

CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT

Chapter 121 121: The Break In The Walls (1)

The air still tasted of fire. Soren's lungs burned with every breath as the Inquisitors marched him back through the Cathedral's labyrinthine passages, their fingers digging into his arms with bruising force.

They no longer seemed concerned with ceremony or dignity, just removal, as if he were a dangerous artifact that needed containment.

Their faces had gone pale beneath their hoods, eyes darting to him and quickly away, as if afraid of what they might see.

The scripture-chains around his wrists felt heavier than before, the metal hot against his raw skin.

'What did it mean?' Soren wanted to ask, but Valenna remained unnervingly silent. The shard against his chest pulsed with its familiar cold, but her presence felt... different. Withdrawn.

Calculating. He sensed her unease like a cold current beneath still water.

As they rounded a corner, Soren counted four Cathedral guards where there had been only two before, armored figures standing rigidly at attention, hands never straying far from their weapons.

Their eyes followed him as he passed, not with the contempt he'd grown accustomed to, but with something closer to wary uncertainty.

A cluster of novices pressed themselves against the wall to make way, their white robes stark against the dark stone. One whispered an urgent prayer, fingers tracing protective symbols in the air. Another clutched a religious pendant so tightly his knuckles whitened.

"—resisted the Flame—"

"—impossible, unless—"

"—the texts speak of—"

Their fragments followed him down the corridor, hushed but clear in the cathedral's perfect acoustics. The Church was shaken, its foundations disturbed in ways Soren couldn't fully comprehend.

They passed a side hallway where raised voices echoed against stone. Soren turned his head, catching sight of senior clerics engaged in heated debate.

Scribes in midnight-blue robes gestured sharply at priests whose golden vestments gleamed in the torchlight.

"The Flame spared him!" insisted a white-bearded scribe, his bony finger jabbing the air for emphasis. "It recognized something in his blood, the texts are clear about the signs—"

"Blasphemy," hissed an older priest, his face flushed with anger. "The Flame was corrupted by whatever heresy he carries. It bent toward him like iron to a lodestone, perversion, not blessing!"

Another voice cut in, too low for Soren to catch the words, but the vehemence was unmistakable. The argument intensified as they passed, fragments fading behind him.

Soren scanned the gathering for Veyr's familiar figure, but the Velrane heir was nowhere to be seen. Had they separated them permanently? Was Veyr being questioned, or worse, for his public defense?

The Inquisitor to his left yanked his arm, forcing his attention forward. "Eyes down," he commanded, voice taut with strain. "Your judgment is not complete."

They turned down a narrower passage, this one lined with reliquaries containing fragments of ancient texts preserved behind glass. The scripture etched into the walls here was older, the language more archaic than what adorned the upper levels.

Footsteps approached from the connecting corridor, measured, deliberate steps that echoed with metallic precision. The Inquisitors stiffened, their grips tightening on Soren's arms.

Ser Calvin emerged into the torchlight, golden and perfect in his scripture-etched armor. Solbrand hung at his side, sheathed but radiating power that made the air around it shimmer with heat.

The knight's burning eyes fixed on Soren with an intensity that felt like physical pressure. Something had changed in that marble-carved face, the absolute certainty replaced by sharp, focused watchfulness.

He studied Soren as one might study a weapon of unknown capability: with caution, respect, and the calculation of how best to neutralize it.

"Inquisitor Malvren," Calvin acknowledged the lead figure with a slight nod. "The Archon requests immediate word of the... outcome."

"We proceed to containment as ordered," the marble-faced Inquisitor replied, his winter-cold eyes never leaving Soren. "The subject requires further study before final determination."

Calvian's gaze swept over Soren once more, lingering on the chains around his wrists, on the unmarked skin that should have been blistered and burned after exposure to the Eternal Flame.

"Study," he repeated, the word carrying edges of something unspoken. "Yes. There is much to understand."

He stepped aside to let them pass, his golden perfection a stark contrast to Soren's disheveled state. As they moved beyond him, Soren felt those burning eyes following, tracking him with predatory focus.

They had nearly reached the stairs leading down to the holding cells when the first bell began to toll, a deep, resonant note that vibrated through stone and bone alike.

Soren felt it in his chest, a physical pressure that momentarily displaced even the shard's cold presence.

The Inquisitors paused, heads tilting toward the sound. The bell struck again, then again, a solemn rhythm that seemed to count out heartbeats in the suddenly silent corridor.

Then the pattern changed. The next toll came faster, urgent rather than ceremonial, followed by another and another in quick succession. Not a call to prayer, but a warning.

"What is this?" The lead Inquisitor's voice carried genuine confusion. "No ceremony was scheduled after the trial."

The younger Inquisitor to Soren's right shifted nervously, his grip faltering for the first time. "Inside the Cathedral? That's impossible—"

A distant shout cut through the bell's clamor, followed by the unmistakable clash of steel against steel. The sound echoed up from lower corridors, sharp and violent against the cathedral's usual reverent quiet.

More shouts followed, closer now, accompanied by the heavy tread of armored feet moving at speed. The Inquisitors exchanged glances, uncertainty rippling through their ranks like wind across still water.

The lead Inquisitor's face hardened with decision. "Move," he ordered, shoving Soren toward the stairs with renewed urgency. "Get him to the holding cells before—"

A scream cut short. The torches in the corridor ahead flickered as if disturbed by sudden movement. Shadows danced against the stone walls, stretching and distorting into shapes

Chapter 122 122: The Break In The Walls (2)

At their head strode a taller figure whose presence hit Soren like a physical blow. Even with his face half-hidden beneath a hood, there was no mistaking him, the confident stride, the way he held his curved blade low and ready, the predatory tilt of his head as he assessed the corridor's occupants.

Sylas.

Weeks had passed since their encounter in the forest outside Northaven, but Soren would have recognized him anywhere.

The assassin moved like no one else, each step deliberate, each gesture efficient to the point of beauty.

The Inquisitors reacted with surprising speed, forming a defensive line across the corridor. Scripture-chains rattled as they raised them like weapons, metal links glowing with pale blue light as they began to chant in that ancient, resonant tongue.

Sylas didn't hesitate. His blade flashed once, impossibly fast, and the nearest Inquisitor crumpled with a sound like punctured bellows.

Before the others could complete their chant, one of Sylas's companions sent a throwing dagger spinning through the air with surgical precision. It struck a chanting priest in the throat, transforming holy words into a wet gurgle.

The corridor erupted into chaos. Two more of Sylas's assassins engaged the remaining Inquisitors, blades moving with lethal efficiency against opponents accustomed to spiritual rather than physical combat.

Another slipped past the melee, heading deeper into the Cathedral with single-minded purpose.

Sylas himself paused, green eyes finding Soren's across the corridor. Recognition flashed between them, sharp, immediate, but not the warmth of reunion.

This was assessment, calculation, the weighing of an unexpected variable in whatever plan had brought him to the Cathedral's heart.

He wasn't here for rescue alone. Soren saw it in the way his gaze flicked past him, in the deliberate manner his companions spread through the corridor. Sylas had his own objective.

Before either could move, the remaining Inquisitor yanked Soren backward, one arm around his throat, the other raising a scripture-chain that pulsed with threatening light.

"Back!" he shouted, voice cracking with fear. "Or the heretic dies first!"

Sylas's perfect mouth twisted in a snarl, but he didn't advance. His blade remained low, ready but restrained. Too risky to strike with Soren so close to his target.

"Unhand him," Sylas said, his voice carrying that same cultured precision Soren remembered, incongruous with the violence he had just witnessed. "He's not part of this."

"Everything is part of this now," the Inquisitor replied, tightening his grip until Soren could barely breathe. "Whatever blasphemy you planned, it dies here."

Golden light suddenly flooded the corridor, so intense it cast no shadows. Heat rolled toward them in a palpable wave, scorching the very air.

Ser Calvin had returned, Solbrand drawn and blazing with sacred fire that stretched toward the ceiling in hungry tongues.

His perfect face showed no fear, no hesitation, only the cold purpose of a weapon fulfilling its designed function.

"Heretics," he intoned, the word carrying the weight of judgment. "You defile sacred ground."

Sylas turned to face this new threat, his own blade gleaming with a strange blue-green light that hadn't been there moments before. The two men assessed each other across the corridor, predators recognizing an equal.

When they moved, it was with such speed that Soren could barely track the exchange. Solbrand's golden flame met Sylas's curved blade in an explosion of light and sound that shook dust from the ancient ceiling.

The corridor itself seemed to groan under the force of their collision, scripture etched into the walls flaring in response to the violent energy unleashed between them.

The Inquisitor holding Soren yanked him backward, away from the duel that threatened to consume the entire passage. Stone cracked where Calvin's blade struck, golden fire scorching ancient text into black char.

Sylas moved like water, each defense flowing into counter-attack with inhuman grace, his blade leaving trails of that eerie blue-green light wherever it passed.

Soren found himself thrown to the floor, the impact driving air from his lungs. The chains around his wrists bit deeper, fresh blood welling around the metal cuffs.

He was helpless, caught between titans whose clash threatened to destroy everything in their path.

Above him, relics shattered in their cases, fragments of sacred texts and saints' bones raining down like macabre confetti.

The very sanctity of the Cathedral lay broken around him, its most sacred halls transformed into a battlefield.

The shard against his chest suddenly pulsed with violent cold, Valenna's presence surging forward after hours of watchful silence.

'If you stay chained, you die between them,' she said, her voice sharp with urgency. 'The key lies in what they fear most.'

Soren twisted his wrists against the scripture-chains, feeling the metal bite deeper into raw flesh.

The links pulsed with that familiar blue light, but something had changed, the power that had muted Valenna's presence seemed weaker now, disrupted by the violence erupting around them.

Above him, Calvian and Sylas danced their deadly ballet, each strike sending shockwaves through the ancient stone.

The knight's golden fire scorched the walls, leaving blackened scripture in its wake, while Sylas's blade carved arcs of blue-green light that seemed to drink the very air.

The Inquisitor who had held him lay crumpled against the wall, skull cracked where he'd struck the stone during the initial clash. His winter-cold eyes stared at nothing, mouth frozen in a half-formed prayer.

Soren rolled toward the dead man's outstretched hand, desperate fingers searching for anything that might—

His palm closed around a small iron key, still warm from the Inquisitor's grip. The same key they'd used to lock the scripture-chains.

The shard against his chest flared with sudden, violent cold as he twisted the key in the first lock. The chain fell away with a sound like breaking glass, the blue light guttering and dying.

The second chain fell away with a similar sound, the scripture-forged metal clattering to the floor.

Soren gasped as sensation flooded back into his hands, pins and needles stabbing through his fingers as blood rushed to deprived tissue. The shard against his chest pulsed with triumphant cold.

'Now run,' Valenna urged. 'Between their clash. The path will open.'

Soren scrambled to his feet, legs still weak from the Eternal Flame's embrace. The corridor had become a battlefield.

Chapter 123 123: Between Blades

Calvian's Solbrand slammed into Syllas's curved blade with a force that shook the very foundations of the Cathedral. Golden fire exploded outward, colliding with arcs of blue-green light that seared across the ancient walls, burning scripture into black char.

The sound was deafening, metal striking metal at impossible speeds, underscored by the hiss and crackle of opposing energies devouring each other.

Soren stared down at the broken scripture-chains lying at his feet, his wrists raw and bleeding but gloriously free. The weight of them, physical and otherwise, had vanished, leaving him light-headed with sudden possibility.

'No one holds you anymore,' Valenna whispered, her voice steadier than it had been in days, the shard against his chest pulsing with cold, familiar certainty.

A reliquary exploded to his left as Sylas dodged a vicious overhead strike, sending fragments of glass and splinters of ancient bone scattering across the stone floor. The saint's skull within, centuries old and treated with reverence by generations of faithful, bounced once before shattering against a pillar. No one paused to mourn its destruction.

Soren bent and snatched up the fallen Inquisitor's shortblade, his fingers closing awkwardly around the unfamiliar hilt. It wasn't his preferred weapon, but it was better than facing this chaos unarmed.

The metal felt cold against his palm, the weight all wrong compared to what he'd trained with under Kaelor's watchful eye.

Across the hall, three of Sylas's hooded assassins engaged a cluster of Inquisitors with lethal precision. Daggers flashed in the chaotic light, finding gaps in robes with surgical accuracy.

The Inquisitors fought back with strange weapons of their own—scripture-chains that moved almost like living things, metal links wrapping around limbs and throats with malicious intent.

Blood spattered across ancient texts. Chants turned to screams. The air filled with the metallic scent of it, mingling with incense and the acrid smell of burning parchment.

Time seemed to slow around Soren as he took in the battle raging before him. Calvin and Sylas remained at its center, their duel transforming the Cathedral's sacred hall into something from legend.

The knight's golden perfection contrasted with the assassin's fluid grace, each movement precisely calculated yet somehow wild in its execution.

When their blades met again, the shockwave sent cracks spiderwebbing up a nearby pillar. Stone groaned in protest, dust raining down from the vaulted ceiling high above. The Cathedral itself seemed to shudder under the force of their conflict, centuries of sanctity crumbling beneath powers never meant to clash in these hallowed halls.

Through smoke and fractured light, a familiar figure appeared at the far end of the corridor. Veyr Velrane moved with that careful grace that disguised his limp, scripture-chains still binding his wrists before him.

Two Cathedral guards flanked him, their faces pale with fear as they escorted their noble prisoner through the chaos. Their hands trembled on their weapons, eyes darting frantically between the battle before them and their dangerous charge.

Veyr's pale eyes found Soren across the chamber, sharp with calculation despite the chains that should have humbled him.

Even now, surrounded by destruction, he looked composed, as if this violence were merely an interesting development in some grand design only he could see.

His voice cut through the chaos with surprising clarity, pitched to carry to the galleries above where clergy cowered behind ornate railings.

"If Solmir's Flame spared him," Veyr called out, gesturing toward Soren with his bound hands, "and Velrane blood stands with him, will you still call it heresy?"

The words landed like stones in still water, rippling outward with implications Soren couldn't fully grasp. Clergy members exchanged uncertain glances.

Some clutched religious symbols tighter, muttering prayers for protection or guidance. Others leaned forward, reassessing the chaos below with new perspective.

"Blasphemy!" shouted a white-bearded priest, his face flushed with righteous anger. "The sacred halls defiled! The relics destroyed!"

"Yet the Flame did not consume him," countered another, younger voice. "The texts speak of such signs—"

The Cathedral's unity fractured before Soren's eyes, splintering along lines that had likely existed for years beneath the surface of ceremonial harmony. Some called for his immediate execution, others for protection and study. The uncertainty created by his survival of the Eternal Flame now compounded by the violence erupting in their most sacred space.

Sylas moved like water made flesh, each strike flowing into the next with hypnotic grace. His curved blade left trails of that eerie blue-green light wherever it passed, the energy seeming to drink the golden fire that Calvian wielded with such righteous certainty.

For all their differences in style and purpose, both men fought with the absolute conviction of those who had dedicated their lives to a single path.

Yet for all his fluid precision, Sylas was gaining ground. Each exchange pushed Calvian back a fraction, the knight's perfect form showing the first hints of strain.

Sparks showered from Solbrand's edge where the assassin's blade scraped against it, the metal itself seeming to protest such contact.

Calvian countered with raw power, golden fire surging from his sword in waves that set the very air ablaze. Stone glowed where it touched, scripture etched into the walls illuminating as if the words themselves had caught fire.

The heat was overwhelming, forcing everyone back. assassins, Inquisitors, even Soren, who stumbled against a broken reliquary as he retreated from the inferno.

'They are like forces of nature,' Soren thought, watching the two combatants with a mixture of terror and awe. What struck him most wasn't their skill, though that was breathtaking, but the sense that neither was fighting at full strength.

Each held something in reserve, testing the other's defenses, probing for weaknesses that could be exploited when the true clash came.

In the midst of this chaos, Soren suddenly realized he had a choice to make. The battle had created a momentary window, all eyes fixed on the duel at the chamber's center, all attention diverted from the prisoner who should not have survived the Flame's embrace.

To his left, Syllas's remaining assassins had regrouped near a side passage. One caught his eye and made a subtle gesture, fingers curling inward twice in quick succession. An invitation. A path out.

To his right, Veyr stood with his guards, still speaking to the gallery above in that measured, persuasive voice. The heir was spinning political protection from chaos, weaving a narrative that might shield Soren from the Church's judgment, if he chose to accept Velrane authority once more.

And straight ahead lay the corridor leading deeper into the Cathedral's labyrinthine halls. Unknown territory, filled with danger but offering something neither Syllas nor Veyr could promise: true independence.

The shard against his chest pulsed with sudden cold, Valenna's voice low but clear beneath the battle's roar.

'Choose,' she whispered. 'Chains will find you again unless you move.'

Soren hesitated, the shortblade heavy in his hand as he weighed options that would have been unimaginable hours before. Freedom stretched before him in three directions, each with its own price.

The decision was stolen from him in the next heartbeat.

Calvian and Syllas's duel reached some critical threshold, a perfect alignment of opposing forces, a moment where neither would yield. Their blades met with a sound like thunder breaking directly overhead, golden fire and blue-green light exploding outward in a shockwave that tore through the chamber.

Walls fractured. A massive reliquary collapsed, centuries of sacred history crashing to the floor in a cacophony of shattering glass and splintering wood. The floor beneath Soren's feet cracked, stone splitting as if the Cathedral itself could no longer contain the powers unleashed within it.

The force of it lifted Soren from his feet, sending him tumbling through air suddenly thick with debris and opposing energies.

For one disorienting moment, he flew between fire and shadow, the world reduced to fragments of sensation, heat searing his face, cold pulsing from the shard against his chest, the shortblade spinning from his grasp as his body cartwheeled through space.

He crashed to the floor amidst broken relics and scattered scripture, pain lancing through his shoulder where Trescan's wound had barely healed. Blood trickled into his eye from a fresh cut across his forehead.

Every muscle screamed as he forced himself to his feet, staggering upright in a world transformed by violence.

The battlefield had split around him. To one side stood Syllas with his remaining assassins, their hooded figures resolute despite injuries.

To the other, Calvin rallied the Inquisitors, golden fire still wreathing Solbrand's edge though it burned lower now, as if the blade itself had tired.

Between them stood Veyr, somehow free of his guards, his voice rising above the din as he continued to shape narrative from chaos.

The chains still bound his wrists, but he held them before him like an offering rather than a constraint, pale eyes fixed on the gallery above where the Church's authority wavered in the face of unprecedented disorder.

Soren stood at the center of it all, blood dripping from his fingertips, the broken scripture-chains scattered at his feet. Three paths stretched before him, each promising a different future, a different kind of freedom, or a different kind of chain.

The choice loomed in the next heartbeat.

Chapter 124 124: The Choice Forced

The Cathedral's heart shattered in a blaze of golden fire and blue-green light. Stone cracked beneath Soren's feet as the shockwave tore through ancient walls, sending centuries of sacred relics crashing to the marble floor.

Dust and debris rained from the vaulted ceiling, scripture burning black where the conflicting energies had scorched it beyond recognition.

Soren struggled to his feet, blood trickling from a dozen small cuts across his face and arms. His ears rang from the explosion, making the world around him seem distant and muffled.

The broken scripture-chains lay scattered at his feet, their blue light extinguished, their hold over him finally broken.

For the first time in days, he stood truly free.

Through the settling dust, he made out Syllas and his remaining assassins regrouping near a shattered archway.

Their fluid movements reminded Soren of wolves preparing for another attack, hooded faces turned toward him with predatory focus. Blood dripped from Syllas's curved blade, the strange blue-green light still flickering along its edge.

Across the ruined chamber, Ser Calvian rallied the surviving Inquisitors. His golden perfection had finally been marred, armor dented, face streaked with soot, a thin line of blood tracing the edge of his jaw. Yet Solbrand still blazed in his hand, the golden fire dimmer but no less deadly as he formed his followers into a defensive line.

And between these forces stood Veyr Velrane.

The heir remained bound by scripture-chains, yet somehow he dominated the shattered gallery. His voice carried over the groaning stone and frightened whimpers of clergy members cowering behind broken railings. Each word pulled at the Church's fracturing authority, weaving doubt and possibility into the chaos.

"—witnessed by all present—"—"sacred texts speak of those the Flame recognizes—"—"House Velrane demands consideration of these signs—"

Soren's chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. The shard pulsed cold against his skin, Valenna's presence sharp and alert after days of muted silence. He searched for his fallen shortblade among the debris but found nothing, unarmed in a battlefield of titans.

Veyr's pale eyes suddenly fixed on him across the ruined chamber. His endless calculations seemed to crystalize into a single, sharp moment of clarity. His voice fell silent mid-argument, leaving the gallery holding its collective breath.

With deliberate steps that favored his bad leg, Veyr crossed the debris-strewn floor until he stood before Soren. This close, Soren could see the strain beneath that carefully composed expression, the faint trembling in his hands, the tightness around his eyes that spoke of exhaustion kept at bay through sheer force of will.

"You cannot stay with me," Veyr said, his voice dropping so only Soren could hear. The usual manipulation had vanished, replaced by something rawer, more urgent. "The Flame revealed you, and no Velrane name will shield that for now."

His pale eyes darted toward Sylas, then back to Soren with cold clarity. "Go with him, live." Something flashed across his face, not quite emotion, but the closest Soren had ever seen to it. "Live, or all of this means nothing."

Before Soren could respond, movement flashed at the corner of his vision. Sylas made a sharp gesture, and his assassins surged forward. They moved like shadow made flesh, blades flickering in the uncertain light as they carved a path through the thinning ranks of Inquisitors.

One reached Soren first, a slight figure whose face remained hidden beneath their hood. A gloved hand seized his arm with surprising strength.

"Now," the assassin hissed, voice barely audible over the renewed clash of steel against steel. "Move!"

Soren hesitated, torn between paths that all led into darkness. Trust Sylas, who had spared him once for reasons still unknown? Or remain with Veyr, whose protection had just crumbled before his eyes?

The decision was made for him.

Calvian's roar cut through the chamber like physical force. "You will not leave these halls, heretic!"

Solbrand blazed brighter, golden fire surging along its length as the knight charged forward. His first strike cut through an assassin with terrifying ease, the body crumpling before it even hit the ground. His second blow shattered a marble column, sending fragments exploding across the hall like deadly projectiles.

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed with violent cold, Valenna's voice cutting through his indecision with crystalline clarity.

'The knight will never stop,' she whispered, urgency threading through her words. 'If you stay, he will end you. Take the path given, before the chains close again.'

Soren's legs moved before his mind had fully decided, the shard's cold presence pushing him toward Sylas and his waiting assassins. The hand on his arm

tightened, pulling him into their defensive formation as they began a fighting retreat toward the shattered eastern passage.

For one heartbeat, he locked eyes with Veyr across the widening gap between them. The heir stood tall despite his chains, defying the priests above with words and presence alone.

His pale face showed no fear, only that same calculating intelligence that had kept him alive in a house that tested its own children with merciless precision.

"Survive, Soren," Veyr called, voice carrying despite the renewed chaos. "Return when you are ready to break them."

Then Sylas was beside him, green eyes fierce beneath his hood as he directed his remaining followers with sharp, economical gestures.

The assassins moved with practiced coordination, two breaking off to engage pursuing Inquisitors while the others formed a protective circle around Soren.

"Keep moving," Sylas ordered, his cultured voice incongruous with the violence surrounding them. "Stay within the formation."

They retreated through a shattered reliquary passage, precious artifacts crunching beneath their boots. One assassin threw something behind them, small clay spheres that shattered against the stone floor, releasing thick clouds of gray smoke that billowed upward, obscuring their path.

Another engaged a Cathedral guard who had emerged from a side corridor, blades meeting with a sound like angry wasps. The fight lasted three heartbeats before the guard crumpled, throat opened in a precise, economical strike that wasted no movement.

Soren struggled to keep pace, his legs still weak from days of captivity and the Flame's embrace.

Every muscle burned with exhaustion, his lungs aching as they pulled in air thick with dust and smoke. Blood from a cut above his eye kept trickling down, forcing him to wipe it away with the back of his hand.

Behind them, Calvin's roar echoed through the passage, words lost to distance but fury unmistakable. The Cathedral itself seemed to shake under renewed pursuit, stone groaning as powers never meant to clash within its walls continued their destructive dance.

Sylas led them deeper into the labyrinth beneath the Cathedral, each turn taking them further from the Eternal Flame and its golden guardians.

His curved blade left faint trails of blue-green light in the darkness, illuminating their path with eerie, shifting patterns that reminded Soren of underwater shadows.

"Almost there," one of the assassins muttered, voice tight with what might have been pain or anticipation.

The passage ahead widened, revealing a circular chamber whose floor was carved with intricate patterns.

Symbols spiraled outward from a central point, forming shapes that made Soren's eyes water if he looked at them too directly. The designs resembled those he'd glimpsed in Naeria's spilled books, yet older somehow, worn by centuries of hidden use.

Sylas stepped into the center of the spiral, green eyes finding Soren's across the chamber. "Time to disappear," he said, that perfect mouth curving in what might have been a smile on anyone else. "Unless you'd prefer to stay and explain yourself to the Inquisitors?"

The shard pulsed cold against Soren's chest, a silent affirmation. He stepped forward, crossing the threshold into whatever future awaited beyond the Cathedral's broken halls.

Behind them, the stones continued to rumble with Calvian's pursuit, relentless, righteous, and utterly certain of his cause. But for now, at least, the chains had been broken.

The spiraled patterns carved into the chamber floor began to glow with the same blue-green light that flickered along Sylas's blade.

Soren felt the stone vibrate beneath his feet, a thrumming that seemed to resonate through his bones and make the shard against his chest pulse in response.

'Ancient ways,' Valenna whispered, her voice carrying notes of recognition. 'The Church built over what came before, but could not erase it all.'

Sylas pressed his palm against a raised symbol at the spiral's center. The glow intensified, spreading outward in waves that made the air itself shimmer like heat rising from summer stone. The chamber filled with a sound like distant wind, though no breeze touched Soren's face.

"Where does this lead?" Soren asked, his voice hoarse from smoke and exertion.

"Away," Sylas replied, which wasn't an answer at all. His green eyes held secrets that went deeper than simple escape routes. "The Cathedral has forgotten much of what lies beneath its foundations. We have not."

The pursuing footsteps grew louder in the passage behind them. Calvin's voice echoed off stone walls, shouting orders that Soren couldn't quite make out through the ringing in his ears. The knight would not give up easily, perhaps not at all.

One of Syllas's assassins posted himself at the chamber's entrance, curved dagger ready. The others formed a loose circle around the glowing spiral.

Chapter 125: Beneath Forgotten Stone (1)

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The spiral carvings beneath Syllas's palm blazed to life, their blue-green glow intensifying until the entire chamber pulsed with ancient power.

The light crawled up the walls in geometric patterns, forming sigils Soren had never seen, yet somehow recognized deep in his bones.

"Brace yourself," Syllas commanded, his voice cutting through the approaching thunder of armored footsteps.

The pursuing Inquisitors burst into the chamber's entrance, black robes billowing like storm clouds. Behind them came Calvin, golden and terrible in his fury, Solbrand's fire painting his perfect features in stark relief.

"Heretic!" The knight's voice shook dust from the ceiling. "Your corruption ends here!"

But as the first Inquisitor crossed the threshold, the spiral's light flared violently. A shimmering barrier materialized, rippling like water yet solid as stone.

The black-robed figure slammed into it with bone-jarring force, thrown backward as if struck by an invisible fist.

Calvian pushed forward, Solbrand raised high. "Pathetic tricks," he snarled, golden fire streaming from his blade as he hurled it against the barrier.

The flames struck the shimmering wall and... disappeared. Not extinguished, not reflected, simply absorbed, drawn into the ancient carvings that now pulsed brighter, drinking the sacred fire like parched earth swallowing rain.

Only the walls behind them blackened, scripture scorching into ash where the residual heat radiated outward.

'Older magic,' Valenna whispered in Soren's mind, her voice stronger than it had been in days. *'The stones remember what came before their temples.'*

Calvian's perfect face contorted with rage. He hurled another stream of golden fire, this one more focused, more intense. Again the barrier drank it without effort, the spiral carvings beneath Soren's feet humming with absorbed energy.

"This changes nothing!" Calvian shouted, his voice distorted by the shimmering wall between them. "There is nowhere in this world you can hide from Solmir's judgment!"

The floor beneath Soren's feet shifted, ancient stone grinding against stone. The spiral's center began to sink, revealing a narrow staircase that corkscrewed downward into impenetrable darkness.

The opening exhaled stale air that carried the scent of centuries, mineral-rich, untouched by living breath for longer than Soren could comprehend.

"Move," Sylas ordered, gesturing toward the revealed passage. His assassins formed a protective ring around the opening, their curved blades ready though the barrier still held.

Soren hesitated, the enormity of his choice suddenly crushing down on him. Behind lay the Cathedral, the Inquisitors, Calvian's relentless pursuit, certain death or worse. Ahead stretched unknown darkness, guided by a man whose motives remained as shadowed as his hooded face.

The shard pulsed cold against his chest. *'Down,'* Valenna urged. *'What awaits below is older than their self-righteous flames.'*

Sylas's green eyes fixed on him, impatient but calculating. "Choose quickly or die slowly boy."

Soren took a deep breath and descended into the darkness.

The stairs wound downward in a tight spiral, each step worn smooth by feet that had walked this path long before the Cathedral existed above them.

The blue-green light from the chamber above faded with every turn, leaving them in darkness broken only by a faint glow emanating from Sylas's curved blade.

The air grew colder with each step, heavy with the scent of damp stone and mineral deposits. Soren's lungs burned with each breath, the oxygen thin and ancient. His wounded shoulder throbbed in time with his heartbeat, a steady reminder of how close he'd come to death, and how close he might still be.

One of Sylas's assassins took the lead, moving with the confident grace of someone following a memorized path. Another fell in behind Soren, footsteps nearly silent despite the close confines. The others maintained their positions around Sylas himself, a living barrier of blades and bodies.

After what seemed like an eternity of descent, the staircase opened into a cavernous chamber supported by massive stone columns.

Unlike the Cathedral's ornate pillars carved with scripture and saints, these were stark geometric shapes, hexagonal prisms rising from floor to ceiling, their surfaces etched with the same spiral patterns that had formed the barrier above.

"Keep moving," Sylas commanded from behind him. "The seal won't hold forever."

They crossed the chamber in tense silence, their footsteps echoing against stone that had stood untouched for centuries. Soren's gaze darted between the towering columns, each one carved with symbols that seemed to shift when viewed directly, like words in a language that refused to be read.

'The old tongue,' Valenna murmured, her voice carrying notes of recognition. 'From before the Sword Kings fell. Before the Church claimed the fire for itself.'

The assassins guided him through a series of interconnected chambers, each one revealing architecture more ancient than the last.

Arches curved overhead without keystones, seemingly held in place by principles of geometry Soren couldn't comprehend. Walls bore frescoes faded by time, figures wielding weapons wreathed in colored light, fighting enemies whose forms blurred into shadow.

In one chamber, the ceiling opened to reveal what might have been a night sky, though Soren knew they must be deep beneath the Cathedral by now.

Stars glimmered in impossible patterns, constellations he had never seen despite nights spent studying the heavens from Northaven's highest rooftops.

'Not stars,' Valenna corrected. 'Memory stones. They captured light from above, preserved it below when they sealed these halls.'

As they moved deeper into the labyrinth, one of the assassins approached him. A slender figure with quick, efficient movements, they produced a small leather pouch from within their cloak.

"For your wounds," they said, voice muffled by the fabric covering the lower half of their face. Without waiting for acknowledgment, they began applying a pungent salve to the cuts across Soren's face and arms. Their touch was clinical, neither gentle nor rough, simply functional, like a craftsman repairing a damaged tool.

"Thank you," Soren managed, wincing as the salve burned against raw flesh.

The assassin didn't respond, simply finished their task and melted back into formation as they continued their descent.

After what felt like hours of winding passages and ancient chambers, Sylas finally called a halt. They had reached a junction where three corridors branched outward like spokes from a wheel.

Chapter 126: Beneath Forgotten Stone (2)

Chapter 126: Beneath Forgotten Stone (2)

Water trickled down one wall, forming a small pool that reflected their shadowy forms in perfect stillness.

For the first time since their escape, Sylas turned to face Soren directly. He pushed back his hood, revealing features that seemed carved from living stone, sharp cheekbones, a perfect mouth, those green eyes that held secrets older than the passages around them.

"Twice now," Sylas said, his cultured voice echoing against the ancient walls. "Twice I've intervened when others would have ended you. Do you wonder why?"

Soren straightened despite his exhaustion, meeting that piercing gaze with all the dignity he could muster. "Yes."

"Not out of kindness," Sylas replied, his perfect mouth curving in what might have been amusement. "Not out of mercy. Those are luxuries neither of us can afford."

He stepped closer, those green eyes never leaving Soren's face. "I didn't save you. I simply kept the Church from deciding what you are before you can decide it yourself."

The words hung between them, laden with implications Soren couldn't fully grasp. The shard against his chest pulsed with sudden cold, Valenna's presence sharpening with alert interest.

"What I am," Soren repeated, the words tasting strange on his tongue. "And what exactly would that be?"

"That," Sylas said, "is the question that terrified them enough to risk breaking their precious Cathedral." His gaze dropped to Soren's chest, to the exact spot where the shard rested beneath his shirt. "The Flame bent toward you. It recognized something the Church has spent centuries trying to erase."

He turned away, gesturing for his assassins to secure the perimeter. They moved with synchronized precision, taking positions at each corridor entrance with weapons ready.

Their discipline reminded Soren of pack animals, wolves perhaps, or something more dangerous, working together with minimal communication.

Soren watched them, noting how they positioned themselves to protect both Sylas and, strangely, himself. Their movements included him in their defensive

formation, yet there was no warmth in it, just tactical necessity, as if he were cargo to be guarded rather than an ally to be sheltered.

"Your people..." Soren began, then faltered, unsure what question to ask first.

"Are not your concern," Sylas finished for him. "They serve a purpose. As do you."

One of the assassins approached, offering Soren a water skin. He accepted it gratefully, the cool liquid soothing his parched throat.

As he drank, his mind raced through everything that had happened, the Inquisitors, the questioning, Calvin's golden fire, and most of all, the Eternal Flame that had embraced but not consumed him.

'What did it mean?' he wondered, the question directed partly at Valenna, partly at himself. 'Why would the Flame react that way?'

'Because you carry what they fear,' Valenna answered, her voice clearer than it had been since their capture. 'Blood remembers what minds forget. The Flame recognized what flows in your veins, what sleeps in your bones.'

Soren lowered the water skin, suddenly aware of Sylas watching him with those calculating green eyes. "The Flame," he said aloud. "It should have burned me."

"Yes," Sylas agreed, something like satisfaction flickering across his face. "By all their doctrine, by all their certainty, you should have been ash before you drew another breath."

He gestured at the ancient passages surrounding them. "Yet here you stand, while their precious Cathedral crumbles above."

He turned, leading them down the central corridor where darkness gave way to a faint glow emanating from somewhere ahead. "The Church built their holy house on foundations they never truly understood. They buried the old ways, covered them with their scripture and saints, but could not erase them entirely."

The passage widened, opening into a vast chamber where ancient aqueducts crossed overhead, their stone channels still carrying water that gleamed in the strange blue-green light. Collapsed vaults lined the walls, their contents long since plundered or decayed. This had been part of a city once, Soren realized, an undercity that predated Northaven itself.

"One of many networks," Sylas said, gesturing at their surroundings. "The Church claims to see all, know all, control all. Yet beneath their very foundations, the old paths remain."

They crossed the chamber, passing beneath arches that had stood for centuries without maintenance or care. Ahead, a doorway had been concealed behind fallen debris, recently cleared to reveal a narrow passage beyond.

Sylas stopped before this threshold, turning to face Soren one final time. His assassins formed a semicircle behind him, hooded faces revealing nothing of the people beneath.

"You've walked into shadow," Sylas said, his voice carrying that same cultured precision that somehow made his words more threatening rather than less. "Shadows give protection, but shadows have their own demands. I didn't pull you from their fire only to let you wander blindly."

The assassins parted, revealing a figure who had remained hidden until now. A woman stepped forward, her gray eyes sharp with intelligence in a face marked by privation. Though she looked thinner than when Soren had last seen her, there was no mistaking Naeria Veyl.

"You," Soren breathed, recognition striking him like a physical blow.

Naeria inclined her head slightly, those remarkable eyes studying him with the same measuring intensity she'd shown during their brief encounter on Northaven's streets.

Her scholar's hands clutched a leather-bound book against her chest, one of the strange volumes he'd glimpsed when she'd stumbled that fateful night.

"The hatmaker's apprentice," she said, her voice carrying notes of irony and something else, confirmation, perhaps. "Though I suspect that particular profession never suited you."

Soren stared at her, pieces suddenly connecting in his mind. "You knew," he said, the realization hitting him with stunning clarity. "That night in the street, it wasn't an accident. You were looking for me."

A hint of a smile touched her lips. "Not looking, precisely. Confirming." Her gaze flicked to his chest, to the exact spot where the shard rested beneath his shirt. "Some things call to each other across distance. Some resonances cannot be hidden, no matter how deeply they're buried."

Chapter 127 127: The Scholar's Curiosity

Naeria led the way through a final winding passage, her fingers tracing symbols on the wall that made the stone glow briefly before fading back to darkness.

The blue-green light from Sylas's blade cast eerie shadows that danced across ancient carvings as they descended deeper into the labyrinth.

"Almost there," she murmured, her voice echoing slightly in the confined space. "The Cathedral's reach ends where the old stones begin."

Soren stumbled, his legs still weak from days of captivity and the Flame's embrace. The shard against his chest pulsed with cold certainty, Valenna's presence a steady comfort after the muting effect of the scripture-chains.

'She leads us deeper than most living souls have ventured,' Valenna whispered. 'Watch her carefully. Knowledge-seekers are rarely satisfied with what they find.'

The passage widened suddenly, opening into a chamber that made Soren halt in his tracks. Unlike the austere architecture of the Cathedral above or the geometric precision of the ancient undercity, this space had been transformed into something entirely different, a fusion of library, workshop, and what appeared to be a makeshift laboratory.

Stone tables lined the walls, their surfaces covered with instruments of brass and silver, crystal fragments that caught the light in strange ways, and scrolls weighted down with small carved figurines.

Shelves had been constructed from salvaged wood and metal, bowing slightly under the weight of countless books and manuscripts.

Some volumes appeared ancient, their bindings cracked and pages yellowed; others looked surprisingly new, ink still glistening on open pages.

Brass lamps hung from chains bolted into the ceiling, their light steadier than torches but somehow more intimate, creating pools of amber warmth in the otherwise cold chamber.

The air smelled of old parchment, ink, metal, and something else, herbs perhaps, or chemicals Soren couldn't identify.

Most striking were the walls themselves. Every available surface had been covered with drawings, diagrams, and text in multiple languages.

Some sections contained neat, precise script; others held frantic scrawls that crawled across stone like desperate insects.

Connecting lines had been drawn between seemingly unrelated sections, creating a web of associations that made Soren's head spin.

"My sanctuary," Naeria said, watching his face with those sharp gray eyes. "Not as grand as the Cathedral's libraries, but considerably more accurate."

Sylas's assassins positioned themselves near the entrance, their hooded figures becoming nearly invisible as they melted into shadows.

Sylas himself remained by the doorway, his curved blade now sheathed, those green eyes scanning the chamber with practiced efficiency.

"You have one hour," he told Naeria, his perfect mouth set in a hard line. "Then we move again."

She nodded without looking at him, her attention already fixed on Soren. "More than enough time for preliminary assessment."

The casual way she said it, as if he were a text to be analyzed or a specimen to be dissected, sent a chill through Soren that had nothing to do with the shard against his chest.

As Sylas withdrew to speak with his assassins, Naeria began to circle Soren slowly.

Her gray eyes moved over him with clinical precision, taking in every detail from his disheveled appearance to the way he favored his injured shoulder.

Her ink-stained fingers twitched occasionally, as if itching to take notes.

"You should be dead," she said abruptly, stopping directly in front of him. "The Flame burns all things... except you."

The bluntness of her assessment caught Soren off guard. He straightened despite his exhaustion, refusing to be diminished by her scrutiny.

"I'm aware," he replied, his voice rougher than intended. "I was there."

A hint of something, not quite a smile, touched her lips. "Indeed you were. And what did you feel when it embraced you? When the fire that has consumed heretics for centuries decided you were... different?"

The question struck too close to memories still raw and disorienting. Soren looked away, his gaze falling on a diagram pinned to the nearest wall, concentric circles surrounding what appeared to be a stylized flame.

"I felt..." He hesitated, uncertain how to describe the sensation. "Like it recognized something. Not me, but something in me."

Naeria's eyes sharpened with interest. She moved to one of the stone tables, her movements suddenly more animated, more focused. "Did you hear voices? See visions? Many texts describe the Flame's embrace as... revealing."

Soren thought of the fragmented images that had flashed through his mind, the throne of blades, the dragon's shadow, the burning crown. Things he had never

seen, yet somehow knew. But caution held his tongue. He had already revealed too much to too many.

"Why are you so interested?" he countered, watching her hands as they moved across the table's surface. "What does it matter to you what I saw or didn't see?"

Naeria selected an instrument from the table, a thin rod of etched metal that tapered to a needle-fine point. She held it up, examining it in the lamplight before turning back to him.

"Because you are proof," she said, her voice carrying a sharp edge of triumph. "Proof the Church fears above all else, that their Flame can be stolen."

'She seeks to peel you open,' Valenna whispered, her voice colder than usual. 'This girl sees you as text to be translated, not flesh to be preserved.'

Naeria approached with the metal rod, her eyes fixed on Soren. "I need to test your resonance."

Soren stepped back, one hand rising protectively to cover the spot where the shard rested beneath his shirt. "No."

"Don't be foolish," she said, impatience creeping into her tone. "I'm not going to harm you. But I need to understand what protected you from the Flame. What connects you to the old powers."

She gestured at the chamber around them. "Everything here, every text, every diagram, every fragment I've salvaged from places the Church tried to bury, points to what you experienced. The Eternal Flame doesn't spare people by accident."

Soren glanced toward the entrance where Syllas stood in conversation with his assassins. No help there, the assassin leader had made it clear that Naeria's investigation was part of whatever bargain had led to his rescue.

"Fine," he relented, though every instinct screamed against it. "But I set the limits."

Naeria's lips thinned with annoyance, but she nodded. "Sit," she said, pointing to a wooden stool near the center of the chamber. "And remove your shirt. I need direct access to your body."

The command, delivered with such clinical detachment, made Soren's jaw clench. But he complied, sinking onto the stool with legs that threatened to give out entirely.

The simple act of removing his ruined shirt sent fresh pain lancing through his wounded shoulder.

The shard gleamed against his skin, its blue-black surface catching the lamplight in ways that seemed to bend rather than reflect it.

The size of his palm, its edges had gradually smoothed over the months he'd carried it, as if adapting to his body, or his body to it.

Naeria's breath caught audibly at the sight. For the first time, her composed demeanor cracked, revealing naked hunger beneath the scholarly facade.

"Extraordinary, a shard..." she whispered, leaning closer. "A perfect resonator."

She placed the metal rod on a nearby table and returned with an array of tools, crystal fragments, small metal implements, and what appeared to be parchment covered in script so ancient the letters seemed to crawl across its surface.

Without asking permission, she brought a crystal shard near his chest. The moment it came within inches of the metal embedded in his skin, both began to glow, the crystal with amber light, the shard with its familiar blue-cold radiance.

Sparks arced between them, neither hot nor cold but somehow both, dancing across the space with minds of their own.

Soren felt the shard pulse against his chest, Valenna's presence surging forward with sudden alertness.

'Old tongue,' Valenna whispered, her voice taking on a strange resonance. 'She works with fragments of power she cannot possibly understand.'

The crystal in Naeria's hand began to emit a low, pulsing hum. She watched the reaction with fierce concentration, her gray eyes reflecting the dancing lights.

"What did you feel when the Flame bent toward you?" she asked again, this time more insistent. "The texts speak of visions, memories not your own, places you've never been."

Soren gritted his teeth as the resonance between crystal and shard intensified, sending uncomfortable vibrations through his chest. "Why should I tell you anything? I don't even know who you are beyond a name the Church fears."

She switched the crystal for a thin piece of metal inscribed with spiraling text. The moment it came near the shard, frost formed along its edge, spreading inward until the inscriptions glowed with cold blue light.

"I am someone who spent years being told I was wrong," Naeria replied, her attention divided between her instrument and his face. "That the Flame was

divine, perfect, absolute in its judgment." Her voice hardened. "I am someone who discovered the truth, that it's older than their Church, older than their faith, stolen and claimed as their own."

She leaned closer, close enough that Soren could see flecks of silver in her gray eyes. "And you are living proof I was right."

The metal in her hand suddenly grew too cold to hold. She dropped it with a hiss of pain, flexing fingers that had gone white with frost-burn.

'This girl seeks to carve pieces from you,' Valenna warned, her voice sharp with something that might have been concern. 'She is not ally, she is hunger.'

that belonged to no Inquisitor or Cathedral guard.

Six figures emerged from the darkness, moving with predatory grace that made the Inquisitors seem ponderous by comparison.

Hooded and lightly armored in leather reinforced with metal plates, they advanced with the synchronized precision of wolves closing on wounded prey.