

# CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT

## Chapter 111: The Whisper of Chains (2)

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The blunt truth of it settled into Soren's bones. He wasn't truly Velrane's Blade—he was Velrane's tool, to be used or discarded according to its master's whim. The tournament hadn't changed that fundamental reality; it had only raised the stakes of failure.

By midday, when Kaelor finally dismissed him, Soren could barely keep his sword raised. Every muscle screamed with exhaustion, his shirt soaked through with sweat and blood. The watching knights had long since lost interest in his humiliation, moving on to more pressing concerns.

He made his way toward the washroom, desperate to clean the grime from his skin before it crusted there. As he passed the kitchen courtyard, two serving girls fell silent, their heads bending together as soon as he moved past.

"—seen with the heretic woman—"

"—Cathedral wants him questioned—"

"—says she practiced forbidden rites—"

The fragments followed him like persistent shadows, whispers dying whenever he turned but resuming as soon as he passed. The entire household buzzed with it, Naeria Veyl, the fugitive archivist, and Soren's foolish intervention.

In the narrow corridor leading to the servants' quarters, he nearly collided with Marwen, the estate's head chamberlain.

The older man's eyes widened momentarily before his face settled into careful blankness. He stepped aside with exaggerated care, as if proximity itself might be dangerous.

"Excuse me, sir," Marwen murmured, gaze fixed firmly on the middle distance.

Before Soren could respond, the chamberlain was gone, his hurried footsteps echoing against the stone walls.

The interaction lasted mere seconds, but its message couldn't have been clearer. Word had spread beyond House Velrane. The Cathedral's interest in him had transformed him from curiosity to contagion.

The shard against his chest suddenly pulsed with violent cold, so intense that Soren gasped aloud. He stumbled into an empty alcove, one hand pressed against his sternum as frost seemed to spread beneath his skin.

*'They think to cage you,' Valenna's voice cut through his mind like a blade of ice, sharper than it had been in days. 'Walls. Guards. Rules. Whispers. All designed to make your world smaller.'*

*"Not now," Soren muttered, glancing around to ensure no one witnessed this one-sided conversation.*

*'Every chain they forge, I'll show you how to snap,' she continued, her presence crystallizing within him, cold and implacable as midwinter. 'Every leash, I'll teach you to sever. They fear what you might become. They should.'*

*The intensity of her voice made him flinch. This wasn't the calculating guidance she'd offered before the tournament, nor the quiet assessment during his recovery. This was something harder, something that tasted of vengeance rather than survival.*

*"I need to be careful," he argued quietly. "The Cathedral—"*

*'The Cathedral fears what it cannot control,' Valenna cut in. 'As they should. Their power is built on chains, on binding, on limiting, on denying. But there are older powers they cannot bind.'*

*The shard pulsed again, and with it came a flash of something, a memory not his own. Golden armor splashed with crimson. A sword breaking against stone. Words whispered in a language he almost understood.*

*Soren pressed his palms against his eyes until colored spots danced in his vision. Valenna's presence receded gradually, the bone-deep cold fading to its usual chill. He straightened, forcing his breathing to steady before continuing toward the washroom.*

*Her words lingered, though, settling into the cracks of his resolve like water that would later freeze and split stone. Every chain they forge, I'll show you how to snap.*

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*The library's familiar scent, old parchment, leather bindings, the faint tang of the oil used to preserve ancient texts, wrapped around Soren as he slipped through the heavy oak door.*

*After the day's brutal training and the constant whispers that followed him through the estate, the silent chamber felt like sanctuary.*

*He moved between the towering shelves with practiced quiet, seeking the section on martial traditions that had become his regular haunt.*

*The wound in his shoulder throbbed dully, a constant reminder of his limitations, of the gap between his hard-won skills and the power nobles took for granted.*

*"I wondered when you'd return."*

*Soren startled, turning to find Veyr Velrane seated at his usual table, surrounded by stacks of ancient texts. The heir looked paler than usual, the shadows beneath his eyes suggesting nights spent in study rather than sleep.*

*His ink-stained fingers traced patterns on the open page before him, symbols similar to those Soren had glimpsed in Naeria's books.*

*"My lord," Soren acknowledged with a slight bow. "I didn't mean to interrupt."*

*"And yet your interruption might be the most interesting part of my evening." Veyr gestured toward the chair opposite him. "Sit. There are matters we should discuss."*

*Soren obeyed, acutely aware of the contrast between them, Veyr's immaculate appearance despite his obvious exhaustion, and his own battered state after Kaelor's punishing regimen. The heir studied him with those pale, intelligent eyes that missed nothing.*

*"You look like you've been dragged behind a cart," Veyr observed. "Kaelor takes his duties seriously, it seems."*

*"He's thorough," Soren replied, the diplomatic understatement almost making him wince.*

*"Thorough." A ghost of a smile touched Veyr's lips. "Yes, I suppose that's one word for it." He closed the book before him with careful movements. "Has anyone told you about the inquisitors yet?"*

*The question dropped between them like a stone in still water, ripples of implication spreading outward. Soren felt his mouth go dry.*

*"No, my lord."*

*Veyr nodded as if this confirmed something. "I thought not. My father prefers to restrict information to those who 'need to know.'"*

*The slight emphasis suggested what he thought of this policy. "The Cathedral has dispatched a delegation from the southern temple. Not just Watch, but true inquisitors. They crossed the Karvath bridge yesterday."*

*Cold settled in Soren's stomach that had nothing to do with the shard against his chest. Everyone in Northaven knew the stories, inquisitors, the Church's most feared servants, empowered to act beyond the constraints of common law.*

*"Because of Naeria?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.*

*"Because of what Naeria knows," Veyr corrected. "And because of who might have been... influenced by her research." His pale eyes fixed on Soren with uncomfortable intensity. "If they suspect you're 'touched' by her knowledge, even peripherally, they won't need evidence to mark you as heretic material."*

*The clinical way he delivered this death sentence made it somehow worse. Not a threat, but a simple statement of fact, the sun rises, water flows downhill, and the Church destroys what it cannot control.*

*"I barely spoke to her," Soren said. "I didn't even know who she was."*

*"Intent matters little in matters of heresy." Veyr absently traced a symbol on the table's surface, a gesture that seemed unconscious. "The taint of forbidden knowledge spreads through mere proximity, or so the doctrine claims."*

*He leaned forward slightly, voice dropping though there was no one else in the vast library to overhear. "The inquisitors who come are not like the Watch you evaded. These are men who have built their lives on rooting out corruption. They will not be bribed, reasoned with, or evaded through ordinary means."*

*"What do they want?" Soren asked, though the question felt hollow as soon as he voiced it.*

*"What the Church always wants," Veyr replied. "Control. Obedience. The elimination of anything that challenges their authority." He paused, studying Soren's face. "But specifically? They want Naeria."*

## **Chapter 112: The Summons of Fire (1)**

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The lanterns came first, flaring against the estate walls like sudden wounds in the darkness. Soren jerked upright in his narrow bed, the shard against his chest pulsing with violent cold that stole his breath. Something was wrong.

Through his small window, he caught glimpses of a black-cloaked procession marching through the main gates, their silvered staves catching the torchlight in brief, threatening flashes. The Velrane guards stood aside without challenge, a sight so unusual it sent ice sliding down Soren's spine.

*'They've come for you,' Valenna whispered, her voice sharp as winter frost. 'The Church does not forgive. The Church does not forget.'*

*Soren pulled on his boots with trembling hands, every muscle still aching from Kaelor's brutal training regimen. He had barely finished dressing when his door crashed open, revealing three house guards with grim faces and averted eyes.*

*"Come," the lead guard said, not meeting Soren's gaze. "You're summoned to the great hall."*

*"By Lord Callen?" Soren asked, though he already knew the answer.*

*"By the Inquisitors of the Illuminated Church," the guard replied, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "They carry Archon Devren's personal seal."*

*The shard pulsed again, colder than before. Soren's fingers instinctively moved to his sword belt, but the guards stepped forward as one.*

*"Don't," the lead guard warned. "It will only make it worse."*

*The journey through the estate's corridors felt like a funeral procession. Servants flattened themselves against walls as they passed, faces pale with fear or something uncomfortably like satisfaction.*

*Word had spread, the troublemaker who had brought the Church's wrath upon House Velrane was being called to account.*

*The great hall blazed with torchlight when they arrived, every lamp lit despite the late hour. Black-robed figures formed a half-circle before the main dais, their faces hidden within deep hoods.*

*At their center stood a taller figure, distinguished by the silver embroidery that edged his robes and the ornate staff he carried, not a weapon but a symbol, the eight-ringed sigil of Solmir's Cathedral atop a shaft of polished silver.*

*The lead guard's grip tightened on Soren's arm as they approached, then released him with a slight push forward. He stumbled, still weak from his injuries, and found himself alone in the center of the hall, a dozen hooded gazes fixed upon him.*

*"Soren Thorne." The lead Inquisitor's voice filled the hall, deep and resonant, a voice accustomed to pronouncing judgment.*

*He pushed back his hood, revealing a face that might have been carved from pale marble, austere features, silver-white hair cropped close to the skull, and eyes the color of winter skies, cold and unyielding. "By writ of Solmir's Archon, we summon you on charges of heretical aid and interference with sacred justice."*

*The Inquisitor unrolled a parchment sealed with crimson wax, the symbol of Archon Devren's personal authority. "You are accused of aiding the fugitive heretic Naeria Veyl in her escape from rightful Church authority. Of obstructing the Cathedral Watch in their sacred duty. Of potential contamination by forbidden knowledge."*

*Each charge landed like a physical blow. Soren felt sweat breaking out across his forehead despite the hall's chill. The wound in his shoulder throbbed in time with his racing heart, a constant reminder of his vulnerability.*

*"I didn't—" he began, but the Inquisitor raised his staff, silencing him with a sharp gesture.*

*"Denials will be heard before the proper tribunal," he said, voice hardening. "Under the light of Solmir's sacred fire, where falsehoods burn away."*

*Movement at the far end of the hall drew Soren's attention. Lord Callen entered through the family's private door, his tall figure somehow more imposing in a simple black robe than most men in full ceremonial dress.*

*His pale, merciless eyes surveyed the scene with calculating precision, missing nothing as he assessed the threat to his house.*

*But he remained silent. Made no move to intervene. Simply watched, as if the proceedings before him were some mildly interesting theater rather than the seizure of his house's Blade.*

*'He waits to see which way the wind blows,' Valenna whispered, contempt edging her voice. 'Whether you're worth defending or better sacrificed.'*

*The lead Inquisitor gestured, and two of his black-robed companions moved forward, producing chains that gleamed oddly in the torchlight. Not ordinary iron, but something else, metal etched with glowing script that pulsed with faint blue light. The sight of them sent a wave of nausea through Soren's body, though he couldn't have explained why.*

*"Soren Thorne, you will accompany us to the Cathedral for proper questioning and judgment," the Inquisitor declared. "Resistance will be considered confirmation of guilt."*

*"House Velrane disciplines its own."*

*The voice cut through the hall like a blade, sharp and unexpected. Veyr Velrane stood in the doorway, his slight limp more pronounced than usual as he approached. His face remained composed, but something in those pale eyes burned with an intensity Soren had never witnessed before.*

*"You have no right to seize him like a common cutpurse," Veyr continued, positioning himself between Soren and the Inquisitors with deliberate precision. "He is sworn to our house. His actions, whatever they may be, fall under our authority first."*

*The lead Inquisitor turned slowly, his winter-cold eyes narrowing as they fixed on Veyr. "Heretics are not 'owned,' Lord Veyr. They are tried."*

*The word hung in the air, heretic, with all its terrible implications. Not criminal. Not misguided. Heretic. A designation that placed one beyond the protection of law, family, or tradition.*

*Veyr's posture stiffened, but his voice remained level. "Has he been proven heretic? Or merely accused? House Velrane has stood as pillar of the faith for eight generations. Our Blade deserves the courtesy of proper process."*

*"Lord Veyr—" his father began, a note of warning in his voice.*

***But Veyr continued as if he hadn't heard, words flowing with the precision of someone who had spent his life wielding language as others wielded swords. "Soren Thorne served this house honorably in the tournament. He faced Ser Daven Trescan with courage that forced a noble knight to reveal Aura. His loyalty has been tested and proven."*** Chapter 113 113: The Summons of Fire (2)

Soren felt something twist in his chest that had nothing to do with the shard's cold presence. Veyr was defending him, publicly, deliberately, placing his own standing at risk. For what? A street rat elevated to house Blade? A liability who had brought the Church's wrath upon them?

The Inquisitors exchanged glances, a silent communication passing between them. The leader's marble features remained impassive, but something shifted in his posture, not retreat, but recalculation.

"Then let House Velrane speak for him, in the Cathedral," he finally said, voice carrying new inflection. "If your loyalty is so strong, Lord Veyr, you will stand beside your Blade as witness. Before Solmir's light, the truth will burn clear."

It wasn't concession. It was escalation. Soren recognized the trap even as it closed around them both, not just the accused now, but his defender as well, both to be questioned under circumstances where the Church controlled every aspect of the proceeding.

The two Inquisitors moved forward again with their strange chains, the glowing script pulsing brighter as they approached. One set for Soren. One set for Veyr.

"These are not necessary," Veyr said, eyeing the chains with obvious distaste.

"They are," the lead Inquisitor countered. "Standard protocol for those who enter the Cathedral's Inner Sanctum. For your protection as much as ours." The slight emphasis on 'protection' carried an unmistakable threat.

Soren's hands curled into fists as the first Inquisitor approached with the chains. Every instinct screamed to fight, to run, to resist this final humiliation. The shard against his chest pulsed with violent cold, Valenna's presence surging forward with unexpected urgency.

'To resist now is to die,' she whispered, her voice cutting through the chaos of his thoughts. 'To go is to learn.'

The metal felt wrong against his skin as the Inquisitor locked the manacles around his wrists. Not just cold, but something else, a sensation like spiders crawling beneath his flesh, a muting of something he hadn't realized was there until it dimmed.

The shard's presence receded, Valenna's voice fading to the faintest whisper as the chains' script flared brighter.

Across from him, Veyr extended his hands with calm dignity that belied the gravity of the moment. The Inquisitor hesitated, clearly surprised that a Velrane heir would submit to such indignity without further protest.

"Then let us both be bound," Veyr said, his voice carrying clearly across the silent hall.

Lord Callen's face betrayed emotion for the first time, a momentary tightening around the eyes, quickly masked but unmistakable. Not anger. Something closer to calculation, or perhaps even approval, though Soren couldn't imagine why.

The second set of chains locked into place with a sound like distant bells. Veyr's expression remained carefully neutral, though something flickered in his eyes as



the metal touched his skin, recognition, perhaps, or confirmation of something long suspected.

"The accused will be escorted to the Cathedral immediately," the lead Inquisitor declared. "Lord Veyr will accompany as witness and advocate. The questioning will begin at dawn."

They were led from the hall like criminals, black-robed figures surrounding them as they moved toward the main doors where carriages waited, not Velrane's elegant conveyances, but heavy, windowless boxes meant for transporting those who might not wish to be seen.

As they passed through the grand foyer, Soren glanced up to see Ayren watching from the upper balcony, those amethyst eyes gleaming in the torchlight. Unlike his father's careful blankness or the servants' fearful avoidance, Ayren's perfect mouth curved in a thin smile that suggested he found the entire spectacle tremendously entertaining.

"Their Blade and one of their sons, both seized in the same night," someone whispered as they passed. "What will become of House Velrane now?"

The night air hit Soren's face like a slap as they emerged into the courtyard. Torches lined the path to the waiting carriages, their flames casting twisted shadows across the perfect gravel. House guards stood at rigid attention, their expressions carefully blank as their lord's heir and Blade were marched past in chains.

Soren was pushed into the first carriage, the metal shackles weighing heavier than any armor he'd ever worn. The interior was cramped and stifling, with only a single barred window high on the opposite wall.

Veyr followed moments later, settling onto the narrow bench across from him with careful movements that favored his injured leg.

The carriage lurched into motion before either could speak, wheels grinding against gravel as they rolled toward Northaven's heart, and the Cathedral that dominated its center like a great stone fist thrust skyward.

Soren tested the chains binding his wrists, feeling that strange crawling sensation intensify wherever the metal touched his skin. The glowing script pulsed in rhythm with something he couldn't identify, each flare making his vision blur at the edges. Whatever power these bindings held, they were more than simple restraints.

"Stop fighting them," Veyr said quietly, his voice pitched to carry no further than the carriage's confines. "The more you struggle, the tighter they bind."

Soren forced his hands to stillness, though every instinct screamed against passive acceptance. "Why?" The word came out rougher than intended. "Why did you—"

"Speak for you?" Veyr's pale eyes found his in the dim light filtering through the window. "Because leaving you to face them alone would have been wasteful. And House Velrane does not waste valuable resources."

The clinical assessment stung worse than any insult might have. Even in defending him, Veyr reduced him to a tool, an asset to be preserved rather than a person to be protected.

"Besides," Veyr continued, adjusting his position as the carriage hit a particularly deep rut, "the Church overreaches. They've grown too bold, seizing house retainers without proper consultation. Someone needs to remind them of the old courtesies."

His voice carried an edge that Soren had never heard before, not anger exactly, but something colder. More calculating. As if this confrontation served purposes beyond simple loyalty to a sworn Blade.

The carriage's wheels changed pitch as they rolled from gravel onto stone, the sound echoing off close walls. Through the barred window, Soren caught glimpses of Northaven's inner district, tall buildings pressed together like watchful sentinels, their windows dark save for the occasional flicker of candlelight.

The city slept, unaware that two of its residents were being transported to face charges that could end in purification by fire.

"What will they do to us?" Soren asked, the question scraping against his throat like broken glass.

Veyr was quiet for a long moment, his pale features thoughtful in the shifting light. "The questioning comes first. Under Solmir's sacred flame, they claim, lies cannot survive." He touched the chains around his own wrists with clinical interest. "These bindings are meant to prevent... interference with that process."

The way he said 'interference' sent fresh chills down Soren's spine.

## Chapter 114: The Flames of Truth (1)

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The carriage wheels seized against the cobblestone with a shuddering finality. Soren lurched forward, the strange chains binding his wrists rattling with the sudden stop.

Through the barred window, he glimpsed it, the Grand Cathedral of Solmir, rising like a mountain of pale stone against the night sky. Massive spires of flame-glass twisted upward, each one glowing with an inner light that needed no torch or lantern.

The tallest tower burned amber against the darkness, as if it had captured a piece of the sun itself.

Bells began to toll, slow and resonant, each peal vibrating through the carriage walls and settling into Soren's bones. Three strikes, then silence. Three more, then silence again. The ancient rhythm of arrival, unchanged for centuries, the summoning of faithful to witness judgment.

"The welcoming bells," Veyr said, his voice barely audible over the rolling echoes. "Traditionally rung only for those who may not leave again."

Before Soren could respond, the carriage door was wrenched open. Four black-robed figures stood waiting, their faces concealed within deep hoods. Without a word, they seized him by the arms and dragged him into the night air.

The chains around his wrists suddenly flared with cold so intense it burned. Soren gasped, his breath clouding before him despite the mild spring night.

Frost seemed to spread beneath his skin, radiating outward from where the metal touched him. The shard against his chest pulsed once, weakly, as if struggling against some unseen force.

Veyr emerged from the carriage with more dignity, though Soren noted the tightness around his eyes as the Inquisitors gripped his arms. The heir's chains glowed with the same eerie blue script, pulsing in rhythm with something unseen.

"Move," one of the hooded figures ordered, shoving Soren toward the cathedral steps.

The great staircase stretched before them, wider at the base than ten carriages placed side by side, narrowing as it rose toward massive doors of black iron.

Dozens of hooded figures lined the steps, silent sentinels whose faces remained hidden in shadow. As Soren passed, he felt their gazes tracking him, not with the hot anger of hatred, but with the cold calculation of surgeons assessing where to cut.

"I count thirty-two," Veyr murmured as they climbed. "Full ceremonial complement. They've been planning this for days, not hours."

"Silence!" The lead Inquisitor's voice cracked like a whip.

The chains burned colder with each step, sending tendrils of ice through Soren's veins. By the time they reached the massive doors, his fingers had gone numb, the skin around the manacles white with frost-burn.

The wound in his shoulder throbbed in counterpoint, hot and insistent, as if reminding him of his vulnerability.

The doors swung inward without a sound, revealing not the soaring sanctuary Soren had glimpsed during public ceremonies, but a narrow stone staircase descending into darkness.

Torches lined the walls at irregular intervals, their flames burning with unnatural steadiness, no smoke, no flicker, just constant, unwavering light that cast more shadows than it banished.

"Down," the Inquisitor ordered, shoving Soren toward the first step.

The descent seemed to last forever, each turn revealing another flight, another level beneath the cathedral that the common folk of Northaven never saw. The air grew colder, heavy with the scent of old stone and something else, a metallic tang that caught in the back of his throat, familiar yet unplaceable.

When they finally reached level ground, Soren found himself in a circular chamber with seven corridors branching outward like spokes from a wheel.

The walls were carved with scripture, each passage flowing into the next without break or pause, forming an unbroken chain of holy text that encircled the entire space. The words seemed to shift when viewed directly, rearranging themselves in patterns that made his eyes water.

"The Hall of Ashes," Veyr whispered, his voice tight with something Soren couldn't identify. "Few enter. Fewer leave."

From one of the corridors came the sound of chanting, low, rhythmic voices rising and falling in patterns too complex to follow. The sound wrapped around them like physical tendrils, probing, seeking weakness.

The lead Inquisitor turned to face them, pushing back his hood to reveal that marble-carved face and winter-cold eyes. "The accused will be taken to the Inner Sanctum for preliminary questioning," he announced. "The witness will be prepared separately."

Two Inquisitors seized Veyr's arms, pulling him toward a different corridor than the one from which the chanting emerged. For the first time since their capture, Soren saw something like genuine concern flash across the heir's face.

"Remember your training," Veyr called as they dragged him away. "Remember what—" A black-gloved hand clamped over his mouth, cutting off whatever final advice he had intended to give.

Soren had no time to process this before his own captors shoved him forward, forcing him down the central corridor toward the source of that unsettling chant. The passage twisted downward, the walls narrowing with each turn until his shoulders nearly brushed the stone on either side.

The chanting grew louder, resolving into words he almost recognized, not quite Northaven's common tongue, but something older, something that resonated with the shard's cold presence against his chest. Each syllable seemed to vibrate through his bones, setting his teeth on edge.



The corridor ended abruptly, opening into a circular chamber that stole the breath from Soren's lungs.

At its center burned the Flame of Solmir.

Not a torch or brazier, but a column of living fire that rose from a pit in the floor to the domed ceiling high above. It burned with impossible intensity, gold at its heart shading to white at its edges, yet produced no smoke.

The heat hit Soren like a physical blow, sweat instantly beading on his forehead despite the chill that had settled in his bones during their descent.

"Bring him forward," a voice commanded from beyond the flame.

The Inquisitors pushed Soren toward the fire, forcing him closer than safety should allow. The chains around his wrists flared in response, the blue script brightening until it nearly matched the flame's intensity. They tightened suddenly, metal contracting against his skin with living malice.

Through the shimmering heat, Soren made out three figures on the far side of the pit – Inquisitors of higher rank, judging by the silver embroidery that edged their robes and the ornate masks they wore, each carved to resemble a face frozen in serene contemplation.

## Chapter 115: The Flames of Truth (2)

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"Soren Thorne," the central figure intoned, voice distorted by the mask and the roaring flame between them. "You stand before the sacred fire that burns away falsehood. Here, lies wither. Here, heresy burns."

Soren's mouth had gone dry, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth as he tried to swallow. The heat was unbearable, yet something about the flame drew him closer, called to him with voices he couldn't quite hear.

"We begin with intent," the masked Inquisitor continued. "The root from which all corruption grows."

Another figure moved forward, producing a scroll from which he read in that same ancient, resonant tongue. With each word, the flame pulsed brighter, reaching toward Soren like a living thing hungry for contact.

"You harbor forbidden knowledge," the central Inquisitor accused, the mask rendering his features immobile, inhuman. "You consort with Naeria Veyl, vessel of corruption. You bear within you the taint of heresy."

"No," Soren managed, the word scraping against his dry throat. "I didn't know who she was. I never—"

The chains around his wrists flared with sudden, violent cold that tore a gasp from his lungs. Simultaneously, the flame roared upward, its heat intensifying until the air itself seemed to waver and distort.

Pain lanced through him, starting where the metal touched his skin and racing outward like lightning through water.

"Lies," the Inquisitor said, voice flat with certainty. "The flame reveals what the tongue conceals."

"I'm not lying!" Soren insisted through gritted teeth.

Again the chains flared, again the fire responded, and again that searing pain coursed through his body. This time it lingered, a burning ache that settled into his joints and radiated outward with each heartbeat.

"The heretic Naeria Veyl sought you specifically," the Inquisitor pressed. "Why? What corruption do you share? What darkness do you harbor?"

"I don't know her," Soren repeated, bracing himself for the pain he knew would follow.

It came worse than before, the chains constricting until he felt bones grinding against metal. The flame reached for him across the pit, tendrils of golden fire stretching toward his face like curious fingers.

The shard against his chest pulsed weakly, its presence muted by the strange chains but not entirely silenced.

*'Do not break,'* Valenna's voice whispered, so faint he might have imagined it. *'Do not name me.'*

The questioning continued, hours bleeding into one another as the Inquisitors circled the same points with relentless precision.

Each denial brought fresh pain, each insistence of innocence met with the flame's hungry response. They asked about Naeria's books, about symbols he might have seen, about voices he might have heard.

Through it all, Valenna's presence remained a faint chill beneath the chains' burning cold – not gone, but diminished, as if shouting from a great distance. Her warnings came in fragments, breaking through the bindings only in moments when the pain briefly receded.

*'They seek... what they cannot... understand.'*

*'The flame devours... truth and lies alike.'*

*'Do not name me.'*

*Soren lost track of time, lost awareness of anything beyond the alternating waves of heat and cold, pain and momentary relief. His knees had given out at some point, leaving him kneeling before the flame, supported only by the Inquisitors' grip on his arms.*

*From somewhere beyond the chamber came a new voice, familiar, precise, cutting through the haze of pain with unexpected clarity.*

*"You waste valuable time with these methods," Veyr said, his tone suggesting bored patience rather than concern. "If the boy harbored true corruption, would House Velrane have placed him in the tournament? Would we risk our standing by elevating a heretic to house Blade?"*

*Soren turned his head with effort, vision blurring as he sought the source of Veyr's voice. A smaller chamber adjoined the main sanctum, separated by a grille of black iron through which he glimpsed the heir, still bound but standing with rigid dignity before his own panel of Inquisitors.*

*"Perhaps House Velrane itself requires examination," one of the masked figures suggested, voice silky with implied threat. "If its judgment has grown so... compromised."*

*"A bold claim," Veyr replied, sounding almost amused. "I wonder if Archon Devren would agree that House Velrane, which has supported the Cathedral treasury for eight generations, suddenly requires such scrutiny? Based on the actions of a recently elevated Blade who simply showed poor judgment in the streets?"*

*The calculated dismissal in his tone stung, but Soren recognized the strategy. Veyr wasn't defending him as a person, he was reducing the incident to a political inconvenience rather than a moral crisis. Protecting the house's interests, not Soren's life.*

*The masked Inquisitor's head turned toward the adjoining chamber, considering. The flame pulsed lower, its hungry reach receding slightly. "House Velrane's loyalty has indeed been... constant."*

*"More than constant," Veyr pressed, his voice carrying the weight of old gold and older promises. "Profitable. The cathedral's eastern expansion, the new scriptoriums, the endowment for the Seventh Ring studies, all funded by Velrane coffers."*

*Soren's vision swam as the chains' pressure eased fractionally. The reprieve felt like cool water on burned skin, though the underlying cold remained, gnawing at his bones. He could breathe without each inhalation feeling like swallowing glass.*

*"The boy made a mistake," Veyr continued, his tone suggesting this was obvious to anyone with sense. "A moment's poor judgment, nothing more. Hardly worth straining relations over."*

*Through the grille, Soren caught glimpses of the heir's pale face, composed despite the chains binding his wrists. Those intelligent eyes met his briefly, not reassurance exactly, but acknowledgment. A reminder that this performance served purposes beyond simple mercy.*

*"Yet he aided a known heretic," the central Inquisitor insisted, though something had shifted in his voice. Uncertainty, perhaps, or the recognition of larger political currents at play.*

*"He aided what appeared to be a woman in distress," Veyr corrected smoothly. "A chivalrous impulse, if misguided. The kind of protective instinct we cultivate in our Blades." A pause, precisely timed. "Would the Church prefer house guards who ignore those in need?"*

*The question hung in the superheated air like a blade poised to fall. Soren felt the flame's attention shift, its golden tendrils withdrawing further as the Inquisitors exchanged glances he couldn't interpret behind their masks.*

*The shard against his chest pulsed once, so faintly he might have imagined it. But with it came a whisper of Valenna's voice, clearer than it had been since the chains first locked around his wrists.*

*'The wolf learns new hunters,' she murmured, approval threading through the words. 'Political prey requires different teeth.'*

*The central Inquisitor raised his hand, and the flame began to subside. Not extinguished, but banked, its roar diminishing to a low crackle. The relief was immediate and overwhelming, Soren's knees buckled completely, leaving him collapsed on the stone floor, gasping.*

*"The preliminary questioning is concluded," the Inquisitor announced, his masked face turning toward the adjoining chamber. "Lord Veyr's... perspective has been noted."*

*Two black-robed figures hauled Soren upright, their grip impersonal as they supported his weight.*



# Chapter 116: The Sword of the Cathedral

*Chapter 116: The Sword of the Cathedral*

Cold stone leached the heat from Soren's bones, dragging him back to consciousness against his will. His eyelids weighed more than armor as he forced them open, blinking against the dim light of a single guttering torch mounted on the wall outside his cell.

The chains around his wrists had left raw circles of flesh, crusted with dried blood where he had struggled against them during the interrogation.

*'You survived,'* Valenna whispered, her voice distant as if calling from across a vast chasm. The shard against his chest felt wrong, muted, its customary chill dulled to barely a whisper of cold. *'Their chains... bind more than flesh.'*

Soren tried to sit up, every muscle screaming in protest. The stone bench beneath him had all the comfort of a grave marker. His throat burned with thirst, his shoulder wound throbbing in time with his heartbeat. How long had he been unconscious? Hours? Days?

Through iron bars, he made out an identical cell across the narrow corridor. Veyr Velrane sat on a matching stone bench, his posture unnaturally straight despite the chains binding his wrists.

The heir's face was pale but composed, those intelligent eyes already scanning their surroundings with methodical attention. Unlike Soren, he looked almost refreshed, as if he'd spent the night in contemplation rather than unconsciousness.

"They'll come soon," Veyr said, his voice pitched just loud enough to carry across the space between them. "The preliminary questioning is complete. Now comes the... demonstration."

Soren licked cracked lips, tasting blood. "Demonstration?"

"The Church requires more than confession. It needs spectacle." Veyr's gaze flicked to the corridor beyond their cells, then back to Soren with pointed significance. "They'll show us the difference between what they consider blessed and what they deem corrupted."

The shard pulsed weakly against Soren's chest, Valenna stirring with what felt like concern rather than her usual sharp assessment. *'Be careful,'* she murmured. *'The fire that burned in that chamber... it seeks what lies within you.'*

"What happens if—" Soren began, but the clang of a distant door cut him off.

Footsteps approached, not the soft whisper of Inquisitors' slippers, but the deliberate, rhythmic sound of armored boots against stone. Six black-robed figures appeared, flanked by Cathedral guards whose polished breastplates gleamed even in the dim light.

The lead Inquisitor, the same marble-faced man who had conducted the questioning, unlocked Soren's cell first. "On your feet," he commanded. "It is time to witness the Church's chosen."

Two guards hauled Soren upright when his legs threatened to buckle. Across the corridor, Veyr rose with that same unsettling composure, extending his chained wrists as if offering a gift rather than submitting to constraint.

"How generous," Veyr remarked, his tone carrying just enough edge to make the Inquisitor's eyes narrow. "A demonstration before judgment. One might almost think the conclusion was predetermined."

The Inquisitor's winter-cold eyes fixed on Veyr with faint disapproval. "The truth requires no predetermination, Lord Velrane. It simply is."

They were marched through a labyrinth of stone corridors, ascending from the dungeon depths toward levels where the air grew marginally warmer.

Soren tried to memorize their path, left at the junction with the carved scripture, right past the chamber where hooded figures knelt in silent prayer, up a narrow staircase with twenty-seven steps, but exhaustion and pain kept fracturing his concentration.

Finally, they emerged into a long gallery that seemed to stretch the entire length of the Cathedral's eastern wing. The ceiling soared overhead, supported by arches that resembled ribs of some massive beast.

Between each arch, stained glass windows filtered the morning light into shards of color that painted the marble floor in fragmented rainbows.

But it was what lined the walls that made Soren's breath catch in his throat.

Swords. Dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, displayed on velvet-draped pedestals or mounted on ornate brackets. Each weapon rested as if in state, surrounded by votive candles and small offerings.

Some were ancient, their blades pitted with age; others gleamed as if forged yesterday. A few, those nearest the far end of the hall, glowed with faint internal light, auras flickering around their edges like banked embers waiting to ignite.

"The Hall of Blades," Veyr murmured beside him. "Every significant sword wielded in Solmir's name for the past four centuries. Some say the metal remembers the hands that held it."

Soren felt the weight of history pressing down on him like a physical force. These were not mere weapons, they were relics, each one representing a champion who had fought and likely died for the Church's cause. Names had been inscribed beneath each display: Ser Thalric the Unbroken, Warden Kelia Flameheart, Lord Commander Valar Lightbringer.

Names that would be remembered long after his own was forgotten. Champions whose devotion had earned them a place in this sacred hall, while he stood in chains, accused of heresy.

The Inquisitors led them to the center of the gallery, where a circular dais rose from the marble floor. The guards positioned Soren and Veyr at its edge, their chains suddenly growing colder, heavier, as if responding to some unseen command.

"Behold," the lead Inquisitor announced, his voice echoing against the vaulted ceiling, "the difference between corruption and blessing. Between doubt and certainty. Between heresy and faith."

A door opened at the far end of the gallery, and all sound seemed to drain from the hall.

The man who entered moved with the measured precision of someone who had never needed to hurry. Taller than any of the guards by at least a head, his form was encased in polished steel plate that caught the colored light and transformed it into something radiant.

Unlike ordinary armor, the metal was etched with scripture that spiraled across every surface, words of holy text rendered in silver against the steel, forming patterns that seemed to shift when viewed directly.

His face, framed by close-cropped golden hair, might have been carved from the same marble as the Cathedral itself, all clean lines and perfect symmetry, utterly devoid of doubt or hesitation.

Eyes the color of burning coals surveyed the hall with serene detachment, taking in the chained prisoners without any hint of emotion.

But it was the sword at his side that drew Soren's gaze like a lodestone pulling iron. The weapon hung from a belt of white leather, its hilt wrapped in the same material, its pommel set with a single amber stone that glowed with internal fire.

Even sheathed, the blade radiated power, a steady, pulsing light that leaked from the scabbard like sunrise breaking through clouds.

"Ser Calvin Merrow," the Inquisitor intoned, "Flamebearer Paladin, Sword of the Cathedral, Chosen of Solmir's Light."

The knight inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the introduction with practiced humility that somehow managed to convey absolute certainty in his own worthiness.

"He stands as living proof of Solmir's blessing," the Inquisitor continued, his voice carrying to every corner of the hall. "A vessel of the sacred flame, untainted by doubt, unmarred by corruption."

Soren felt himself being measured by those burning eyes, weighed and found wanting in the space of a single heartbeat. The shard against his chest pulsed weakly, Valenna's presence stirring with something that felt almost like recognition, or was it fear?

Ser Calvian ascended the dais with unhurried steps, each movement precise as a ritual long practiced. When he spoke, his voice carried the resonance of deep bells, measured and absolute.

"The difference must be demonstrated," he said, drawing his sword in a single fluid motion that seemed to bend light around the blade.

The weapon emerged from its scabbard trailing fire, not the scarlet aura Soren had witnessed in the tournament, but pure golden flame that mirrored the sacred fire in the chamber below. It burned without consuming the steel, wrapping around the blade like a living thing, reaching toward the ceiling in hungry tendrils.

Heat washed across Soren's face, drying the sweat on his brow in an instant. The chains around his wrists suddenly constricted, growing so cold they burned against his skin. The shard against his chest pulsed violently, Valenna's presence surging forward with unexpected strength.

*'False flame!' she hissed, her voice clearer than it had been since their capture. 'It is not pure. It is stolen. He is no true vessel, he is a thief who wears what he has taken!'*

The golden fire intensified, spreading from Calvin's sword to envelop his armored form in a nimbus of sacred light. The scripture etched into his plate began to glow, each word burning with the same amber radiance as the flame itself.

Pain lanced through Soren's body, starting where the chains touched his skin and radiating outward like lightning through water. His knees buckled, would have sent him crashing to the floor if not for the guards' grip on his arms.

Through watering eyes, he saw Veyr watching the display with studied neutrality, though something in the heir's posture suggested he was not as unmoved as he appeared. When Veyr spoke, his voice cut through the hall with surprising clarity.

"Impressive theatrics," he said, each word precisely chosen and delivered. "The Cathedral has always excelled at spectacle. House Velrane prefers substance, we produce our warriors through breeding, training, and sacrifice, not through... pageantry."

## Chapter 117: The Trial of Flame (1)

*Chapter 117: The Trial of Flame (1)*



The Inquisitors stiffened, heads turning toward Veyr with the synchronized movement of predators sensing prey. But Calvin's expression remained unchanged, that perfect serenity undisturbed by the implicit challenge in Veyr's words.

"Your house produces skilled fighters, Lord Velrane," he acknowledged, the golden fire around his sword pulsing in time with his words. "But skill alone cannot stand against corruption. Only the flame purifies."

He stepped closer to Soren, close enough that the heat from his aura became nearly unbearable. Those burning eyes studied him with the detached interest of a naturalist examining an unusual specimen.

"You are unworthy to stand as a Blade," Calvin said, his voice carrying absolute certainty.

"Yet something clings to you." His gaze dropped to Soren's chest, to the exact spot where the shard rested beneath his shirt. "The Flame will strip it bare."

In that moment, Soren understood with perfect clarity. This man, this living weapon of the Church, would be his executioner if the judgment fell against him. Not a faceless Inquisitor, not a nameless guard, but this knight whose very presence forced silence upon the hall.

And as those burning eyes held his, Soren felt the shard pulse once more against his chest, not with fear, but with something closer to determination.

Valenna's presence sharpened, her voice cutting through the pain with crystalline clarity.

*'Remember,' she whispered. 'I have faced his kind before. And they burned all the same.'*

—

The Cathedral's Grand Audience Chamber smelled of incense and sweat, the former a deliberate choice, the latter an unavoidable consequence of packing so many bodies into the vast circular space.

Soren's raw wrists throbbed beneath the chains as the Inquisitors marched him and Veyr through massive bronze doors that groaned like dying beasts.

His legs nearly gave out at the sight before him. Hundreds of faces turned as one—clergy in their formal vestments, knights in polished armor, nobles in finery that could have fed Northaven's poor for a year.

The morning light filtered through stained glass high above, casting the assembled crowd in fragments of blue and gold that made them seem less than human, more like pieces of some vast, breathing mosaic.

"Quite the audience," Veyr murmured beside him, so softly only Soren could hear. "They've invited half the city's power to witness your judgment."

The guards shoved them forward, down a central aisle that seemed to stretch for miles. With each step, Soren felt the weight of those stares, some eager, some disgusted, some merely curious, as if he were an exotic animal brought for their entertainment.

At the chamber's center rose a raised dais of polished white stone. Upon it stood the marble-faced Inquisitor, flanked by six of his black-robed brethren. Behind them loomed Ser Calvin, golden-haired and impassive, his scripture-etched armor gleaming in the colored light.

When they reached the dais, the guards forced Soren to his knees. The stone floor struck his bones with bruising force. Veyr they allowed to remain standing, though the chains around his wrists kept his hands bound before him.

The lead Inquisitor raised his arms, and silence fell across the chamber like a smothering blanket.

"Faithful of Solmir," he intoned, voice carrying to every corner of the vast space, "you are summoned to witness the Trial of Flame, sacred rite of our faith, in which Solmir's blessed light reveals truth by consuming falsehood."

A murmur passed through the audience, anticipation rippling like heat across still water.

"Before you kneels a vessel suspected of harboring corruption," the Inquisitor continued, gesturing toward Soren with a pale, long-fingered hand. "A common-born fighter elevated beyond his station, who aided the heretic Naeria Veyl in her flight from sacred justice."

From his position on the floor, Soren could see only the front rows of the audience. Knights of various houses sat rigid and attentive, their faces betraying nothing.

Clergy leaned forward in their seats, some with expressions of righteous certainty, others with something closer to unease.

"The flame will show what lurks within," the Inquisitor declared. "If he is pure, he will endure. If corrupted, he will burn."

Ser Calvin stepped forward, each movement precise as a clockmaker's gear. Sunlight caught his golden hair, forming a halo that made him seem more icon than man. When he drew his sword, the sound cut through the chamber's tension like a physical blow.

Solbrand emerged from its scabbard trailing fire, pure golden flame that wrapped around the blade like a living thing, hungry and eager. Heat washed across Soren's face, drying the sweat on his brow in an instant. The audience gasped as one, several nobles in the front row leaning back involuntarily.

Two Inquisitors approached, carrying between them a bronze vessel filled with fine gray powder. With methodical precision, they poured it around Soren in a perfect circle, the ash settling on the white stone in an unbroken line.

"The ward of revelation," the lead Inquisitor announced. "Through which no falsehood may pass unmarked."

The chains around Soren's wrists suddenly constricted, metal biting into flesh with renewed malice. Fresh blood welled around the cuffs, warm droplets spattering onto the immaculate floor. The pain was immediate and overwhelming, forcing a hissed breath between his clenched teeth.

The shard against his chest pulsed violently, a surge of cold so intense it burned. Valenna's presence crystallized within his mind, sharp and clear as broken ice after hours of muted silence.

*'Do not yield,'* she whispered, her voice stronger than it had been since their capture. *'His fire is borrowed. It cannot pierce the truth of the root.'*

Ser Calvin approached the circle, Solbrand held before him like a torch. The golden flames cast his face in stark relief, shadows gathering in the hollows of his cheeks, light gleaming in eyes that burned with absolute conviction.

"Solmir's flame reveals all," he said, voice carrying the resonance of deep bells.  
"No corruption may hide from its blessed light."

He raised the sword high, its golden fire stretching toward the vaulted ceiling. When he brought it down, the blade did not touch Soren, instead, it hovered at the edge of the ash circle, point directed at his chest.

"By Solmir's will," Calvin intoned, "let truth be revealed."

The flame leapt from the sword, crossing the barrier of ash as if it were nothing more than a line drawn in sand. It engulfed Soren in a cocoon of golden light, searing heat that stole the air from his lungs and sent pain lancing through every nerve.

His body screamed for relief, for surrender, for the mercy of unconsciousness. The chains burned colder in response, as if fighting the flame with their own bitter chill. Somewhere distant, he heard voices raised in shock or prayer, the audience witnessing his torment with religious fervor.

Through the haze of agony, Soren felt something stir within him, not Valenna's voice this time, but her presence, surging forward against the chains' restraint. The shard pulsed against his chest, a rhythmic cold that countered the flame's relentless heat.

*'Resist,' she hissed, voice cutting through the roaring in his ears. 'His fire is not pure. It is stolen light, hollow at its core.'*

The golden flames pressed closer, seeking entrance through eyes, mouth, every pore of his skin. But where they touched, something pushed back, a faint blue glow emanating from beneath his shirt, so subtle it might have been imagination.

## Chapter 118: The Trial of Flame (2)

*Chapter 118: The Trial of Flame (2)*

Soren's vision narrowed to pinpricks of light swimming in darkness. His lungs burned for air he couldn't seem to find. Yet still he remained upright, still the flame failed to consume him entirely.

Gasps rippled through the chamber. A cleric in the front row half-rose from his seat, face pale with shock. Two knights exchanged glances heavy with unspoken questions.

"The corruption interferes with the sacred flame!" the lead Inquisitor declared, voice sharp with what might have been alarm. "See how it resists Solmir's purifying light!"

But the whispers had already begun, spreading through the assembled crowd like fire through dry timber.

"—should have burned instantly—"

"—something's wrong—"

"—the flame falters—"

Veyr's voice cut through the growing murmurs, cold and precise as a surgeon's blade. "How curious," he said, each word perfectly audible in the sudden hush. "If your blessed flame cannot purge corruption from a mere common-born Blade, one might question the potency of your relics."

The lead Inquisitor's head snapped toward Veyr, winter-cold eyes narrowing with dangerous intensity. "Take care, Lord Velrane. Such words border on blasphemy."

"Observation, not blasphemy," Veyr replied, his tone suggesting bored disinterest rather than fear. "House Velrane has witnessed many demonstrations of Solmir's power over the centuries. This one seems... underwhelming." He glanced at the assembled nobility, many of whom shifted uncomfortably in their seats. "I wonder if others share my disappointment?"

The calculated dismissal hit its mark. Several priests glanced at one another with obvious unease. A knight bearing House Ashgard's iron fist emblem leaned toward his neighbor, whispering behind a gloved hand.



Even some of the black-robed Inquisitors seemed to hesitate, gazes darting between their leader and the still-burning figure at the center of the ash circle.

Ser Calvian's perfect features remained unchanged, but something in those burning eyes intensified, not anger exactly, but a hardening of purpose that made the flames around his sword burn higher, hotter.

With a single fluid motion, he withdrew the golden fire, pulling it back into Solbrand's gleaming blade. The flames retreated from Soren's body, leaving him gasping and trembling but unburned.

The sudden absence of heat made the chamber's air feel freezing against Soren's sweat-soaked skin. His lungs heaved, drawing in oxygen with desperate greed. The shard against his chest pulsed once more, then settled into its familiar cold, Valenna's presence receding to a watchful distance.

Silence held the chamber in its grip as Calvian regarded Soren with those burning eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice carried absolute certainty despite the demonstration's apparent failure.

"The depth of corruption clinging to this vessel exceeds what can be cleansed in this chamber," he declared. "It has taken root too deeply for even Solmir's blessing to reach in a single purge."

His gaze swept the assembled crowd, challenging anyone to question his interpretation. "The final judgment must come before the true Flame of Solmir itself, the eternal fire that burns in the heart of the Inner Sanctum."

The lead Inquisitor stepped forward, seizing the explanation like a drowning man clutching at driftwood. "Indeed, the spectacle has only confirmed the necessity of more stringent measures. The corruption resists ordinary flame, proof of its malignant nature."

Murmurs rippled through the audience, some accepting this reasoning, others clearly skeptical. The political damage Veyr had inflicted couldn't be entirely undone, even by Calvin's commanding presence.

Soren's strength finally failed him. He slumped forward, barely catching himself before his face struck the stone floor. The world swam around him, voices blending into meaningless noise. His body felt hollowed out, scraped raw from inside.

Through the encroaching darkness, Valenna's voice reached him one last time, sharp with something that might have been satisfaction.

*'See? Their fire cannot reach the root. He is not your executioner. Not yet.'*

As consciousness slipped away, Soren felt hands gripping his arms, dragging him backward across the polished stone. The last thing he saw was Veyr's face, those pale eyes watching him with calculated interest, not concern for a person, but assessment of a valuable asset whose worth had suddenly, unexpectedly, increased.

The stone floor swayed beneath him as they dragged him backward, the world tilting like a ship in high seas. Black spots bloomed in Soren's vision. The chains around his wrists felt heavier than anvils as his body surrendered to exhaustion.

He came to in a different chamber, smaller and more austere than the grand audience hall. His back rested against a cold wall, legs splayed awkwardly before him. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth where he'd bitten his tongue during Calvin's display.

"Drink."

A cup pressed against his lips. Water spilled down his chin as he gulped greedily, the simple act of swallowing requiring more concentration than it should have. When his vision cleared, he found Veyr crouched before him, still bound but somehow managing to look composed despite the chains.

"You survived," Veyr said, his voice pitched low enough that the guards stationed at the door couldn't hear. "Rather spectacularly, I might add."

Soren tried to speak, but his throat felt scraped raw. He managed only a hoarse croak that barely resembled words.

"Don't strain yourself," Veyr continued, settling beside him against the wall. "The flame takes more than it appears to. You'll need time to recover."

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed weakly, its familiar cold a comfort after the searing heat of Calvin's golden fire. Valenna remained silent, her presence faint but steady, like a candle flame sheltered from wind.

"What..." Soren swallowed painfully. "What happened out there?"

Veyr's pale eyes darted toward the guards before answering. "Politics happened. The Church staged a demonstration meant to break you publicly and validate their authority." His lips curved in what might have been a smile on anyone else. "Instead, they've created doubt. Ser Calvin's flame should have consumed you instantly if you were truly corrupted. Its failure suggests... complications to their narrative."

Soren remembered the faces in the audience, the confusion, the whispers, the uncertain glances between clergy members. "They'll try again."

"Of course they will." Veyr shifted slightly, favoring his bad leg. "But now they must contend with witnesses. Noble witnesses who saw the Cathedral's champion falter against a common-born fighter with no religious training." He paused,

studying Soren with renewed interest. "Though perhaps not so common as they believed."

The implication hung between them, dangerous as a naked blade. Soren looked away, unwilling to meet that searching gaze. The chains around his wrists had stopped burning quite so fiercely, though the skin beneath remained raw and blistered.

"You spoke against them," he said instead. "Challenged them publicly."

"I merely observed what everyone saw," Veyr replied. "Their flame failed to consume you. That suggests either their power is weaker than claimed, or..."

## Chapter 119: The Flame Chooses (1)

*Chapter 119: The Flame Chooses (1)*

They came at dawn, six hooded figures gliding through the door of his cell. The chains around Soren's wrists clinked as he struggled to his feet, muscles screaming from hours spent on cold stone.

"Time for judgment," one of them whispered, voice scraping like metal on stone.

Soren looked across the narrow corridor where Veyr had been held, but the cell stood empty. No sign remained of the Velrane heir, not even the imprint where he had sat so composed despite his chains. The realization sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the damp air.

"Where's Lord Velrane?" he managed, throat raw from thirst.

The Inquisitor's face remained hidden within his deep hood. "The noble witness is being escorted separately. Your paths diverge now."

They marched him through corridors that twisted ever downward, descending deeper beneath the Cathedral than he had thought possible.

The air grew thicker with each turn, heavy with incense that couldn't quite mask the underlying scent of old stone and something metallic that caught in the back of his throat. Soren's legs trembled with each step, weakness from the previous day's ordeal still clinging to him like a second skin.

The shard against his chest remained cold but quiet, Valenna's presence muted as if conserving strength. He found himself longing for her sharp commentary, for any voice besides the soft shuffling of Inquisitors' slippers against stone.

The passage ended abruptly at a circular door of blackened iron, its surface etched with symbols that made his eyes water if he looked directly at them.

Two Inquisitors placed their hands against the metal, chanting words in that same ancient tongue he'd heard during his questioning. The door responded with a low groan, swinging inward to reveal what lay beyond.

Heat struck him like a physical blow, stealing the breath from his lungs. The chamber beyond was perfectly circular, its walls lined with pillars carved from some pale stone that seemed to absorb the dancing light rather than reflect it.

Between each pillar stood reliquaries of polished gold, their glass fronts revealing grisly contents, bones, dried flesh, scraps of fabric preserved in strange liquids.

Saints' remains, he realized with a jolt. The preserved fragments of those the Church deemed holy.

But it was what dominated the center of the chamber that drew his gaze and held it. A massive brazier of hammered bronze, easily twice the height of a man, rose from a pit in the floor.

Within it burned the Eternal Flame of Solmir, the sacred fire that had ignited when the faith was founded, never extinguished in all the centuries since.

Unlike Calvian's golden sword-flame, this fire burned white at its core, shading to deep amber at its edges. It roared upward toward a vaulted ceiling lost in shadow

and smoke, its heat so intense that sweat immediately soaked through Soren's threadbare shirt.

A small gallery had been built into one wall, elevated above the main floor. There sat the audience for what was to come, senior clergy in formal vestments, high Inquisitors whose faces remained shadowed within their hoods, and Ser Calvin himself, golden and perfect in his scripture-etched armor.

This was not the public spectacle of the audience chamber. This was something more intimate, more final.

Soren's gaze swept the gallery, searching for Veyr's pale face among the assembled witnesses. He found the heir seated apart from the others, still bound in those strange chains, his expression carefully neutral as he observed the proceedings below.

Their eyes met briefly across the chamber, not encouragement exactly, but acknowledgment.

The Inquisitors forced Soren to his knees before the brazier, the heat from the flame searing his face even at this distance.

From within their robes, they produced new chains, not the cold-burning restraints he'd worn since his capture, but links of metal inscribed with scripture, each verse flowing into the next in an unbroken circle.



They bound his wrists anew, the metal burning hot against his raw skin.

"Scripture-forged," one of them whispered as they tightened the bonds. "That which contains the Word contains all truth."

They dragged him closer to the brazier, close enough that breathing became painful, each inhalation scorching his lungs. The flame roared higher as he approached, as if sensing fresh fuel.

The lead Inquisitor, the marble-faced man who had conducted his questioning, stepped forward, arms raised toward the vaulted ceiling.

"The Flame cannot be deceived," he intoned, voice carrying despite the fire's constant roar. "It burns truth into light, and corruption into ash."

The words fell like stones into still water, rippling outward with finality that settled into Soren's bones. This was not questioning. This was execution. They had brought him to the heart of their power to be consumed, erased so thoroughly that not even memory would remain.

'*Stand,*' Valenna's voice suddenly cut through his mind, sharp as winter frost after hours of silence. '*Stand before it. You are not theirs to burn.*'

With tremendous effort, Soren forced his legs to straighten, rising from his knees despite the chains binding his wrists. The movement drew murmurs from the gallery above, clergy leaning forward with renewed interest.

The Eternal Flame seemed to respond to his defiance. It swelled outward, tendrils of white-hot fire reaching toward him like curious fingers. The heat intensified until Soren's skin felt ready to blister and peel away from muscle.

"The corruption reveals itself!" the Inquisitor declared, satisfaction edging his voice. "See how it recoils from sacred light!"

But something was happening that none of them had anticipated. The flame stretched toward Soren, yes, but it didn't consume. Instead, it wrapped around him like a living cloak, licking at his clothes, his skin, his hair... yet leaving him unburned.

The shard against his chest pulsed with violent cold, so intense it sent frost spreading outward beneath his shirt despite the flame's overwhelming heat. Valenna's presence crystalized within him, sharp and clear as broken ice.

*"It reacts to you,"* she whispered, her voice grounded in a way he had never heard before. *"Your bloodline.."*

# Chapter 120: The Flame Chooses (2)

*Chapter 120: The Flame Chooses (2)*

The flame's embrace tightened, not burning but illuminating. Soren staggered under the onslaught of sensations, not pain, but a pressure that threatened to crack him open from within, revealing something buried so deep he hadn't known it existed.

Visions flashed before his eyes, fragmented but vivid:

A throne constructed entirely of blades, their edges gleaming in torchlight.

A battlefield over which loomed a dragon's shadow, massive and ancient.

A crown wreathed in flames that matched the color of the fire now surrounding him.

The chains around his wrists began to glow red-hot, the metal softening, scripture warping as hairline fractures appeared in the links.

From the gallery came sounds of confusion, gasps, muttered prayers, a chair scraping back as someone rose in alarm.

Soren could barely focus on them through the curtain of light that enveloped him, but he caught glimpses of wide eyes, pale faces, hands clutching religious symbols for protection.

"Impossible," someone whispered, the word barely audible over the flame's roar.

The lead Inquisitor's marble composure cracked for the first time. His winter-cold eyes widened as he stepped back from the brazier, one hand raised as if to shield himself.

"The corruption twists the Flame!" he shouted, voice rising with what might have been fear. "This is not blessing, it is proof of taint! The heresy is so deep it perverts even sacred fire!"

But whispers rippled through the assembled clergy, uncertainty spreading like cracks through ice. Some murmured of divine favor, ancient texts that spoke of those chosen by the flame itself.

Others looked terrified, as if witnessing something that threatened foundations they had believed unshakable.

Soren remained standing, engulfed but unconsumed. The visions continued to flash before him, each one feeling like a memory he had never lived yet recognized to his core.

Through the curtain of flame, he saw Ser Calvin rise from his seat in the gallery, golden perfection marred for the first time by an expression of naked shock. The knight's burning eyes fixed on Soren with something new, not contempt or righteous certainty, but confusion. Perhaps even fear.

For Calvin knew, as did everyone in that chamber, that the Eternal Flame bent toward Soren instead of consuming him. Bent toward him instead of its supposed champion.

"If Solmir's own Flame spares him," Veyr's voice cut through the growing chaos, precise and carrying, "who among us dares dispute the will of the divine?"

The heir had risen in the gallery, chains still binding his wrists but posture straight and commanding. His pale eyes surveyed the assembled clergy with cool calculation.

"The sacred texts speak of those who cannot be consumed," Veyr continued, each word carefully chosen. "Of vessels the Flame recognizes. Is it heresy to acknowledge what we all witness with our own eyes?"

Soren knew Veyr didn't believe a word of it, the heir's faith was in knowledge, in ancient texts, in political calculation. But he wielded these words like perfectly balanced knives, striking at the heart of the Cathedral's narrative.

The nobles and clergy present shifted uncomfortably in their seats, forced into hesitation by the spectacle before them. No one could simply condemn Soren now, not when the Church's most sacred relic had refused to burn him.

The flame gradually receded, withdrawing back into the brazier with reluctance that felt almost sentient. As its embrace loosened, Soren nearly collapsed, legs trembling with exhaustion.

Only the chains around his wrists, held by Inquisitors who had backed away during the display, kept him upright.

The lead Inquisitor stepped forward again, composure partially restored though something haunted lingered in those winter-cold eyes.

"The trial is... inconclusive," he declared, the admission clearly painful. "The subject requires further purification before final judgment can be rendered."

It wasn't victory, but it wasn't execution either. Soren felt the reprieve like cool water on parched skin, relief so profound his knees threatened to buckle beneath him.

The Inquisitors surrounded him again, their grip on his chains tighter than before, as if they feared what might happen should they loosen their hold. They dragged him backward from the brazier, from the Eternal Flame that had refused to consume him.

As they pulled him toward the iron door, Soren caught one last glimpse of Veyr in the gallery, those pale eyes fixed on him with new assessment, measuring his value against whatever political advantage this spectacle might yield.

Ser Calvin remained standing, golden perfection now marred by the first uncertainty Soren had seen in that marble-carved face. The knight's burning gaze followed him as he was dragged from the chamber, tracking him with an intensity that promised this was far from over.

The shard against his chest settled into its familiar cold, Valenna's presence receding slightly though her voice remained clear as they pulled him into the corridor beyond.

*"Now they see you," she whispered, calm and cutting. "Now they'll fear you."*

The iron doors clanged shut behind him, cutting off the roar of the Eternal Flame. Soren stumbled as the Inquisitors dragged him down the corridor, his legs still weak from the ordeal.

The scripture-forged chains bit into his raw wrists, but the pain felt distant now, overwhelmed by the echoes of what had just happened.

*'You are marked now,' Valenna whispered, her voice clearer than it had been since their capture. 'Neither heretic nor faithful. Something they cannot categorize.'*

The Inquisitors' grips tightened on his arms, their fingers digging into muscle with bruising force. Beneath their hoods, Soren caught glimpses of pale faces tight with confusion, perhaps even fear.

They had expected to witness an execution. Instead, they had seen something none of them could explain.

"Take him to the holding cell," one of them ordered, voice strained. "The Archon must be consulted."

They rounded a corner, and Soren nearly collided with a figure in midnight-blue robes trimmed with silver. The man stepped back, pale eyes widening as he took in the disheveled prisoner and his escort.

"High Scribe Dalen," an Inquisitor acknowledged with a slight bow. "We are returning the subject for—"



"I know what you're doing," the scribe interrupted, his gaze fixed on Soren with unsettling intensity.

*He moved closer to Soren, each step deliberate despite his limp. "If you claim him, you claim us. House Velrane is not so easily cowed."*

*The hall fell silent. Servants pressed against the walls, barely breathing. Guards shifted uncomfortably, hands hovering near weapons they dared not draw. The air itself seemed to thicken with tension as Veyr's challenge hung between them.*