not with fear, he recognized the stutter in the tendon as adrenaline, the way back-alley brawls always left him vibrating, even after the threat was gone.

The yard was a haze of bright sun and the coppery perfume of sweat, and the eyes of the other boys bunched together at the edge of the ring like crows scenting a meal.

The instructor pressed hard against Rhain's shoulder, drawing a wince. Then he snapped his fingers at Soren. "Clean it."

There was no nurse on duty for the Choosing stock. Soren hustled, found a crust of cloth in the bucket by the well, and dabbed at the trickle.

Rhain stared straight ahead, lips pressed fine as wire. His voice came out flat and formal: "Good match, Soren."

The words hit like a slap. Soren had never heard this boy, bred for silk, not blood, speak with something so close to respect.

He nodded, too clumsy for speech, and kept at the work. The memory kept repeating: the catch, the pivot, the exposed line in Rhain's stance.

Not instinct, he was sure of it. He'd seen it in the instant before the move. Seen it from behind someone else's face.

Valenna, in his mind's eye, unspooling a slow, perfect sneer.

"You see? It's prediction. Not reaction. The body learns to hunt the pattern, then break it."

He tried not to let the others notice his shaking.

At supper, Tavren found him at the end of the mess hall bench, bowl in one hand and a sliver of bread in the other.

"Word travels, Soren," he said, voice pitched low but carrying. "Heard you almost put Rhain in the grave." Tavren grinned, lips glossy with stew fat. "Couldn't happen to a finer line."

Soren stabbed at his own bowl, fighting the urge to look at Rhain, who sat across the aisle with a bloodstained bandage and an entourage of noble rejects.

None of them met Soren's gaze. It wasn't hate, they'd moved past that, into a space where he worried more about being the last one alive than being liked.

Tavren slurped, then rapped a knuckle on the table. "You do it on purpose, or did some old ghost finally show you a new trick?"

Soren's hand tensed around the food. He didn't answer.

Tavren reached out and lowered his voice to a smoke-thread: "No shame in it. I seen the shake. That's what happens, sometimes." He shot Soren a look, more fox than wolf. "You feel it? Or just hear someone?"

Soren risked a glance and saw that Tavren's own hands were busy shredding crust, piece by piece, into smaller and smaller morsels.

Not nerves, but habit. Every muscle in Tavren's arms mapped along the grain of violence, but the rest of him was a coil waiting for a reason not to spring.

Soren cleared his throat. "I don't exactly know what you mean...some movements just come to me naturally. It's still weird even for me."

Tavren shrugged, unconcerned. "You get used to it. Some would kill to have your edge." He eyed Soren's left hand, where a thin blue line of bruise ran from knuckle to wrist. "Most here would kill to have your pain go to the right people."

Soren didn't want to admit how good it had felt, even for a heartbeat, to land something that mattered.

A clang at the front of the hall sent ripples down both benches.

The instructor, his name still a blank in Soren's memory, but his presence undeniable, stood at the head, arms folded into the architecture of his chest. "Tomorrow is the test. You know what waits for you. If you piss it, you're gone."

Glen spat into his stew, missing the bowl entirely. "That's the only ceremony they care about," Tavren muttered.

Soren's right hand still tingled.

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Night brought the familiar ritual. The bunkhouse stank with the cumulative memory of a dozen boys who all dreamed of home and woke to bruise. Soren lay on his back, eyes open, waiting for the ceiling's geometry to shift into something more than darkness.

"Valenna," he whispered, not even moving his lips.

This time the answer was not a voice, but sensation: the sudden, intrusive knowledge of angles, the torque of a shoulder locked, the way a wrist could be bent just so to make someone drop a blade.

He saw the memory, then became it: Valenna, younger than he'd ever glimpsed her, pacing after a battle, blood pooling between the flagstones, her hands unable to release the sword even after the threat had passed.

The memory's weight was intoxicating, almost giddy.

She had killed someone important, but the satisfaction in her bones was immediately at war with the dread. In the memory, she unwrapped a strip of linen, revealing a broken tooth, her own, he realized, knocked loose mid-fight.

She laughed, spat it onto the tile, then rammed her sword point-down through a corpse's hand, pinning it to the ground as a warning.

Soren blinked, the vision fragmenting into the barracks' blackness and the sound of Glen snoring three bunks away. His own mouth felt wet, and he tasted copper.

"More?" Valenna's voice, quiet now, not in his ears but his jaw. *"You want to know why it gets easier?"*

He barely managed to murmur: "Why?"

"Because you're not fighting for anything but the next hour of breath. That makes the pattern easier to see."

He squeezed the rag-wrapped shard in his palm. The warmth was gone, but the pulse had returned, steady and insistent.

He slept, the echo of her laughter carrying him further than he had planned.

Test day. The yard was empty at first bell, the cold raw enough to turn exhalations into instant crystals. Soren reported to the line, expecting half the boys to be gone.

Instead, they were all present; even Glen's wrist had been set and wrapped in greasy wool. The instructor herded them, not to the practice ring, but toward the east wall, where a shallow pit had been dug, "the arena," as rumors styled it.

Each recruit would fight in public, one-on-one, under the watch of three men in blue-gray tunics and a single, severe-faced woman with a notepad and no gloves. Her hands were so red they looked tattooed.

Soren drew an early match against Glen. Tavren, bouncing in place, whispered, "You owe him a rematch. Don't waste it."

The pit was ringed with fresh hay to soak the blood. Soren stepped in, trying not to watch the faces of the men above him.

Glen entered from the opposite end, pausing to hitch up his sleeve and spit, hard, onto the ground.

The instructor called out, "Intent only." A warning.

Soren focused on the sand, memorizing where the lines would trip him. Glen circled, sword low, using the left hand for balance.

He was bigger, but slower, and his face already shone with a hot, urgent sweat.

The opening exchange was all noise and waste: Glen swung with his right, overshot, and Soren ducked, letting the blade pass close enough to shear a lock of his hair.

The next pass, Soren parried, but the collision vibrated up his arm, almost dislodging his own grip.

Valenna: *"Watch the feet. Don't get greedy."*

He did as told. Glen advanced, feinted left, then lunged. Soren saw the telegraph in the way Glen's hips set.

He sidestepped, using the memory of Valenna's pivot, and at the last instant, swept Glen's knee with a kick. Glen tumbled forward, hitting the dirt hard, sword scraping up a spray of sand.

Soren hesitated. For a beat too long. Glen rolled and grabbed Soren's ankle, trying to pull him down. Soren let himself fall backward, used the momentum to spin, and

brought the heel of his hand against the side of Glen's head, a move he'd never practiced, but which landed with sickening accuracy.

Glen went out cold. Soren hovered above him, panting, half-certain he had killed him.

There was a lull, then the woman with the red hands called, "Next."

They dragged Glen to the side. He was breathing, and after a minute, started cursing with cleverness. Soren watched, almost detached, as his own hands curled into fists.

Tavren's fight was briefer: a fistful of sand to his opponent's eyes, followed by a headbutt that drew gasps from the gallery.

By noon, a half-dozen boys had been dismissed to the benches, or to the medic. Soren advanced, round after round, the movements ever more familiar, the memory-overlay of Valenna's craft now less an intrusion and more a habit. He didn't speak, didn't make a show of the pain or the pleasure. He just won.

In the final round Tavren met Soren at the edge of the pit with a wide, sunlit smile. He looked like a man who had already accepted the ending.

"Last try, gutter," Tavren said, mock reverent. "Winner gets..." he glanced at the instructor, then back, eyebrows raised, "everything."

Soren flexed his fingers. The shard against his chest beat fast enough to ache.

They squared off. Tavren moved with more care now, conserving every inch of his body.

He taunted, faked a left, then came in right, but Soren parried with ease. Not his skill; Valenna's. He felt the shame, then the satisfaction.

The fight tilted, not with a blow, but when Tavren caught Soren's eye and grinned, full of teeth and something not hate.

The city's cruelty, Soren saw, was only ever a mask: underneath, there was just the will to stay in the ring longer than the odds might allow.

Tavren made a show of the next move, the overhand swing so telegraphed that even the crowd murmured.

Soren ducked, wrenched Tavren's wrist, and heard the wood of Tavren's practice blade splinter. In the next instant, Soren's own blade was at Tavren's throat.

There was a silence, broken quickly by the woman's voice:

"Victor: Soren Thorne."

The name sparked in his skull, foreign and final. He tried to let go of the sword, but his hands wouldn't release.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 13: When the Blade Hesitates - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 13: When the Blade Hesitates

Chapter 13: When the Blade Hesitates

The world started to tunnel, and the memory, Valenna's own, the first time she'd sworn a life-oath, crashed in on him like a fever: the crowd, the applause, the moment she realized she'd never be on the ground again.

The instructor stepped between them, muttered, "Enough." He caught Soren's gaze, the look long and unsparing, then turned to Tavren and offered a hand.

Tavren ignored it, wiped the snot from his nose, and stood on his own. They both limped out of the pit.

From the benches, Rhain sat watching, his own bandage vivid against the pallor of his skin. He gave Soren a nod, solemn as a burial.

Soren made it almost to the barracks before the embarrassment turned corrosive. He pushed past the other boys, through the resin stink of the corridor, didn't stop until the stink of it faded.

Ducking behind the shed, he pressed his face to the rough stone, letting the chill gnaw at the flush in his skin. Seen.

Not just for what he was, a gutter rat lucky enough to swing a stick, but for the exact manner in which he didn't belong.

It wasn't even the instructor's stare that stung the worst, or the knowledge that Rhain might carry the scar for weeks; it was Tavren, lurking by the end of the yard with that same clever look, as if he already knew exactly what Soren had done.

He pressed his thumb into the palm, hard enough that the edge of the hidden shard bit through callus and into quick.

For a second, Soren imagined driving it deeper, splitting skin, letting the blood smear out and dissolve the memory. Instead, he wiped his hand on the black of his coat and tried to breathe.

"Where'd you learn it?"

The instructor's voice, again, puncturing the skull like a steel spike. Not a question meant for answering, not when the answer wouldn't fit the world.

He had no script; the lie came out thin as gruel. "I just moved."

That night, every muscle twitched with the urge to wriggle out of his own body.

He ate only enough to kill the taste of old bread, ignored the background thrum of Glen's curses, and lay on the cot with arms folded tight, waiting for sleep. It hid from him.

All he got was the odd half-dream: a flicker of blue-white banners, the pressure of ceremonial cloth around the neck, and the memory of that sword's, no, her, presence steering his limbs with the certainty of a wolf among sheep.

Hours passed. He lurched up, sat on the edge of the cot, and fished the rag-wrapped shard out. The ghost waited, silent and patient as rot.

"You nearly broke his neck," Soren muttered, keeping the words behind his teeth in case anyone listened.

The reply was not a word but a sensation, the tightness at the back of his jaw, the ache under the shoulder blade where the memory had planted itself too deep to dislodge.

"You asked," Valenna pulsed through him. *"You asked to learn. I warned you what the edge would feel like on your skin."*

He gripped the fragment tighter. "Can you turn it off?"

A long silence. *"No,"* the voice said, at last almost gentle. *"But I can show you how to choose when to cut."*

He snorted, one dry, involuntary laugh. "That's nothing like a power," he said. "That's just madness, wrapped up fancy."

"Most power is," Valenna said, and the truth of it settled like a stone in his chest.

Next morning, the yard was bitter with a slick layer of black ice. The instructor met them early, cane in one hand, a length of real steel in the other. He pointed at Soren, then at Rhain, and barked: "You're first."

Soren did as told. The two drifted to the center. Rhain's face was icy-pale but composure locked it in place; he nodded at Soren, then set his weight, low and careful.

Soren's own sword felt heavier than before, as if the thing resented being used for violence done without purpose. He waited for the instructor to call the round, but Rhain didn't wait; he stepped forward, blade angled toward Soren's heart, and hissed, "Don't fake it this time."

Soren obliged. The memory overlay was there, crisp as yesterday, Valenna's technique, but his own panic underneath. The first two exchanges were nothing: a test, the voices of the other boys fading as the world narrowed to the ring, the cold, and the possibility of failure.

The third time, Soren parried, then shifted the blade in a motion so fast he barely recognized it.

The sword popped free of his hand, landing in the snow, but the move had done what it needed, Rhain's guard lowered, his balance ruined.

Soren stopped seeing the yard. He saw, instead, the memory of a dozen duels that weren't his. The Doctrine of Angles. The way a true swordsman read not the arm, but the line from the ankle to the tip of the nose.

"Let him win," Valenna whispered. "Not the match. The lesson."

He let Rhain close. The noble boy hesitated, unsure if it was a trick. Soren used the pause, closed distance, and in a single motion, used the old street trick: left arm up, then a twist of the hip, and a leverage against Rhain's wrist that sent both blades tumbling.

They hit the ground together. Not romantic, not even fair, but enough for the instructor to sneer and mark the round as a tie.

After, Rhain glared. "You could have dropped me flat. Why didn't you?"

Soren shrugged. "Better to bleed a little now."

Rhain wiped the snot and smiled, a bare suggestion of gratitude in the upward twitch of his mouth.

The day passed in a blur of drills and bruises. Soren tried to use less and less of the memory, more of himself.

But it was hard work, always knowing that a better, crueller move lay waiting one layer down. By the third set, his muscles had gone soupy, and he limped back to the barracks, where Tavren waited, grinning as always.

"You're getting good, Soren," Tavren said, knowing it would bother him. "You'll be the first gutterboy to make House without bribing a judge."

Soren wanted to hate him, but only managed a laugh. "And you'll be the first to get thrown out for biting."

"Not a crime if you don't get caught," Tavren replied, then handed him a heel of bread ripped from the middle of the communal loaf.

Soren took it. Chewed. The world didn't taste like victory, but it didn't taste like losing, either.

He went to bed early. Dreamed, again, of the sword and its memory.

This time, though, he dreamed of standing in a corridor lined with banners, and as he walked, each flag changed: blue, to a colorless white, then to a shade he couldn't name at all.

At the end of the corridor waited a door, but he woke before he could reach it.

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Weeks blizzarded by, every day a layer on the heap of bruises and half-mended skin. Soren was moved from drills to chores hauling water, splitting kindling, ferrying buckets of ash from the smithy to the waste pit.

Through all of it, the memory ticked away, less intrusive now, a background hum he could almost ignore when the physical work got hard enough.

He liked those hours best: shoveling, sweating, the numbness in his hands erasing everything the city or Valenna tried to write onto him.

Some days, Kaelrin appeared at the edge of the commons, waving or, more often, watching from the shadow of the wall, face unreadable.

Soren ignored him, but always felt the prickle of being observed.

By the time the final Choosing was announced, only fourteen boys remained.

They were weighed, measured, and made to stand in the blue-lit corridor while the judges circled, picking favorites by the shape of a jaw or the width of a wrist.

Soren stood as instructed, shoulders back, face blank, and tried not to think about the fact that Valenna's memory had gone quiet for two whole days. Not a word, not a chiding, not even the suggestion of a sneer.

He wondered if she'd left, or if something worse was waiting.

His turn came. They called his name, "Soren, gutter side, bring your blade", and he followed, out into a courtyard lined with spidery white trees.

A man in priest's dress waited there, but the face was a surprise: the same judge from months before, the one with river-glass eyes and the broken nose.

The man nodded. "You advanced," he said. "I'd say you surprised me, but to be honest, I bet the pool on you."

Soren looked at him, unsure if it was a joke.

The judge smiled, or something like it. "This is the end of the choosing. You did well. Now you get to see what it was for."

He handed Soren a slip of parchment, sealed not with wax, but with a strip of blue linen sewn through the fibers.

The sign of House Ashgard, full member, not just conscript.

Soren waited for the other shoe, but the judge only shook his head. "It'll get harder. But you're used to that."

A nod sent him back to the barracks.

Inside, Tavren was already mid-celebration, packing his bag with anything not nailed down. "We're real now," he said, voice barely softened by the cut on his lip.

"We get coats, real ones, and pay, and maybe even wine if we don't screw it."

Soren let him talk, then rolled the parchment in his hands, feeling the slit of blue fabric between his fingers.

He sat on the edge of the cot, looked out the window at the night's colorless sky, and whispered, "You there?"

No answer. Only the echo of his own voice in the stillness.

He tucked the slip into his shirt, then lay down, hands folded. Maybe she was gone, or maybe the next time she spoke, it would mean something awful.

He almost hoped for it.

The city never let you keep anything you didn't need, and Soren had stopped needing the voice. He'd learned to make do with just the memory.

But as he drifted off, he felt, faint and easy, the pulse of the shard through the bones of his wrist, colder and more constant than ever before.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 14: The Bonewell Road - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 14: The Bonewell Road

Chapter 14: The Bonewell Road

They shivered into the open with the brittle dignity of men who suspected the joke to be on them, but had not yet been told its punchline.

Even the good boots weren't armored for this sort of cold, wind that slotted knives down the line of your spine and left your ears humming like tuning forks.

Soren flexed his fingers inside the new gloves, feeling the burn of motion in every cut and scar, then cinched the cloak tighter around his throat.

It smelled of woodsmoke, talc, and underneath, the faintest memory of wet animal, like the skin had lain for months in a kennel ring before they'd boiled the color in.

The other three, Tavren, Rhain, plus a haystack kid called Orsell, lagged until the quartermaster's glare pressed them forward.

Above, the sun was little more than a white smudge behind the clouds, and the city wall, once they'd crossed the outer cluster of blocks, shrank fast into a memory.

Soren tried not to watch it recede.

"Feels wrong," Tavren muttered, once they'd breached the first pasture gate. "City's supposed to follow you. Or at least send a song, even if it's curses."

No one answered. There was nothing to answer with.

Every step stretched the line of their convoy farther from the world as Soren knew it and deeper into a white expanse he'd only ever admired from rooftops, untouchable, unowned.

They kept to the spill of the old river road, a path two men wide, the snow tamped hard in the center and loose in the margins.

Drifts leaned up against the fenceposts, taller than Soren in places, so that every hundred paces they had to shoulder into it, fists and knees churning to keep forward.

His feet soaked through quick. The wet felt good for the first hour, then evolved into something personal.

They were meant to join the grain-seller at the Bonewell fork.

The instructions, spoken and then again written in a block script Soren could barely read, were simple: arrive before dusk.

Stay with the merchant until relieved by the city's next patrol. Soren recited it under his breath, not for reassurance, but to keep the wind's voice out of his head.

At the fork, the world seemed to flatten and gather itself, as if the land had paused to listen.

The Bonewell stood half-buried by snow, a fat stone ring set in the ground. Someone had carved a face on the capstone, wide mouth, crimped eyes, though time had half-melted the expression until it looked both terrified and hugely amused.

A wagon waited on the path, its upper frame tarped in a quilt of patched hide, the horses hitched and steaming out their own small, urgent clouds.

The merchant, short, wrapped in velvet the color of dried blood, watched them with a predator's patience.

Face round, hands skinned to a deep-creased red. His eyes were glassy, the kind Soren recognized from drinking men who never paid their tabs.

"You the Ashgard?" he asked.

"We're the extant," Tavren replied, proud of the word. "You the grain?"

The man eyed Tavren, then Soren, then the others. "I'm whatever keeps to the road and stays breathing. Let's load up and move, if you don't fancy explaining to the farmer sons why their spring bread's short."

They distributed themselves as instructed: Soren to the side, covering the blind angle; Tavren and Orsell to the rear, near the tailgate and walking in the wagon's wake; Rhain assigned to the front, cursing under his breath each time the wagon jounced and the wind dumped a white hand of powder down his collar.

The first mile passed in silence, save the deep grind of cartwheels and the slap of leather on horsehide.

Soren found his thoughts bouncing, untethered, between the back of the merchant's fat head, and the slow, ritual warmth at his chest, steady as a heartbeat, hidden under coat and shirt, close as a secret.

It was different, now that he was outside the wall. If within Nordhav the memory had been a low fire, here it was an optic nerve flashing with afterimages.

Every so often, Soren blinked and felt himself both on the road and slightly off to the side, vision doubled and stuttered, the snow and sky briefly tinged with the colorless blue he'd seen in the sword's old dreams.

He kept pace, boots crunching, eyes raking the white for shape or movement.

There'd been stories, even in the street schools, about what haunted the fields: scavenger bands, Mage pickets, the rare beast gone mad from hunger and from the war's old leavings.

But mostly, it was the stories themselves, that if you passed the Bonewell after sunset, your tongue would blacken by morning; that the snow remembered every footstep and could call you back, years later, to account for how you'd trespassed.

Tavren yawned, loud but fake. "If you get to choose, would you rather die gutted, or freeze to death?"

"Gutted," Orsell said. "Quicker."

Rhain, up front, didn't turn. "Depends who's doing the gutting."

The merchant grunted. "You girls chatter this much inside the city, or is it just nerves when the wall's behind you?"

Soren said nothing. The cold had climbed past discomfort into a level of numb where each movement felt stylized, as if his arms were props manned by an eccentric puppeteer.

With each breath the Remnant pulsed, the echo of blue flickering at the edge of his vision, insistent and, this far from city stone, much less interested in hiding itself.

It was three hours to the relay marker, a hardstand of broken brick topped by a bell caged in corroded brass. The merchant called a halt. Soren fanned out to check the nearby drifts.

Nothing moved, nothing but the wind. They circled the wagon, hands tucked, trading glances out of habit rather than suspicion.

Soren leaned against the cold brick, feeling the city in his body but not in the landscape.

It struck him that for the first time, if only for a league or two, he was not actively being watched by a hierarchy of jeering boys or the godless gaze of House Ashgard.

Only the Remnant seemed to have an audience for his heart.

He waited. The assignment was to escort, not to think. Yet the memory of last night, or three nights ago, hard to tell, in the chronology of dreams, stitched on him the urge to ask, even if only in his own head:

'What are you, really?'

The answer did not come as a voice. It was a repetition of the same drab scene, overlaid with slices of color and impossible memory: the grain wagon, but older, the wood charred, sky blown open with stars and the world's border gone to glass.

Instead of three horses, a team of armored men pulled the cart, their faces gaunt and streaked with runes, a sabbath of the dead. Not a hallucination, Soren thought. A rehearsal.

He stood up, stretched, then blinked until the world aligned again.

Rhain padded over, eyes darting. "You all right?"

Soren nodded. "Just cold."

Rhain's face, pale with blue splotches, pinched. "When we get back, you heard what they said? That if we made it clean, we get first pick of the real weapons. Maybe even the blue."

Soren glanced at him, not understanding.

"The blue," Rhain insisted. "Mage-steel. Oathkeeper's offcuts, sometimes. They save it for officers, but..."

He trailed off, noticed Soren's lack of reaction, then shrugged. "Maybe it's nothing."

He walked away, embarrassment shrugged off along with the rest of his city self.

The merchant barked that they'd lingered long enough. They loaded up. The road ran for another hour in the darkening light.

Past the markers, the snow peeled away in strips, the ground struck flat and mean by decades of war. Soren saw, far off, the ribs of a house snapped open, its black timbers making a mockery of the city's regular lines.

He squinted. Something in the silhouette suggested a flag, but more likely it was a sheet of torn canvas, clicking in the wind. He kept walking.

Behind him, Tavren and Orsell had begun to talk low, voices pressed to a whisper when they thought no one could hear.

Soren caught only the odd phrase: "Heard they eat the horses first," and a laugh, then, "Not if you're already gone." He let the words pass through him. Everything cold, everything private.

Near twilight, they passed a set of iron nails staked in a crossroads pattern, the metal gone to orange with rust.

Soren felt his heart flex tighter, the pressure, if not painful, then at least keenly alive.

He put his hand to the hidden shard, as if to hold it in place. At his touch, the sensation spiked, a slow pour of warmth sliding up the tendons of his arm, into the meat of his shoulder.

He almost expected Valenna to speak. But she didn't. Instead, the sense of audience grew, then split; Soren traced the feeling outward, all the way to the edge of the snow where two figures, darker than the wind, waited.

He hissed, "Stop."

The wagon slowed. Rhain tensed; Tavren, too, though not so much as to give away a real fear. The merchant muttered a curse and reached for the club lashed under his seat.

The figures stepped into the open. Coats black as a salt cask, hats slung low, both armed.

The taller one had a face like a spade, narrow, sharp, everything chewed down to the essence of suspicion.

The other, barely out of boyhood, only stared, the kind of stare that added not a thing to the world except the certainty that this moment would repeat, again and again, for as long as someone else's memory endured.

Soren's hand drifted toward his belt; the knife there was third-rate, the Remnant a last resort. Tavren muttered, "Bandits. Or worse, cousins with a grudge."

The taller one spoke. "Evening. It's cold for the road."

The merchant hunched, unconvinced. "We're on House escort. Move on."

The man's eyes flicked from Soren to each of the others, then to the wagon. "Heard there was a bounty on westbound grain. Not worth much, but..." He looked at the snow, then back up. "But even gutter-boys get hungry."

No movement. No threat uttered. The threat, Soren felt, was in the patience, in the discipline of two men willing to freeze a sundown waiting to see how the other would blink.

The shard, under his coat, set up a vibration that made Soren's teeth ache. He tried to focus, to be, if not Valenna, then at least someone who could fake her memory.

The air thinned. No one spoke for a full minute.

The taller one moved first, hands free of weapons but loose at the sides. "We'll walk past," he said, to no one. "No need for mess."

They did. Soren watched the two figures march off, never once looking back. When the wagon started again, the merchant exhaled so hard Soren could see it billow, like the afterburn of some great machine.

They made camp that night not at the next marker, but in the lee of a ruined fence that cut the wind into smaller, less intelligent pieces.

Soren drew first watch, sat cross-legged behind the wagon, and waited for the cold to stop thinking about him.

He expected Tavren to snipe a joke, or for Orsell to start snoring. He expected, more than anything, a word from Valenna, some sharp-edged advice or rebuke. Instead, the voice that reached him was his own. It said: "You don't belong here, and you never did."

He trusted it enough to keep awake through the entire night.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 15: The Path of Silence - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 15: The Path of Silence

Chapter 15: The Path of Silence

Night deadened the air to glass. For an hour, Soren watched frost spread in spiderbones across the edge of his boot, crackling with the expansion of each shallow breath.

The sky, blacker now, the clouds strained paper-thin, hung like a threat no one had time to mutter.

Camp was a huddle behind the crippled wagon, four youth and the merchant, waiting out dusk and the less-predictable dangers that arrived after.

Nobody argued; even Tavren, always the first to provoke, settled for tossing splinters into the wedge-frozen fire, each pop a rebuke to the notion that any of them could still feel their hands.

Fatigue was the only warmth. Rhain rolled a coin between his fingers, the old, nervous habit fighting hard to outlive the cold.

Orsell, soaked through from the slip at noon, hunched, shaking so hard it made his teeth sound like icicles rattling in the city's bonewind chimes.

The merchant, legs tucked under a scrap of horse blanket, stared out past the dead reach of the road as if what waited there might decide to pass them by, once it saw how meager the haul really was.

Soren waited for hunger to kill the shaking. It was the city way: after a while, even fear starved to a manageable whine.

He didn't sleep, though he drifted, head on knees, listening past the fire for wind or footfall.

Even the Remnant at his chest, usually a comfort, now felt urgent: a knot of heat twisting, then untwisting, at the center of his breastbone.

He pressed it through his jacket, half-hoping to coax a word, even one of Valenna's black-edged jests.

Nothing. Just the thud, faint but doubling at intervals. Not a heartbeat, he'd learned that difference, but something more like a twitch in the muscle of memory.

Orsell's head jerked up once, wide-eyed, so sudden Rhain nearly dropped his coin.

Soren caught the look and followed it. Nothing. The dark offered only the flat sameness of snow and the slow, cold breath of wind. Orsell exhaled, tried to laugh, but it came out a slosh of snot.

Tavren muttered, "Should've burned the wagon for heat."

The merchant, without looking, said, "Break the axle for fire and you drag it the rest of the way on your own backs. We're not dead yet."

"Doesn't mean they won't try," Tavren said, meaning more than wolves.

He unwrapped a crust of bread and began gnawing, jaw working with the deliberate menace of someone rehearsing how to bite the future.

Soren counted the seconds between the pulses at his chest. Seven. Then five. Each time, a little sharper.

Past the wagon, the night split. Not with a sound, but a motion, a single, unbroken slice of dark against the horizon. Soren's eyes trained quick, and he saw them: two, no, three men, spreading out with the cautious arrogance of men who had found the trick and were about to use it.

Tavren saw them next. "Shit," he whispered, and the word fogged and froze before it reached the ground.

Rhain's coin stopped. Orsell twitched, then folded in. Soren felt the shard, no, Valenna, ignite in his ribs, a pressure that pinched the air until it rang.

The others waited for a signal. There wasn't one.

The three strangers advanced, two with spears, one holding a bundled something that Soren recognized: crossbow, cheap and heavy, the kind that fired twice before shattering in your hands.

Their steps, measured and loose, suggested careful, practiced hunger. Soren let the panic build, then numb itself.

His own blade, barely worth the name, a factory offcut dulled on both sides, suddenly felt like a relic he'd stolen but never quite earned.

The merchant spoke first, voice brittle. "We're with House," he lied, loud enough for the fire to catch every syllable.

The crossbowman grinned, just enough teeth to see in the dark. "House don't matter out here," he replied. "What matters is what's in the wagon. Which of you wants to live?"

Tavren spat onto the fire. "Depends how you plan on asking."

Soren tensed. The Remnant's pulse now rode the length of his arm, heat bubbling through the cold like a fever.

He shifted, put himself forward just as the crossbowman took aim. There was no warning, no build of tension. The bandit fired.

The bolt split the air and caught Orsell mid-breath. He didn't scream; just made a noise like a cork pulled fast from a bottle, and then he was on the ground, face buried in the drift. Soren's mind blanked for a beat, then hyper-spiced:

Left. Rhain. On his knees, trembling, but alive.

Right. Tavren, coiled, teeth bare, not moving yet.

The merchant, already gone. Soren didn't see when he'd bolted, but the vacant patch on the tarp told the story.

A second volley whined past Tavren, nipped his shoulder. The two with spears closed in, boots crunching with an authority that, for Soren, confirmed everything he'd ever hated about men in groups.

He gripped the blade. No voice told him what to do, but his hands understood. His feet, too. He advanced, sloppy, cold, desperate, and the first spear tip flicked at his face, missing by the width of a coin.

A sudden memory overlay happened of Valenna's trials, the tight geometry of her war. Not a suggestion, but an order snapping in Soren's bones.

"Duck. Cut low. Again."

He ducked, and the blade sunk into the meat of the bandit's thigh, through fabric, into muscle.

The man screamed, a chorus instead of a note, and dropped the spear to clutch at his leg. Soren didn't watch him fall; he pivoted, using the momentum, and caught sight of Tavren wrestling with the other spearman.

The bandit was bigger, but Tavren had the city's gift: he went for the eyes, the ears, the edge of every soft thing you couldn't armor.

In the scuffle, Soren lost the thread. His own hands were wet, the sword, too, though he didn't process what it meant until the air filled with a hot, metallic stink that fogged the memory.

For a second, he felt sick; then the shard at his heart pummeled the feeling out, replacing it with the imperative to move.

The crossbowman had reloaded. Soren saw the flick of motion, the setting of jaw. He dove sideways, trying to hex the flight of the bolt by sheer will. It struck the snow, closer than he'd wanted.

He advanced, but the crossbowman was ready, swinging the weapon like a club. Soren's arm took the brunt, and the world rang with the bright, narcotic clarity of impact.

"Now. Up. Angle the point."

He did as told, and the blade, his body, found the hollow under the man's chin, the place Thorne had never studied but which Valenna, in her memory, knew perfectly.

The blade didn't stick; it slipped free and the crossbowman, mouth a red tremor, toppled backward, never even finding the time to scream.

The spearman Tavren fought was down, face crumpled under a boot. Rhain, frozen, watched Soren wipe at the blood pooling in the crease of his knuckle.

Another man, hidden until now, lurched from behind the wagon. He was younger, though his face was too starved to hold age.

He saw Orsell on the ground, and the scream was not of pain, but insult. He charged Rhain, who simply dropped, hands over his head, and let the bandit trip over his body.

Soren finished it. Not for glory, or even survival. Just because, by then, the Remnant, Valenna, had forced the sequence into his veins.

"A slice, an elbow, the foot pressed into the throat until the noise stops."

When it ended, the fire was low, the snow splattered and churned, the air thick with the afterlife smell of blood.

Soren looked at his hands, then at Rhain, who was leaking from a graze along the jaw but otherwise intact.

Tavren stood over a body, breathing through his mouth, eyes locked on nothing.

The merchant reappeared from the darkness, empty-handed except for a knife still capped in its sheath.

He looked at Soren, then the carnage, and gave a nod, not of thanks, exactly, but of recognition. He regarded the dead, then began the work of rifling pockets, as if the event had been scheduled in advance.

No one spoke for the better part of an hour. Soren cleaned his blade on the inside of his coat, the cold numb enough now to make the act seem ordinary.

At some point, the snow started again, fresh and greedy, intent on covering the night's memory for the next unlucky soul to pass.

As Rhain tried to bind his own wound, Soren settled himself, let the pulse of the Remnant slow, and for the first time since the fight, felt the presence settle, no longer sharp, but almost content.

Valenna's voice, when it came, was mellow and near enough to hear only in the teeth:

"Now you've bled for the lesson. Don't waste it."

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 16: Snow Breaks Red - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 16: Snow Breaks Red

Chapter 16: Snow Breaks Red

By morning, the fire had lost. Everything beyond its radius welled blue and black, the color of last bruises. Orsell was, Soren found himself unable to finish the sentence, even inside his head.

The body was Orsell shaped, curled on itself, rime climbing every fold of the old city coat, as if the cold were still working to reshape him into something less offensive to the snow. Soren knelt by it.

His first impulse was to brush the ice from Orsell's hair, but it didn't seem right to touch him now. The merchant, emerging from his fleeces, fixed the scene with a hard glance and said, "Don't look. Let it."

They left him wrapped and uncrowded, at the far edge of what the fire dared to warm. Tavren didn't move during the entire preparation, just sat cross-legged, eyes on the dead boy, biting at the web of flesh between thumb and forefinger.

Rhain worked with small, exacting motions to tie new cloth around the wound on his arm. Soren didn't remember seeing him get hit. Maybe he hadn't, not really.

They buried Orsell in the just-soft ground behind the wagon, a shallow slot among the roots of a white willow.

Rhain and Soren dug together, alternating as the blood left their hands. Tavren found a flat stone and etched Orsell's name with the tip of a knife, though by the time he placed it, the letters were already blurred by melting snow and the gray-frozen moment.

No words, not even the gutter's joke about a home at last. They sat together for a while. The fire spat embers and went ugly, refusing to die until it shamed them.

The merchant insisted on leaving before dawn. "Wolves'll nose the trail for a league," he said, "and there's more than wolves, if you hear the stories."

Soren waited for the others to refuse, but didn't. Maybe none of them wanted to stay where Orsell's shape was still visible, pressed into the page of snow like something had tried and failed to erase him.

They walked fast. At first, the cold bit harder than Soren could remember from any winter inside Nordhav's walls.

His feet went from stinging, to pulsing, to not-there, and then the rhythm of the march took over.

The world thinned itself to a corridor between two urgent blues, the sky above, harder-edged and inhuman, and the snow, which took the wind and made it feel like knives ground from glass. He watched Tavren from behind: the boots, the hollowed shoulders.

Tavren's brawny outline looked less like a person than a puppet strung by the need to stay upright.

Rhain checked his bandage every few hundred steps, fingers delicate even through the gloves.

He wasn't bleeding, but the cloth showed a halo of brown-black that got neither larger nor smaller, which Soren decided was maybe its own kind of victory.

The Remnant's throb didn't mute, exactly, but pulsed in a new way, lower, more patient, as if unwilling to draw attention until Soren had worked out what to do with his own hurt.

Even Valenna, the old voice, said nothing. Soren wondered if grief could silence the dead as well as the living.

Once, a mile out, Soren saw abandoned equipment half-swallowed by snow: a rusted pike, splintered, wedged upright into the dirt as if making a last stand against the world's white wash.

Farther on, a tree that had been hacked off at shoulder height, years ago, but someone had nailed a sword through the trunk, blade and all.

The sword was notched dull and slagging off rust, but the hilt still bore the grip wrapping, a single blue thread woven through the black. He motioned at the others to see, but nobody did, so Soren shouldered the memory for himself.

The checkpoint was not a tower or fort as he'd expected, but a squat, one-story runnel of stone and iron, barely taller than a wagon.

The roof had collapsed in the center so it gathered snow like a dead mouth. Out front, a single figure waited astride a white-chestnut horse: a Knight, black cloak hitched against the wind, sword scabbard a vertical line over the spine.

His face, Soren double-checked because it was hard to tell under the helmet, looked less a face than something constructed for the sole purpose of fitting inside a helmet. Deep lines, eyes set like river stones, mouth bloodless.

The Knight did not speak until they were close enough for spittle to freeze between them.

"What happened?" His voice was not cruel, but devoid of any other option.

The merchant gestured at the boys. "Bandits. Three, maybe more. Orsell—" He gestured behind him, then stopped. "Didn't make it. These held the line."

The Knight's eyes slid over Soren and the others. He lingered on the stains at Soren's coat, the line of dried blood on Tavren's cheek, the crusted black where Rhain's bandage leaked through.

Then the sword at Soren's belt, which still wore the discoloration of last night.

"Show it," the Knight said.

Soren drew the blade, careful. He'd wiped it, but only once, and the polish was poor enough that the edge wore a visible filigree of dried blood.

The Knight took the weapon, passed a thumb along its length. Blood for the test. He handed it back.

"Who killed them?" the Knight asked, no accusation in the words.

"Nobody," Tavren said. "We all just tried not to die."

The Knight took this in. He surveyed the horizon, the colorless sprawl behind them. Then he swung a leg and dismounted more gracefully than Soren thought possible in heavy armor.

He motioned them forward, toward the ruined checkpoint. As they approached, Soren saw the building in more detail: the old sign nailed to the archway, script half-legible, something about Law and Passage, etched over with a line of black paint.

The entrance was pitted from where, for a hundred years, hands had knocked.

Inside, the Knight told them to stand in the light. He lit a small fire from a prearranged pyramid of sticks.

The room had one chair and several iron hooks in the wall, for which Soren could imagine a hundred utilitarian uses, none good for the person being hooked.

The Knight squinted. "You'll need to sign the ledger," he said. "Proof of service. House Ashgard expects a record."

He produced a battered book. Soren signed, hand trembling. Rhain and Tavren did too, though Tavren's handwriting was worse than Soren had ever seen it. The merchant pressed an oily thumbprint into the spot where his name had once lived.

The Knight checked the register, then looked at Orsell's blank. "What of the other?" he asked.

Soren said, "Gone. Buried."

For a while, no one spoke. The wind outside made its own case, gnawing through the mortar of the old checkpoint. Soren's fingers still hurt from the digging. He flexed them, saw that two nails had gone black at the beds.

The Knight wrapped the book, set it in his saddlebag. Just before closing the cover, he said, "Do you know what the Codex says about surviving when others do not?"

Soren shook his head.

"It says: 'Those who cannot bury the dead, cannot claim their own breath.' And more than that, it says: 'The sin is not in living on. The sin is in failing to account for it.'"

He let the implication settle cold in the stone room.

Soren found that he wanted to cry, but could not, so he bit the skin at the base of his thumb until the feeling passed.

The Knight nodded to the door, meaning they were dismissed.

The merchant slapped his hands together, as if nothing had happened except a delay in the schedule, and led them out to the wagon.

Rhain and Tavren followed, Rhain clutching the thin sheaf of bread the Knight had given as "medicinal ration." Soren paused at the door, then turned back.

The Knight was staring at the wall, at a notch in the stone where, Soren realized, a name had been carved and then scrubbed out. He stared at the mark for a while.

Outside, Soren walked the line between trail and snow, not because he wanted to leave a record, but because he needed to feel the difference. With every step, Valenna's silence pressed in. He finally pressed the Remnant shard to his chest, so tight it drew blood.

At last, the voice returned. Not loud, not clever, not even present enough to sound as if it cared.

"Practice," it said.

Soren did not answer. He walked until his feet numbed, then walked farther, and for the first time since the city, the quiet felt not like an absence, but a weight he would have to carry until the world found a way to take it off him.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 17: Weight of The Second Cut - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 17: Weight of The Second Cut

Chapter 17: Weight of The Second Cut

They said the dead left the world easy, but it was the living who carried forward like anchors, inch by inch, into a future they no longer fit.

Soren found the city unkind in its indifference, every tower and cobbled gutter looking exactly as it always had.

The stink of mildew leaked through windows at the yolk of sunrise; the blue lit corridors echoed the same slaps and mutters that had framed every day in the barracks. Nothing had changed. He had.

His boots hit the dirt of the training pit the same hour as before, but the sand felt different, denser, unwilling to shift beneath his weight.

He worked the edge until it stopped hurting, then worked it past that, swinging and resetting, then again.

Each breath came thin and sharp, frost burning his lungs even as sweat started to streak along his ribs.

Every time Soren's blade cut the air, the memory of Orsell's scream returned, a backwards echo that trembled his hands for half a second before the next swing erased it.

Tavren circled the perimeter, voice gone flat. He spoke only if forced, and when he did, the brightness in the words was gone: "You missed a spot, gutter."

Soren didn't answer. Not because he feared, but because the shape of Tavren's face had changed; the smirk hung slack now, like a towel forgotten on a railing.

Rhain took to lingering by the edge, pinching at the cracked scabs on his wrist, eyes ducked from Soren's as if they'd shared a secret no one wanted to revisit.

The merchant had vanished in the way all things vanished from the city, overnight, matter of fact, his debts and promises left for braver idiots to settle.

Soren dug the blade in an arcing diagonal, again and again, until his shoulder threatened to seize.

He planted his feet, checked the position, then did it again without bothering to look where it landed.

The repetitions blurred, one indistinct agony stretching into the next. Sometimes, when the arc caught just so, he could see the line of spray from the night outside the wall: not sand, but blood, fountaining into the snow, turning white to pink and then to rust.

Orsell's face stayed sharpest. They'd buried him, but Soren still saw his teeth clenched against the last cold, the lips drawn tight against judgment.

At the edge of the grounds, the instructor watched. Soren felt it more than saw it, the itch between his shoulder blades growing fierce whenever he turned away. The man's arms were folded, his aura of patience bloated to cartoon enormity. He said nothing, letting the morning wind carry any lesson worth hearing.

Valenna's voice did not arrive at first, but when it did, it was more corporal than ever, as if the sword itself had chewed a hollow inside Soren's chest to live in.

"You're off axis,"

she snapped. *"Again."*

He adjusted, or tried to, but the next cycle doubled the ache in his elbow.

"No. Too much reach. Compact. The cut is not a gift, it's a barbed courtesy. Less."

He compressed, cinching the line of his swing as if it offended her personally. The sword, dull steel, no edge but the memory of one, moved with less violence than before, quieter. But this time, the arc landed straight, splitting the air with a tight, ugly whicker.

"Better," Valenna observed, *"but you lead with the upper body. You'll die like that, and the man will laugh over your corpse. Again."*

He tried. Arm, then waist, then hip, a sequence unfamiliar and stubborn. The sword wobbled, nearly an insult.

"This isn't theater," she spat. *"You're not staging an opera in the yard. Put the weight on the back foot. Again."*

It took hours for Soren to break the habit, and when he did, it felt less like learning and more like dismemberment.

By mid morning, his thigh trembled so violently he considered biting down on it to keep it from shaking the rest of him apart. Breath steamed the air; the sweat freezing at his temples turned to grit, then ice.

He stopped only when his palm slipped and the sword barked his finger raw. Soren flexed it, expecting the blood, then sucked the cut.

Valenna did not comfort. *"What are you waiting for?"* she said, skeptical. *"For the pain to teach you something original?"*

He choked down the urge to spit back. Instead, Soren reset the grip, set his feet, tried again. He lost track of time this way.

Lost track of the other boys, too, at some point, Tavren and Rhain had wandered off to the refectory, the sound of their voices a distant, intermittent clatter. Soren preferred them gone.

The world shrank to blade, breath, and the relentless metronome of Valenna's corrections.

"Draw the line, don't chase it."

"Don't look at their eyes. Look at the point of the attack."

"You're not fighting the man. You're fighting the memory of the man."

He learned, but worse, he learned so fast it frightened him. The adjustment period was a single repetition, never more; the pattern cut itself into his hands like grooves in a millstone.

The muscle, once slow and petulant, now responded before the thought could fully finish. His wrist, his elbow, even the lean of his head fell forward into each form as if he'd done it for years, maybe always.

After a second hour, Valenna's instruction shifted, the tone edged not with disdain but something acid, conspiratorial.

"Do the spiral cut," she said.

He hesitated. It was not a term he'd heard. But the ghost-memory, the overlay from the bad nights, flickered: a swirl of movement, a feint toward retreat, then a whip-crack rotation bringing the blade back for a sudden forward lunge.

Soren tried it, slow, missing the tempo at first. He ran it twice more, and on the third, the maneuver worked, swinging him low then upright, the sword's tip arriving at an invisible target's neck.

Silence. Even the wind settled.

Valenna's voice, when it came, was smaller. *"Who taught you that?"*

"You did," said Soren, and then hated himself for answering. He checked for eavesdroppers out of paranoid instinct, then quieter: "I saw it in a dream, when you fought the Knight with the red mask."

A long, slow hush. Soren could feel the memory, hers, his, both, bubbling up through his veins, seeking a place to nest.

"That fight was about twelve years before you were born."

He shrugged, swinging the blade again, a little less certain now.

"If you keep learning at this rate, you'll burn up by summer," she said. Valenna no longer sounded amused. The words thickened, weighted with something Soren refused to name.

He kept going. Each maneuver sapped his bones, but every repetition made the movement easier, more assured.

The pain stayed, but now it was a signal, the proof of having done it right, because when he did it wrong the ache vanished, and the only thing left was embarrassment.

He worked the edge until it stung, then ignored the nerves. He let the form take him whole, let it draw the memory over the surface of his muscles until the two were indistinguishable.

In the background, Tavren and Rhain had returned. They watched from a safe distance, hands wrapped around mugs of the brown, bitter stuff the mess called coffee. Soren could hear them; not the words, but the rhythm, the up and down that sounded less like mockery and more like caution.

He was not sure what he looked like from the outside. Every bone in his body felt heavier than before, but the sword itself now weighed so little he often forgot to brace for the shock at the end of each cut.

He was sure, at least, that he looked different to Valenna. In the silence, he could sense her reappraising, the way her presence, usually sharp as vinegar, now seeped long and slow, taking its time.

Night crept up without warning. The pit, drained of sun, turned blue, then black. Soren kept at it, even as his fingers numbed and the muscles in his legs begged.

He was adjusting for wind direction now, even though none had been ordered. He did the drills with his eyes half-closed, only stopping when he caught himself trying to sight unseen.

"You're not supposed to be this good."

Valenna said this, not as rebuke, but as observation. She let it hang, as if waiting for the world to correct itself.

For a minute, Soren wished someone would.

He let the blade fall to his side, breath steaming, shirt soaked and already stiffening in the night chill. Head bowed, he stared into the dimpled sand.

The past few days, Orsell's laugh, the merchant's winey breath, even Tavren's idiotic boasts, collapsed together until they were nearly the same voice, the same echo, running in the hollow the old him used to fill.

He turned, and for an instant caught Rhain's eyes: unblinking, searching for sense, but finding none.

The instructor watched from the edge of the dark, silent as ever.

Soren squared his feet, then, for no real reason, drew the spiral cut again through the empty air. It landed with a soft, final sigh.

He waited for Valenna to speak. She did not.

Soren went back to the barracks. Even with the ghost at his chest and the memory in his hands, he felt as if something had been left behind, scaled off with the sweat and vanished into the yard.

He left the sword by his cot, lay down with arms over his face, and listened for anything that might tell him he was still himself.

In the blue tinged dark, the only voice was his own, and it wasn't enough to fill the silence.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 18: The First Resonation - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 18: The First Resonation

Chapter 18: The First Resonation

He woke to the rhythm of distance. Soren lay flat on his cot, the wool blanket drawn over his face and pulled so tight to his chin he could taste the old soap caked into the fringed edge.

He listened: the morning was still, muffled by snow and the sleeping bulk of the barracks.

Every hour Chancery's bell tolled, but the walls here had grown greedy; sound died against the stone, folded in on itself, just another secret waiting to rot.

His chest ached. Not the soreness of drills, though that never really faded, but a heat, right at the point where the blue shard pressed through linen close to the heart.

It had been days since Valenna last intruded on his dreams. Nights bled together, each one a little heavier, a little closer to the old street's logic: keep your head down, watch for the cut, never owe anyone more than you can steal back by dawn.

He rolled onto his side and palmed under the cot for the rag bundle. The shard inside had changed, less a thing, more a presence.

Sometimes, when he touched it, it felt as if something just barely resisted being held, a faint pulse against his skin, as if it wanted to push through the world and into something newer, sharper.

Soren turned the cloth-wrapped weight over in his hands until he couldn't tell if the trembling was from the cold or from anticipation.

He waited for her voice to break the silence. It didn't.

He unwrapped the shard, holding it in the space between thumb and knuckle, letting the dim blue reflect off the wall.

The metal looked less jagged in daylight, more like a half-formed promise. Soren closed his eyes and set it against his sternum, feeling the heat spike; breath gathered behind his teeth, then released. Still, nothing.

He thought of throwing the fragment across the cell, just to see if it would shatter further. Instead, he pressed his thumb along the flat of the blade and whispered, "You awake?"

No answer. Not at first.

Then:

"You're getting predictable, Soren."

He smiled, couldn't help it, even though it came out lopsided. "You were quiet."

The answer came slower, threaded with something he'd have called melancholy in another life. *"You didn't need me last night."*

He snorted. "Could have fooled me. They paired me with Tavren again. He knows every trick I learned from you, and the rest he just makes up with spite."

And yet you're alive. Valenna's tone hovered, neither praise nor condemnation.

He lay there, palm pressed to the burning spot at his chest, the other hand clenching the shard so tight the geometry of it imprinted along his lifeline.

"What are you really?" he asked, softer. "Not the history. The thing that's in me."

She waited long enough he thought she'd left him again.

"The Remnant is a path, not a thing. You carry it, so now you're on it. That is all."

He tried to swallow that. "So it's not magic? Not even old blood, the way the gutter rats say?"

"No. Just memory that won't rot."

He watched the frost crawl higher on the window pane. What would it be like, if the memory stayed longer than the body? If you were just the echo of something nobody dared to remember except as legend or curse?

He wrapped the shard back in its rag, careful not to let the edge catch skin, and slipped it under the mattress.

He thought of his own hands, the notches and lines, how they were slowly coming to resemble more the memory of another's.

"You ready?" Valenna's voice was lighter now, almost playful. *"Or are you content to let Tavren break your nose a second time?"*

He dressed, left arm, then right, then the patched coat, the sequence burned in like an oath. He double-knotted the boots and thought of the instructor's warning from two mornings ago: Not all learning is safe. Careful, or you outgrow the patience of those who train you.

Outside, the yard stung with morning. Rhain and Tavren waited by the fence, trading jokes neither seemed to find funny. Soren joined them, careful to keep the limp subtle, he didn't need another spectacle.

They went through drills. The others stumbled more than usual; Tavren's left eye shone a ring of purple, and Rhain nursed the knuckles on his sword hand. The instructor barked at them, but it was softer this time, as if the winter was sapping even cruelty from the world.

Soren moved through the forms, not fast, but exact. Every motion found its mark, every correction landed before the mistake.

Once or twice, he caught Tavren watching him, not with malice, but with a wary curiosity, like he'd taken apart a clock and found something inside that shouldn't be possible.

When the instructor called for pairs, Soren and Tavren met at the center without discussion. They circled, blades at low, Rhain counting the pace from the edge of the sand.

The first few exchanges were nothing, just testing. Tavren liked to make a show of brute force, but Soren, no, Valenna knew the pivot points. After a minute, the match grew quiet, each move slower, more deliberate.

"You're holding back," Tavren hissed, just audible.

Soren shrugged. "You too."

Another pass, and Tavren went for the undercut, the same move he'd landed last week. Soren countered, feeling the old rhythm flood in, Valenna's memory overlayed, but now softer, as if she'd stepped aside to let him own the movement.

He caught Tavren's blade, twisted, and with a flick, sent the practice sword tumbling into the fence post. Tavren looked at his own empty hand, then at Soren, and grinned through a split lip.

"Nice," was all Tavren said, and Soren caught the flash of respect before Tavren rolled his shoulders and stomped off.

The yard emptied in short order, boys scattering to the mess or the dormer's warmth. Soren lingered, staring at the gouges in the sand. He found himself looking at his own arms, the way the tendons flexed beneath the skin, almost as if they were waiting for permission to do something new.

She spoke, low and cordial: *"You ready to know the cost?"*

He cocked his head, forcing a laugh. "There's always a cost."

"Not always yours to pay."

He bent and gathered the scattered blades, feeling the weight of each, balancing them in his palm the way a baker weighed loaves, by hand, by history.

"Tell me," he said, more a dare than a plea.

"Tonight, then. When we're alone."

—

He survived mess. The stew was more bran than broth, but his hands didn't shake as much now, and Rhain sat next to him without flinching. "You're not like them," Rhain murmured, not quite friendly, but as close as he got.

Soren kept his eyes on the bowl. "Nobody is. Not really."

That earned a twitch of a smile, and Rhain nudged him in the ribs. "Tomorrow, they start the blood tests. Instructor says anyone with old magic in them gets marched to the cathedral for the high priest's brand."

Soren wanted to laugh. "They'd be lucky to find anything in me."

"You're the luckiest one here," Rhain said, matter of fact, then turned his attention to a thick heel of bread.

Soren felt the tickle of Valenna's amusement, but she didn't speak again.

He went to the barracks after, unremarked. The others huddled near the stove, trading stories about the old city and the kind of girls, real or no, they hoped to leave behind. Soren lay on his cot, pulling the blanket up so none could see his lips move when he whispered beneath his breath:

"Now?"

"Yes."

He waited.

A hush fell. The air changed, not cold, or not only cold, but a kind of pressure, like storm weather crowding below skin.

"What do you want to know?"

He almost laughed, so many answers that none felt true. Instead: "What is this? What am I turning into?"

Valenna's reply was clinical, the tone she used for lessons she didn't surface until the student was already drowning. *"Remnants are not artifacts, Soren. They are scars on the world. A memory that survived the death of everything that mattered."*

She let it hang, then: *"The Remnant Path is not a trick. It is a bond, not designed but inherited. You carry me. I carry you. So long as neither lets go, the Pattern continues."*

Soren processed this, then asked, "How does it end?"

Silence, then: *"Most don't. They are buried, or burned, or ground under until neither host nor Remnant can distinguish which piece belonged to which. If you're lucky, lucky in a coward's way, you die before the memory erases what you wanted to save."*

He swallowed, feeling the knot form in the soft of his throat. "Is this how you started?"

"Oh, no. There was a sadness there, the kind that only came from stories told too often. I started with glory, Soren. I started with a city, a weapon, and an oath that lasted until the world forgot its own words. You start with hunger. That's better."

He lay there, eyes wide in the dim. "What if I want to stop?"

"Easy. Break the bond. Throw the shard down a well, never touch it again. Let the next idiot make your mistakes."

He gripped the fragment harder, unsure why the thought of letting go made his stomach turn. "What comes next?"

Valenna's voice was, for the first time, gentle:

"Next, you say yes."

He unwrapped the rag. The shard glimmered, steady and blue. Soren put the blade to his breastbone, feeling the heat pulse even through the layers of skin and shirt. He pictured it sinking inside, burning old scars to ash, hollowing him for what came next.

"Do it," he whispered.

The world blurred, lost color. The pain was sharp, a spike driven into the web of his being, but it was over in a flicker. The shard vanished, and in its place a cold, heavy certainty spread through his ribs.

He waited for Valenna to laugh, to tell him he'd failed her or himself. Instead, her words came close, almost within the bones of his ear:

"Well done, little knife."

He slept, and for the first time, dreamed in a color that was not blue.

—

He woke knowing that the world had shifted, if only by a fraction. He stood, stretched. His arms obeyed him, but the overlay, the memory, the ghost, was quieter now. Not so much absence as companion.

There would be tests, drills, more days identical to the last. But Soren would meet them on his own terms, with his own hands, even if half of the impulse belonged to someone else.

For now, that was enough. He joined the others in the yard, blade low, eyes forward, and waited for the next cut, the next lesson, the next hour lived. He felt the memory brewing in his marrow, and wondered, idly, what would happen when the boy he had been finally caught up with the man he was becoming.

He resolved to find out. For now, there was only time, and the pattern, and the slow, secret burn of a path only he could walk.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 19: First Posture of the Sovereign - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 19: First Posture of the Sovereign

Chapter 19: First Posture of the Sovereign

The silence was so thick, Soren feared breaking it would splinter him in half.

He woke wrong, skin buzzing, as if the blue-white shard had multiplied behind his ribs overnight and was now a thousandth of a gram heavier than his body could accommodate.

Every muscle sang with the memory of a lesson that hadn't yet been taught. He waited for Valenna's voice, the morning rebuke, the lesson by ambush, but from the moment he blinked awake to the moment he stalked the corridor, there was only the extracurricular throb of the Remnant, and the patience of a world that had already decided what to do with him.

He dressed on autopilot, hands slow, the cloth catching on a blister at the knuckle. Rhain and Tavren were nowhere; neither was the noise of a barracks waking, which meant he'd overshot dawn or undershot curfew.

The hallway, usually a river of boys feigning purpose, was empty.

Every step sounded too loud. Soren kept to the blue line of the tiling, rolling his feet so soft the noise barely registered.

The world outside the door gaped, new and raw. The pit was empty, the practice dummies caught mid-shiver.

He crossed the sand, following the path his boots had cut yesterday, and wedged himself into the shadow at the edge of the ring.

He waited for the instructor to descend, for a barked command or the insulting limp of that old bastard's cane.

Nothing. Not even a bird; Soren scanned the rooftops and saw only the diamond haze of snow slapping off the gutters.

He wanted to leave, to go back inside, but the ache behind his ribs nudged him onward, so he pulled the practice blade from its rack and set himself just beyond the circle's center. He stood, and for a moment, that was all.

Not a stance, he'd seen a hundred stances, and this was nothing like any of them. It was a subtraction, the absence of any desire to move or flex or dominate. He simply stood, waiting for Valenna's voice.

None came.

After five minutes, he felt stupid. After ten, he started to feel cold in places he couldn't name. At the fifteen-minute mark, his shins began to burn, the ache crawling up to the knees, then the tendons at the hips.

Soren gripped the hilt, not tight, not loose, but like an afterthought in his palm. If you'd asked him, he would have said the sword wasn't even there.

The Remnant disagreed.

He counted breaths, sixty, then one-twenty, then so many he lost track and relapsed to counting heartbeats instead. The cold became its own kind of heat, a tight ring around each bone. Still, Soren stayed. His eyes watered, then dried, then watered again.

Only after the sky paled from indigo to eggshell did the voice return, faint as a breath on the opposite side of glass:

"You will not swing until you earn the right to stand."

He almost snorted. Of all the haunted wisdom, this was the lamest. Not a trick, not a drill, just standing.

But Valenna persisted, every syllable now the low, arctic tone that had shamed him in so many night lessons:

"First posture. The Doctrine of the Still. Everything that follows is a lie unless the world believes you mean it."

He straightened. Without a thought, Soren drew his heels into alignment, a line so precise he felt one side of his body rebel.

The back foot angled ninety degrees, the toes of his left pointing straight at the invisible enemy.

He widened his stance until the thigh muscles screamed, then forced his shoulders down and his chest out, the way tavern fighters did right before they decided to risk a punch on a larger man.

The point of the blade hovered out, perfectly level. It required nothing special, no force, no cunning, but the longer Soren held it, the more every fiber in his arms rebelled. His mouth dried out, the spit gone brittle on his tongue.

He fought the urge to glance up at the main house, to check if anyone was watching, but he knew: if you broke the gaze before the world, you lost it for free.

He stood, and the ache settled, as if the body agreed to this new rule. Soren realized he had no idea if an hour had passed or five minutes.

The voice returned, gentle as it ever got:

"The enemy is not across from you. The enemy is the need to move before you have command. You do not step into the fight; you are the place the fight happens."

His calves trembled, then stopped. The cold faded, the world blurred. Even the city's distant clamor shrank, until there was only his body, the cold fire of memory, and the sword's strange, floating equilibrium.

The moment dissolved not with a lesson, but with a simple cessation: Soren exhaled, and the standing was done. He let the blade go slack, and only then did the pain arrive to remind him how much he'd been faking the calm. He stumbled once, then masked it as a stretch.

At the edge of the yard, a copper pot clattered on the cobbles, someone opening up the refectory. Soren pretended he'd been warming up, then strolled back to the door before his legs could betray the wobble.

—

By breakfast, the barracks' regular entropy resumed. Tavren appeared at the table with a new bandage under his eye and a story about being caught on the wrong end of a bet; Rhain followed, unmarked, but with a tension under his skin Soren recognized from last winter when Rhain feared his mother was dead in the city's quarantines.

Soren slurped his beans, ignored the taste, and listened.

"Did you hear?" Tavren said. "They're doing the blood test rounds. Saw them dragging boys up to the Blue Hall at dawn. Even the noble sons."

Rhain poked at his plate. "Glen's gone. Didn't take his shoes."

Soren frowned. "Gone where?"

"No one said," Rhain whispered, voice a hush meant only for the immediate table. "Some said he's in the Infirmary. Some said he's in the cellars."

Tavren leaned close, eyes bright with anticipation of doom. "Some said the test turned his blood blue and they had to put him down like a sick mule."

He grinned, teeth less white than Soren remembered, then shrugged. "Maybe he just ran."

Soren saw it then: more empty seats in the mess, the way the instructors scanned heads with a new intent.

He didn't know if the cold behind his ribs was fear or the Remnant threatening to break free and launch him out the next open window.

After breakfast, they were herded out into the pit for group drill. But today was different: the instructor didn't divide them by size, but by lottery.

Soren drew a spot in the far left corner with three strangers from the south quarters, a boy with no neck, a girl with a single braid, and a redhead with thumb-sized welts on both arms.

They stood in a crude diamond, each unsure if they were supposed to threaten or defend.

The instructor did not speak. He just watched.

Soren remembered the morning's teaching. He did not square up, did not announce himself.

He just stood, feet aligned, practice blade held with the lazy precision of a man waiting for the world to make its move.

The redhead advanced first, swinging wild and arrogant. Soren watched the attack, not the eyes, and stepped a half pace forward, just enough to jam the charge and let the other's momentum carry him off balance.

The other two shifted, unsure, as the redhead stumbled. In the second window, Soren adjusted his stance, chest wide, shoulders low. He let the sword float, showing neither rush nor retreat.

They circled him. Soren did nothing. The memory flickered, Valenna, once, facing seven men in a ring, doing exactly this. He waited until the girl with the braid committed to a darting move.

He didn't parry; instead, he stepped forward into the attack, closing all space. It was so close the moment froze: her sword caught under his bicep, both their faces flushed from the surprise.

He did not strike. He just held posture, smiling.

The instructor grunted, then moved on.

The rest of the morning followed the same rhythm, three-to-one, four-to-one, always Soren standing as the locus, never as the aggressor. By lunch, his thighs radiated with the ache, but beneath the pain was a core of certainty.

He finished drills and retreated to the shade between the barracks and the wall. The sun had finally burned off the worst of the city's blue, leaving a slush that stank of old blood and candle tallow. Soren lay in the wet, breathing until the air tasted right again.

The voice arrived, as he knew it would.

That was the answer, she said. Now you know the trick.

"What trick?" he muttered, half-hoping the voice would vanish if he played dumb.

"You don't fight them all. You fight the world that tells them they have to fight you."

He rolled onto his side, hating the truth of it. "So what now?"

"Tomorrow we draw," Valenna replied. *"Today, you taught the world to wait before it bites."*

He tried not to smile. It almost worked.

—

That night, the rumors thickened. Boys called into the Blue Hall did not always return. The staff said it was nothing. just tests, just records, just a little Arcana to check your line, but even Tavren admitted with a low voice that one or two had come back "changed." Soren said nothing.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 20: The Line that Divides - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 20: The Line that Divides

Chapter 20: The Line that Divides

The day opened with cuts, a dozen boys, Soren among them, hacking the morning into vertical slices, none of which landed where the instructor wanted them.

The pit was mud now, thawed and re-freezing in miserable layers; even the sand aspired to be stone.

Soren watched the row of backs hunch and heave, the repetition chewing up time and confidence in equal measure.

Tavren put his whole spine into each draw, grunting after every bladefall, and Rhain, careful as ever, traced his arcs with a mathematician's dread of error.

Soren's own arms felt like someone else's, or like the memory of arms. The sword hung perfect and indifferent at the end of his reach.

The instructor, face swollen and red from some private rage, ordered draw cuts, high to low, again, again, again, until the sound of metal through air bored a groove in Soren's skull.

His turn lingered at the end of the line. The instructor pointed at him: "Show it."

Soren stepped forward. He drew, then cut. Once. The blade whickered a straight, living line from above his shoulder down to the mark, not quick, but, worse, without that moment of animal stutter that made the others look human. It was a cut like a tally mark.

The instructor's brow twitched. He said nothing, but the hush that followed pasted the silence to Soren's skin for the rest of the hour.

The drills wore on. Soren listened to his own breath, the inhale-exhale scored with a new rhythm.

Not his. Not even Valenna's. He tried to remember what his body felt like before he'd held the shard, before her voice and its patient, punitive logic, but the memory had gone thin, like a poorly done tracing.

By midday the instructor relented, shuffling them back into the shade of the corridor, where the sun snuck in through warped glass and puddled in blue lipped pools on the floor.

The boys muttered, massaging elbows and wrists; Tavren spat blood in the sink, took one look at Soren and left the room without crowing a single insult.

He ate alone, the bread tearing in dry clumps across his tongue. The mealtime noise ran along the walls but never quite reached him.

Soren pressed the shard in his pocket and waited for the world to notice what he'd done.

—

Night came. The barracks groaned, contracting in the cold. Soren lay awake, counting the cracks in the ceiling and the breaths of the boy snoring in the cot below.

He thought the lessons were over for the day, but when the others' breathing evened out, he felt the warmth spread under his ribs, and the voice slipped in, quiet, careful, like a hand closing a secret.

"What you did today: that was a line. But not the right one."

He rolled away, burying his face in the pillow, but the voice got louder as the world got quieter.

"A line cuts both ways. That was the first rule of Sovereign Doctrine."

He whispered, "Is there a second?"

"Of course. The second is: the line is not a mark but a division. You draw it not to show the world where you stand, but to decide what will never cross over you alive."

He exhaled, felt the lungs empty before the air filled up again.

She continued: *"Every draw is a split. Above is theirs; below is yours. The sword's job is to define, not to chase. If you swing to kill, you're reacting. If you draw a line, you're declaring war on possibility."*

He let the words run over him. He pictured himself in the ring, blade up, the blue-white presence a cold leash along his wrist, and saw what she meant: every cut he'd ever made was a question, and every answer a little more certain than the last.

"Try it," Valenna said.

In the dark, Soren sat up, feet on frozen planks, and withdrew the rag-wrapped shard. He worked his grip, then, not fast, but deliberate, cut the air in front of him, an arc he tried to make not sharp, but clean, sovereign.

"Slower," she prompted.

He tried again. Slower, slower. Not for speed, speed belonged to the desperate, but for the truth of the line.

He felt the world fold on either side of the cut, and for an instant the distance between past and future collapsed to a single, merciless now.

"That's the doctrine, little knife. Not to kill, but to divide. To say: 'Here, and no farther.'"

He tried not to laugh. It would have woken Rhain or worse, Tavren.

He ran the movement five times, then ten. Each was easier, more inevitable. Not instinct, not memory, but something harder, habit turning into will.

He had never in his life been asked to slow down. It shamed him how hungry the request made him.

When the lesson ended, he lay down and let the afterimages of the cut dance behind his eyelids. He wondered if Valenna was proud, or just efficient.

He dreamt of doors, every one slammed shut by a single perfect cut.

—

Week wore on. No one commented on the drills, though the other boys began to avoid Soren in the hall, or watched him only when they thought he wasn't looking.

Even the instructor had started to address him by name, the sound of it slurred but deliberate, a label affixed to the spot Soren stood in the yard.

Rhain was the first to break the silence. It happened during chores, as they swept the frost from the edge of the ring.

Rhain leaned on his broom, then said, in the tone of someone reporting a crime, "You're not fighting like you used to."

Soren looked up. "Should I stop?"

Rhain's mouth opened, then hung, catching on the hook of the question. "It's just—" He trailed off. "You move different. Like a statue that decided to kill."

Soren shrugged. "Statues last longer."

Rhain snorted, then flushed, unsure if it was a joke. "Do you hear what the sword wants or something?" The question was a trap. Soren recognized the edge.

He considered the answer, then lied by omission: "Sometimes, I remember things my body forgot."

Rhain let it hang. He swept, then, as if the world had forgiven the strangeness, went back to the routine.

—

That night, Soren tried the exercise again, not for Valenna, but for himself. The slow, perfect cut.

The declaration that the world must now abide a new rule, one drawn by his hands alone. He pictured something on the other side of the line, an enemy, or perhaps just any old future that dared to approach.

The cut was a warning: Cross, and be erased.

The lesson took.

By third watch, the ache in his shoulders was matched only by a deeper certainty in the bones, a feeling, for the first time in his life, that he could impose his will on the world and the world would yield instead of mock.

Valenna's voice, when it came, was soft as the snow that dusted the pit outside:

"Good. Now make them cross your line. And when they do, erase them."

He lay in the dark, and tried to imagine any force in the world that could force him backwards, once the line was drawn. For the first time, he failed.

He slept and woke with the certainty that every cut had a doctrine, and every doctrine was his to teach the world.