

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 21: Form is a Kind of Mercy - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 21: Form is a Kind of Mercy

Chapter 21: Form is a Kind of Mercy

The sword cut the air with a sound like splitting silk, then thunked the post, vibrating Soren's arms up to his ears.

He held the top of the cut too long; the follow-through was sluggish, a sluggishness that announced itself in the ache above his elbow. He stepped back, waited for the voice. The memory. The judgment.

It arrived, imperious as ever: *"No. That's not a cut. That's a tantrum, and not even a convincing one. Again."*

Valenna's critique was becoming predictable. Knife the intent, trowel it with insult, then wait for correction.

He reset his grip and tried again, arms loose, no tension in the triceps, exactly as she'd drilled.

The wooden blade whooshed overhead, a straight line, but it lacked somethingM maybe commitment. Maybe permission to do real harm.

The blow landed, but not with the finality she'd have wanted.

"That is worse," Valenna sighed. *"You're not even pretending to disagree with me now."*

He could almost see her, pale-gloved hand pinching the bridge of her nose, the blue lamplight making a soft mockery of her silver hair. When she was alive, he imagined, this was the part that drove squires to drink.

She controlled the memory now, and the world buckled to accommodate her. Soren felt it before he saw it: the bone cold gravity that meant she was about to make him watch.

She let the moment transmit itself, clear and unyielding, into the root of his spine.

The memory laid itself over him, a new version, sharper than the last.

The yard vanished, replaced by a marble hall stripped of banners, just the hard echo of boots against polished floor.

Valenna stood at the center, a single opponent waiting in repose at the far end, a silhouette he'd seen in other dreams, always too distant to parse. She inclined her head, almost bored, then stepped forward.

Her own sword, much heavier than the one Soren carried, its length a blue shimmer that ghosted every motion, rose from hip to crown, an unhurried ascent.

Her feet, if they moved, did so with such economy that the stone beneath might have mistaken itself for the only thing in motion.

The sword paused, perfectly vertical, suspended at the top of the draw as if it might stay there forever. The enemy shifted, anticipating a feint, a slash, an angle, a compromise.

Valenna gave no feint. She simply let the sword drop.

There was a small, final sound: not the violent percussion he'd expected, but the click of a decision already made.

A surgical line split the air and bisected the opponent's defense. Even when the man tried to block it, nothing mattered; the sword's trajectory did not deviate, not once.

The blow struck him first at the crown, then traveled, unstoppable, confident, down the axis of symmetry, leaving the rest of the world to catch up.

She returned to guard, uninterested, as her opponent staggered, his hands unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Soren, within the memory, felt his own heart slow to a crawl, the certainty of the move written into his marrow for as long as he lived.

Valenna turned, unhurried, and he could see her eyes: not cold, but honest. *"The Crown Cut ends the question. There is no next move."*

The memory shattered. Soren stood again in the practice yard, the stub of wood heavy in his hand, the post an indifferent target.

He drew a deep breath, exhaled, and tried to manufacture the same certainty. The overhead cut was clean, almost elegant, but at the critical moment his body remembered the implications and balked.

He saw it in the slack of his own shoulders. Even the post seemed to flinch, as if embarrassed for him.

The echo in his skull was immediate: *"You think the enemy won't notice? They'll smell the fear in your hands before you even touch the hilt."*

He moved to reset, but the drill master, gray and mean through the morning frost, turned and called for sparring partners.

Soren found himself across from Tavren, who was grinning as if he'd just caught Soren cheating on a test.

"Want to try that tantrum on something that bleeds?" Tavren asked, then feinted to the outside, nearly catching Soren's wrist.

He countered, falling back into memory, letting the overlay pilot his body. The pattern unfolded: a block, a twist, a quick step left.

Soren drew the blade up in the beginnings of the Crown Cut, but Tavren anticipated, dipped, and jabbed Soren's ribs with the tip.

"See, that's the problem," Tavren said, not breaking rhythm. "You're not fighting anymore. You're judging me."

The words lingered. Soren circled, all discomfort.

"I don't need to fight you," Soren said, quietly. "I only need to see where you'll end up."

Tavren barked a laugh. "That's rich, gutter."

But on the next exchange, Tavren's guard was high, and the memory, Valenna's perfect, surgical memory, opened a gap at the midline.

Soren stepped in, inhaled, visualized the blue shimmer and let the sword drop exactly as she'd shown.

There was no sound, not even tactile feedback, but Tavren's mockery froze in place, eyes flicking to where Soren's cut would have landed, neck to navel, an unbroken truth.

The yard stopped. Even the instructor looked over, chin raised in a rare show of interest.

A hush, and then the whisper: "That's not how recruits fight. That's basically how knights bury traitors."

Soren let the sword fall to his side, not triumphant, not even sure of what he'd done. Tavren, for once, said nothing.

The lesson pressed, subtle as frost under a door:

"Form is a kind of mercy, Soren. Use it only on those who deserve to die with their name intact."

He shivered, not from cold, but from recognition. The rest of the morning, he tried not to think about which side of the line he stood on, and whether anyone left in the yard was worthy of the cut.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 22: The Banners Choose - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 22: The Banners Choose

Chapter 22: The Banners Choose

The yard filled with fog so thick it felt like the world had thrown a shroud over everything worth seeing.

They lined up at the instructor's whistle, Soren, Tavren, Rhain, and the rest of the city's scrapings, boots polished to a despairing shine, uniforms cinched so tight there was barely room for breath beneath the ribs.

Soren could see his own reflection in the toe-leather, though the face that looked back seemed older: more the memory of a boy than the thing itself.

Nobody had told them what the ceremony was for. Not precisely. The rumors slithered overnight, as rumors excelled at doing.

Some said it was a final culling before release; others, that the city's House intended a mockery, some public humiliation where the highborn would pick favorites, or worse, names. Soren found he lacked the acid for dread.

At this point, he half hoped it would be a test, just to skip the suspense.

The outer gates of the yard, twin slabs of darkwood, chained and sealed since the first week of training, creaked open with a dramatic groan.

The world beyond was not the familiar haze of Nordhav's slums but a riot of banners, four in number, each tied to a color and memory Soren had, until today, known only from the chipped coins and the mouths of boys who lied for sport.

The frontmost banner, house Kaldris, by the look, was heavy blue, bordered in silver and marked with a wolf's twin heads, one snarling and one devouring.

Soren recognized the wolf pelt mantle from stories; the man wearing it stood at least a head above the rest, hair silver-blond and beard kept in the style of mountain reavers.

His embroidered sleeves ended in actual claws, polished to an ivory sheen. The man's face seemed carved out of boredom, as if he'd rather be elsewhere, or perhaps nowhere at all.

To Kaldris's left, the Sunspire Dominion's banner blazed gold on white, and the man beneath its sigil wore armor not of steel, but interlocked silk plates, the surface shot through with so much glinting thread it hurt to look at directly.

His hair was black, wax-sleek, pulled into a knot so severe it stretched the skin around his eyes, which remained half shut, the way a street hawker's did when he was about to sell you something that would break in the first rain.

Soren couldn't decide if he liked the man, or just wanted to see him humbled.

Third in line, the representative from the Yllaire Confederacy looked half-starved but not unassuming: cloak green-black, buckled at the throat with an iron oak-leaf, skin pale and brows so arched they resembled question marks.

His hands were red and cracked, the nails bitten below the quick; he fiddled constantly with a book, the spine of which was wrapped in copper wire. A knife hilt protruded from behind the book's edge.

No emblem for Ashgard, not that Soren expected one. In the stories, Nordhav's House never recruited. They released.

If you made it through, you got a name and a coat, and never saw the inside of the yard again.

Sometimes, you became an instructor; more often, you vanished into the city's lattice of alleys.

Soren looked for an Ashgard representative out of reflex, but there was only the instructor, arms folded and face unreadable, watching from a step behind the visiting banners.

The three foreign nobles advanced with the methodical choreography of men who'd watched a hundred such ceremonies in their own kingdoms.

They paced the line, each accompanied by a second: the Kaldris wolf by a mute, scarred valet; the Sunspire silk by a woman in mirrored armor; the Yllaire scholar by a scribe whose quill hand was wrapped in blue gauze.

They walked the line, eyes sharp, faces blank, but Soren sensed the inventory of each boy happening in the milliseconds before a name or a flaw could present itself. Tavren, always first for attention, found himself fixed under the Kaldris man's gaze. "Name," the noble rumbled.

"Tavren. No line," Tavren said, eyes forward and voice thin as candlewick.

One glance, then a look to the valet, who shook his head. Kaldris moved on.

Rhain, two down, caught the Yllaire's eye. The scholar sniffed, then murmured a string of syllables Soren only half-heard, but it sounded like a diagnosis of interest.

The scribe scribbled. Soren saw, for the first time, a faint hope light up in Rhain's face.

Then the Sunspire noble stopped in front of Soren. Shorter than the Kaldris lord, but with an intensity that left Soren's hair standing at the back of the neck.

The Sunspire measured him, toes to brow, then turned to his mirror-armored second, who whispered something just below Soren's threshold of hearing.

"You are Soren Thorne," the noble said, not a question.

He nodded.

"Of Ashgard, gutter line? Or other?" the noble pressed, unblinking.

"Gutter. No line," Soren echoed Tavren. For once, the phrase didn't sound like a curse.

The noble's lips quirked, not quite a smile. He fished something from within his sleeve, a small scroll, banded in yellow, and pressed it into Soren's palm.

"Follow when called," he said, and swept down the row.

The three houses cycled twice. After the first round, some boys were dismissed outright, sent through the inner courtyard with looks of sullen relief or, in Glen's case, a performative shrug that didn't quite mask the rawness in his face.

Tavren was passed over on the second loop, but Rhain received a mark: the Yllaire scholar drew a line of ink across the back of Rhain's hand, then sniffed as if unimpressed with the result.

Soren waited, heart pounding hard enough that he felt the Remnant's edge echo the pulse.

Every breath tasted of iron, the air thin as a knife's edge. The Sunspire noble didn't speak to any of the others.

He simply passed, paused at Soren at each circuit, then continued on until the ceremony's logic finished itself.

When it was over, there were only Soren, Tavren, Rhain, and four others: two older than Soren, one smaller and hunched, the last so nondescript Soren felt embarrassed for not knowing the boy's name after all this time.

The instructor signaled for silence. "Boys. You have been seen. Some of you will stay. Some go."

Yllaire's scholar pointed to Rhain: "You. Mirrored Hall, noon tomorrow. If you bleed, don't say it."

Rhain nodded, mouth slack with awe.

Kaldris wolf head just grunted, and his valet took two of the older boys, hands rough on their shoulders, leading them down the causeway toward the west gate.

Finally, Sunspire addressed Soren: "You will present at the blue-glass door at firstlight. Do not bring the coat. Do not bring the sword."

He nodded, barely trusting himself to speak.

Tavren was passed over a final time, and the look on his face was not anger, but something close to pity, or perhaps envy.

The instructor did nothing, just watched, the chin raised as if to catch the wind's taste.

The nobles exited as they had entered, banners trailing smoke and rumor behind them. The instructor dismissed the line with a gesture, and Soren found himself adrift on the yard, the fog now dissipated to a pale, ordinary gray.

Tavren sidled up. He didn't look at Soren directly, but said, "Guess even knives find sheaths."

Soren offered nothing. The cold had climbed inward, as if his blood had forgotten what it was for.

"Does it hurt?" Tavren asked, after a time.

"Not yet," Soren replied.

Rhain passed, hand cradled close, the line of ink already smudged by nervous sweat. He gave Soren a nod, distant, but real.

Soren waited. The rest of the day blurred. Supper was bread, thinner than before. No one talked at mess, or if they did, Soren's ears filtered it out.

There was only the heat and the challenge of the unknown.

Night pressed in. Soren repacked his bundle, folding the blanket with care, and rewound the Remnant fragment in its rag, though it was now more a comfort than a weapon.

He looked at the stone walls, the way the evening light caught the cracks and made them glow a sullen orange, and tried to imagine the world beyond, the place he was to enter at dawn.

The barracks emptied by degrees. Tavren left without fanfare. Rhain, too, but he paused at the door and looked back, as if memorizing the scene in case it changed once he turned away.

Soren was last to sleep, last to rise. In the morning, he dressed with slow, exacting care, as if any missed button or off center fold might send him back to start.

He touched his chest under shirt and coat, one last time, then walked the hall to the blue glass door.

The door opened before he could raise a hand. The Sunspire noble stood just inside, not in armor, but a white and gold tunic, gloves so spotless they looked like they'd never known dirt. The noble's smile was gone, replaced by something sharper.

"Soren Thorne," he announced, as if reciting a name already carved in marble.

"Yes, sir."

He was given a scroll and a silver badge. The scroll was blank, save for the Sunspire seal; the badge cool and heavy, an unfamiliar weight.

"Do I..." Soren started.

"Nothing for it," said the noble. "Your city will not miss you."

Soren supposed that was true. He bowed, more to the moment than the man, then walked through the blue glass door, not looking back, not even once.

When the fog closed in again, it was clean, and for the first time, Soren felt as though he had been not chosen, but set free.

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Evening came with the end of snow, and a sudden hush as the gates drew shut behind him.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 23: A Banner Not Your Own - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 23: A Banner Not Your Own

Chapter 23: A Banner Not Your Own

The carriage shuddered like it might tip, then righted itself, wheels grinding over a rut that Soren suspected was more crack than road.

He braced his boots wide, fighting the urge to grab the seat frame with both hands, noble company or not, he'd rather look terrified than test his luck on these slush-buried arteries.

The windows had fogged over by now, giving only quick glimpses of white plains and the distant graphite of Ashgard on the horizon, shrinking by the minute.

His companion was unbothered.

Veyr Velrane had made a throne of his half of the carriage bench, slouching low enough to stretch his boots to the opposite seat, which meant Soren's knees crashed into them every time the carriage lurched.

The boy's cloak was stitched with a scatter of starbursts, all gold thread and little judgment, though the rest of him looked like he'd been poured into the outfit as an afterthought.

An artful chaos of hair, a stripe of blonde beside a stripe of ink black, tumbled over Veyr's brow, one lock nearly touching his flicker-blue eyes.

"The trick," Veyr said, gesturing with a ring-heavy hand, "is not to fight the motion. Accept chaos, Soren of Ashgard. Embrace the bump."

"Easy if you don't have breakfast fighting it back up," Soren managed, patting his own stomach for show.

Veyr grinned, a longer smile than most nobles would waste on a gutterboy, then kicked one heel up to the window ledge. "That's what makes you interesting. Most who come from Ashgard eat stone and never learn to spit it out."

Soren had no idea how to reply, so he nodded, which made the carriage bounce feel strangely dignified for a moment.

Two horsemen rode in the lead, heads lowered and cloaks streaming in the wind.

The banner of Velrane, sun-cut gold and a streak of red, on white so blinding it seemed to dare the landscape to look away, snapped overhead.

Soren watched the guards, wondering how much they actually paid attention.

The last two had spent most of the journey trading curses under their breath, but these rode in silence, as if the world out here wasn't worth comment.

"Is it weird?" Veyr asked after a silence, "knowing your House doesn't even play the game anymore?"

Soren squinted. "You mean the culling? Or something else?"

Veyr wagged a finger. "No, not the Choosing. I mean the actual game. The contracts, the alliances, the threats. The pageant of flags."

"I never had to," Soren admitted. "We just did what kept us alive."

The seat across creaked. Veyr leaned forward, elbows on knees, suddenly conspiratorial. "That's why they picked you, isn't it? The panel? You're not a swallow-tail, you're a..." he snapped his fingers twice as if chasing the exact bird, "...a crow. Not made for display. Made for what happens after."

Soren said nothing, which he regretted when Veyr didn't fill the silence for a whole minute. Somewhere above, the sun cleared a spit of gray sky and filled the carriage with a blinding, brief heat.

The map between Veyr's boots lit up with every river, range, and city, brighter than he'd ever seen them in any barracks school.

"So." Veyr tapped the map, then patted the space beside him until Soren gave in and shuffled over. "Let's do your orientation, as I see it."

He pointed to a ragged splotch in the center. "This is us. The old border, before the Tithing. Now all Ashgard's really got is the city and the ice north. But south, see this band of gold? That's Sunspire. My family, House Velrane. The ones who still have taste. We make the rules, and occasionally, the knives."

Next, his finger stabbed a blue-black crescent to the east. "Underground, but not literally. House Kaldris. They run half the ashfields, built their keeps inside the old glaciers. Mean, orderly, humorless. Their motto is 'Purge the rot or die cold.'"

A green cluster, webbed with lake names Soren had only heard as jokes: "Verdane Confederacy. House Yllaire. Nothing gets in or out unless they bless it, and they bless nothing except poison and coin. They're supposed to be neutral, but even their neutrality has a price-list."

Veyr's finger circled a coastal ring. "Coralward. House Merien. They claim the ocean and anything else not nailed down. Their admirals want to be gods, but their sailors are better than ours at dying with good stories."

He moved next to a sand-smudge to the far west. "Blackridge. House Dreshaun. They duel for everything, even their own coffins. You ever met a Dreshaun brat? No? Keep it that way, unless you like having your drink poisoned and your shoes set on fire."

Finally, Veyr's finger returned to Ashgard, tapping the spot three times. "And here, the sad monument. No offense. The guilds and blood lines once ran the world from here, but now... Your House is a question no one wants to answer. They say the old Lords traded their seed for a curse, which is why every Ashgard scion dies off in the wild, or in the gutter. That's what they say, anyway."

"I heard worse," said Soren.

"Oh, please. They call us sunborn fascists with a taste for velvet." He grinned. "Everyone's got a script in this world. You just play it better than most."

The carriage lurched, hard, and Veyr fell shoulder-first into Soren, knocking their heads together. They both yelped, then swore, then collapsed into a laughter that bordered on indecent.

When the moment passed, Veyr asked, "You ever fought with an actual sword? Not the blunted trash, but real steel?"

Soren shook his head. "Once..most of the time just street knives. Axes, when there was wood to chop. That's it."

"That's going to be a problem," Veyr decided, like a doctor pronouncing a cold terminal. "But I like that. It'll keep the others guessing."

Soren looked at the map again, then at the blur outside, then back to Veyr. "What about the Houses that didn't make it on your map?"

The princeling's eyes flicked up. "You mean the ghosts? The ones who lost, or ran, or joined the wrong side at the end?"

"Yeah."

Veyr shrugged. "They get what's coming, sometimes. Sometimes, if they get smart, they reinvent themselves as something new. But mostly, they haunt the edges and try to sell the world on why they should matter again."

Soren felt the shard at his chest, still there, still warm, though it pulsed slower than before. He wondered if Valenna, wherever she was, would have called this company beneath her, or a practical cost of business.

"Here," Veyr said, reaching to fold the map. "Let's skip the theory. Tell me what the knife in your coat would do, if I tried to rob you right now."

"I'd let you," Soren said. "So you'd have to figure out what came next."

That, finally, earned a pause. Then a smile. "That's Ashgard gutter combat. I like the style."

The rest of the ride went quickly, either the road got better, or Soren stopped caring about the bumps.

When the carriage halted at the next town's gate, the guards dropped from their saddles and bowed, which Soren tried not to stare at. Velrane stepped out, eyes alive, then turned and offered Soren a hand. "You want out, you take the left. You want to go on, you take the right."

Soren took a moment. Then, right hand first, he climbed out into the world that had just been mapped on his behalf, and didn't look back when the carriage vanished behind another plume of white and gold.

His boots hit the ground with more certainty than he expected. Veyr, already meters ahead and dazzling every market vendor in the village with his smile, shouted: "You coming, Thorne? Or do you need the map again?"

He followed, because the world wasn't going to let up, and neither was he.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 24: The Ground Where Names Begin - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 24: The Ground Where Names Begin

Chapter 24: The Ground Where Names Begin

Arrival was not a fanfare but a test, the road bottlenecked to a promontory of black glass, snow swept so clean it could have been an omen.

Above, the Knightfall Grounds crouched into the cliff with the patience of a nail waiting to drive itself deeper.

At first glance: not a castle, but a fort dressed in the trappings of monarchy. The towers were stunted, as if they'd thought better of advertising themselves in a land where siege engines outnumbered saints.

Flags hung everywhere. Everywhere. Not caught on gusts, but pulled taut by a trick of wire, or some graveyard wind that cared more for spectacle than politics.

Each banner flexed: the double-spired sun, the sigils of victory, even the threadwork constellations that circled the ramparts like a dare to look closer. Soren did.

He slipped on ice twice as he crossed the causeway, boots refusing to pretend he belonged.

Behind, Veyr Velrane made a show of catching him by the elbow, then released with an exaggerated bow, as if that absolved the mutual embarrassment.

"Careful," Veyr said, voice pitched for the guards at the gate to overhear. "The first step's always the worst."

Soren blinked away the cold, which stung less than expected, then squared his chin and stepped past the arch into the inner threshold.

There was a different air inside. Not literal, still the same bite to the nose, but a density to the light. The echoes here didn't fade, they doubled, like the walls held a mirror for every step.

A trio of junior heralds, all shorn to the scalp and dressed in identical white, waited at a lectern. One read a list; one checked for weapons; the third did nothing visible but watched for hesitation.

Soren almost grinned at the perfection of it. These people measured worth not by the sword, but by the microsecond wasted at a decision.

Veyr swept through protocol like a man who'd lived his whole life in a world built for him. Soren stumbled in his footsteps, which only made Veyr's notched smile wider.

"Time to split the line," Veyr said. He dropped the comment like a coin in a wishing well, then vanished in the wake of a gold-clad steward.

Soren watched the steward's braid whip past and tried to tell if it was the same kind of braid he'd seen in the city, or upgraded for ceremony. It was.

He was alone. Or not: the boredom of the junior heralds now zeroed in. Soren tried to look at them without actually looking.

There were subtleties to the initiation, even in the gutters. In this place, the trick would be not surviving, but noticing the rules fast enough to fake that you knew them.

He followed where indicated, across the vestibule, up a flight of non-uniform steps, into a corridor lined with mirrors. Correction: not mirrors.

Sheets of polished metal, warped enough to stretch the body and shrink the soul. Soren felt his own reflection buckle and snap as he passed.

No voices in the corridor, but at the end, a single guard: black plate with a white sun over the heart, weapon at ease but eyes locked on the world's disappointments.

The guard didn't move, but gestured with a chin for Soren to take a left, down a secondary hall. Soren did.

Another set of voices waited, these ones more anxious, buzzing behind a door labeled Iron Cloisters.

The room beyond: low benches, a wash-pan in each corner, and a row of pegs for the new coats that every recruit itched to wear.

Soren saw three others already here, all staged for maximum intimidation.

First, the boy sitting upright with his hands folded on his knees: pale, with a hawk nose and the waxy look of someone unused to sun or defeat.

His hair was the color of early frost, and a diagonal scar traced his left cheek like a failed attempt at molding the bone underneath.

He wore the house badge of Kaldris, a wolf's head doubled, and eyed Soren narrowly, as if to guess which of Soren's limbs was oldest and would fail first.

To his left, a girl, no, woman, Soren adjusted, dressed in black, the gloves on her hands a statement so obvious even he noticed.

She wore her pale hair tight to the skull, not a single strand out of sequence, and when her name was spoken...by no one, which meant she'd forced it ahead of time, it would be said with the sharpness of a needle through cloth.

He was nearly sure he'd never met her, but she looked at him with a smile premade for poisoners: small, careful, a coin waiting for the right side to show.

On the floor, cross-legged and wide-shouldered, the third recruit absently punched the air in time to her own heartbeat.

She was taller even sitting, with the open, freckled face of a fisher's daughter, and the set of her jaw said she'd survived more than the other two combined.

She caught Soren's stare and grinned, voice bright as a dropped bottle: "They said Ashgard sent an orphan. I figured you'd be smaller."

He shrugged. "Orphans come in all sizes."

"That's true," she said, then stuck out her hand with the confidence of someone who'd never been told no.

He accepted it, and she squeezed, not hard but with a deliberate assurance that mapped a new set of bruises.

"Juno Merien," she declared. "Coralward. Don't worry, I bathe."

"Is that supposed to be a warning?" Soren managed.

She laughed, and the girl in black raised her gloves, as if stifling a yawn or hiding a smile.

The hawk-nosed boy spoke last. "Dain Telmaris," he said, looking not at Soren but at the wall as he said it.

Soren had no script for this, so he did what always worked on the street: he waited for someone to make a mistake and then spoke second. "Soren Thorne," he said, careful not to overplay the name. "No house worth mentioning, unless you count what's left of Ashgard."

Juno grinned, appreciative. The girl in gloves only nodded, a single dip. Dain didn't react.

They sat for a while, pretending not to be watching each other. Soren checked the seams of the bench for sabotage, then realized this was the sort of place where sabotage would not be physical, but emotional, reputational, maybe judicial.

A chime somewhere overhead. The door at the far end opened, and a man entered. He was not, Soren decided at once, a knight.

His face was too smooth, his fingers unscarred, his eyes not so much bored as resigned. He wore the badge of Velrane, but with a stripe that Soren recognized as "in service, not in blood." The man's job was clear: bring the trash inside, then haul out whatever survived.

He listed them by name, or title, or offense, then motioned for coats to be hung and faces scrubbed.

Soren washed with a rag that stank of lamp oil and lavender; the scent caught in his throat, dizzying, so strong it threatened to cancel every other memory he had of morning.

They followed the man, two-by-two, down a corridor lined with glass mosaics, clearly expensive, but all showing the same image: a bright white sun, broken into twin halves. The symbolism was so obvious it felt like a threat, but Soren let it pass.

The next room sat long and low, with windows open to the winter, and a single table groaning under bowls of fruit, bread, and hot, brined meat. He tried not to look at the food, but failed.

"Eat," said the man, and then left without waiting.

Dain sniffed everything before taking the closest seat to the exit. Juno attacked the meat like a bear fumbling at a salmon run, and Soren found himself flanked by the poisoner-smile girl, whose plate remained empty.

"Not hungry?" he asked.

She shook her head, then said, in a voice soft as powder: "I don't eat on test days."

He didn't ask if she meant literal tests, or something else.

Juno leaned in. "She's worried she'll fail the weigh-in, but don't tell her I said so."

The woman in gloves didn't react except to lick a sliver of juice from her thumb, an act so precise Soren wondered if she'd practiced it for years.

The meal was perfunctory, but the salt and fat worked instantly, crawling into the spaces between Soren's bones.

He tried not to wolf it, but failed by the third bite. Valenna's presence, which had hovered in the background since arrival, now flexed, like a dog being forced to sit while the other dogs ate.

"*You're not impressed?*" she challenged, the voice inside his jaw.

"*I'm reserving judgment until someone tries to kill me,*" Soren replied, chewing slow.

She approved of the caution, or at least didn't argue it.

After the meal, another escort: this time a pair of armored men, both with the blank eyes and absolute lack of fear that meant they could kill Soren in three moves or less.

They led the four recruits out into a yard, paved with tile, each square laced with lead. Soren saw the logic instantly: no footing, no traction, every surface a calculated risk. They were to walk the perimeter, no talk, no hesitation.

Dain led, steps calculated to minimize sound. Juno clanked, not even pretending to care.

The gloves girl moved so light it was hard to tell if she made contact; her shadow seemed to float an inch above the ground. Soren took the middle, as always.

After a lap, one of the guards called them to a line, then gestured to the rack of practice swords set into the snow.

Each blade was lacquered blue or white, insignia stamped along the handle. Dain picked first, of course, and went straight for the Kaldris-marked blade, a slim, straight edge with no guard at all.

Juno grabbed a sword too heavy for anyone else, then spun it in an arc that nearly took Soren's nose. "Friendly!" she said, meaning the opposite.

Soren found a blade that looked like nothing: dull edge, worn hilt, balanced poorly. His kind of sword.

They faced off, two at a time: Dain vs. Juno, gloves vs. Soren. This was not a fight, but a lesson.

Dain moved fast, not just for a noble but for anyone. He kept Juno at distance, tapped the back of her hand twice in quick succession, then disengaged before she could counter.

Soren nodded: this was gutter discipline, or something better.

His own bout began with the girl in gloves giving him the opening move. She stood square, sword at shoulder height, unmoving.

Soren circled, trying for an angle, but every time he shifted, she mirrored. He faked a thrust, then stepped in; she let him, then swept his ankle and he landed flat in the snow, breath knocked out. Not painful, just humiliating.

"Again?" she offered, voice polite, but the smile still poison.

He did not decline.

After five rotations, they were all panting, except for her. The guard called a halt. Juno spat a tooth into the snow, laughed, and offered Soren a hand up without mockery.

Dain nodded, once, at Soren. "You learn quick."

He said nothing; the compliment was a set-up.

"Juno's right," Dain added, voice clipped. "I thought Ashgard sent orphans as a joke. You made her work for it."

Soren shrugged. "Maybe she wanted to."

At the edge of the yard, the second guard waited with a bundle of new coats, each sewn with an emblem.

Soren's was the least decorative: just a silver thread at the collar and a single patch on the left arm. He shrugged it on and found it not quite fitted, but not entirely wrong.

They were sent to quarters next. Soren's room was as promised: a narrow rectangle, cot, basin, a view of the yard that doubled as a view of every mistake you'd made that day. He sat on the edge of the bed and waited for the ache in his arms to dial down.

Valenna, now closer: *"You expected allies?"*

'Not even myself,' Soren thought.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 25: Not The Worst - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 25: Not The Worst

Chapter 25: Not The Worst

Soren woke to a corridor full of noise and the taste of wax in his mouth. It took a beat to orient: the bell had gone twice, he'd missed the summons, and now a dozen bodies funneled toward the lower drill amphitheater.

He managed a coat, wrong sleeve, then right, before plunging into the clot at the stairs. The shards of conversation caught in his ears: "Three knights," "full Velrane," "the duelist's here," and, whispered close: "One of them doesn't blink."

He followed the tide down, past the glass mosaics and the false-mirror corridor, until the world opened onto the immense practice ring, a phalanx of benches circling an oval pit paved in white tile and powdered ice.

The other recruits. double, now, from the night before, packed into arbitrary order, coats flashing every sigil Soren had seen on Veyr's map, and several he hadn't. Somewhere above, Veyr watched from a mezzanine, hands folded, eyes fixed on the churn below.

The noise shut off. Three figures stood at the lowest step. Soren instinctively clocked the hierarchy: the first, a spindled scarecrow in white, armor etched with sunbursts so artfully they seemed to burn into the metal.

His face was all lines, hair slicked flat, eyes a pale gloss, almost clear, and arms crossed as if to conserve the bare minimum of warmth and goodwill. Cassareth Vale, arrived by rumour hours before his body.

Next to him sprawled a slab of man, not fat but packed the way rubble is packed: Knight-Brecht, of the warhammer and the vocabulary. Brecht wore no helm.

His face sagged under the weight of veined scars, a nose flattened into myth, lips set in a permanent wince. Even at rest, he radiated the certainty that he'd killed men for fun and regretted only the effort.

The third, half a pace behind: Ser Caldryn Veyne, house colors only on the cuffs, gloves dark as wet slate.

He looked bored, but something in the poise suggested a man who'd never been surprised in his life.

Soren watched him the longest, not because of the duelist's legend, but because Veyne's eyes took him in as if reading print off a page. The look made Soren need to adjust his collar.

The three let the hush settle. Then Cassareth Vale stepped forward, boots clicking with delight on the cold tile.

"First Assembly. There are forty-two of you, which is at least a dozen too many." His voice was crystal, no, Soren thought, glass. Ready to splinter.

"These are not your fellow students." Vale let the words bench-hop. "These are your antagonists, your biographers, your best-case hazard. Fail and you will be replaced." He smiled, and Soren saw it wasn't a threat—it was a seasoning, meant to flavor the air. "Every week, someone will be missing. Consider it mercy."

Brecht snorted, then took the floor. "You will run drills in groups. You're blades-in-bone. A body does not get to choose its own hands or feet. You will be your worst enemy's best hope. If you cannot be that, at least don't disgrace the marrow."

The knight punctuated these instructions with the warhammer: he tapped it, lightly, against his own armored shin until the sound carried through the pit and up to the rafters.

Veyne didn't speak, but at a signal Soren missed, half the crowd reshuffled into pairs, then teams of four. He ended up with Juno, Dain, and the glove-girl, who this time relented and gave a name: Linné.

Soren heard the accent as soon as she said it, Valekhyri. That explained the gloves, the elegance of movement, the dislike of food on test days. Linné, not Linnea.

She never looked directly at Soren, only measured the space around him, as if plotting how it could be better spent.

"Group Five, you're first," Brecht growled.

They followed the call to the sparring ring. The rules were loose: contest the center, two teams at a time, until only one lasted. Half the blades were blunted steel, but a few shimmered with blue or white edges, liquid glass, Mage-touched.

Dain started with a low rush, moving quicker than Soren could guess. Juno hung back, playing the heavy, drawing attention.

Linné disappeared, he blinked and she was already at the shoulder of a boy twice her size, suppressing him with a disarm that looked accidental. Soren kept to the edge, watching the rhythm, absorbing the small failures, the ticks of wasted motion.

It was a blur after that: his hands remembered the drills better than his mind, correcting in real-time, the overlay flickering at a volume just shy of intrusive.

At one point, Juno clubbed a lad to the ground and bellowed "As advertised!" which earned her a warning from the white-armored knight.

Dain parried a blow that would have ruined his lungs, then flicked it toward Soren, who sidestepped, used the moment, and cut the victor clean off his feet.

They lost, but only by a margin. Vale watched from the dais, mouth pressed tight, then jotted something on a thin board. Brecht rolled his eyes and gestured for the next teams up.

It went like that. By midday, Soren's muscles shook with the effort of staying upright. He felt both less tired and more alive than yesterday; the memory sometimes glitched, running ahead or behind, but always leaving him a step ahead of whichever blue-blooded competitor dared to underestimate it.

At break, the four slumped together at the edge of the pit. Juno, sweating so hard her freckles ran, nodded once at Soren. "You learn fast, Ashgard."

He tried to shrug, but his shoulder felt like a cudgel had been taken to it.

"It's not a compliment," Dain said, still watching the floor.

Linné peeled off her gloves, then flexed her hands, revealing a latticework of old scars, each crossing the next like failed equations. "He's cheating," she said, but there was no malice in it, only curiosity.

Soren struggled to find the right lie. "I watch. Then I try. Bad habit."

"Not that," said Linné. "You're like a haunted person."

He risked a glance. Her eyes were pale, not quite blue, but the irises had a tremor to them, like ice about to crack.

Juno said, "I'd kill for that edge, haunted or not."

"Don't need to kill," said Linné, rising. "You just have to last."

The bell sounded, and they all got up, knees popping.

The rest of the day was theory, run by a tired priest in a mud-splattered robe who failed to pronounce any of their names correctly and seemed more interested in the window than the lesson. Soren drifted, doodling tactics into the edge of his paper, letting the overlay do its own rehearsal below consciousness.

The evening passed to a fog of hunger and bone-weariness. Mess was chaos, but the table found itself: Juno, Soren, Dain, and eventually Linné, who ate nothing but drank the brine from every cup she could find.

Soren tried to remember if he'd ever hated anyone, really hated, and decided he hadn't. But he could see, through the day's parade, how a person might learn.

When the mess broke, Soren wandered the upper yard. The sky was clear, the flags along the battlements still straining against their tethers.

Somewhere below, the whicker and crash of night practice echoed, someone, somewhere, always running drills for an audience even if only the dark.

He watched, for a minute, the windows of the main house. Most were blank, but one glowed blue, stuttering like a lighthouse on a storm coast. He let the memory of Valenna rise, see what she made of the place.

She approved, quietly: *"If you can't rule a city, you rule the space inside your own veins. That's what these people do."*

He almost agreed. But he knew what haunted meant, and so did Linné, and it did not have anything to do with blood.

He went to his quarters. The cot was less a bed than an invitation to die horizontal, but he accepted. The shard at his chest hummed, alive now, as if the day's work had resharpened it. He pressed a thumb to it, felt the old pulse.

"Groomed,"

Valenna whispered.

"Ashgard never did grooming," he muttered.

She laughed, not quite cruel, just tired. Maybe it was pride.

The next morning, and the one after, bled together. Brecht made the drills harder, and Dain started winning every third match.

Linné smiled more, but only at Juno. Veyr reappeared now and then, trailing fresh stories and fake insults, but never staying. Soren noticed that all the boys who'd scoffed at him on the first day now watched him with a careful, deliberate boredom.

A while in, Vale dropped the pretense, calling Soren and Dain up to the dais at end of day. "Telmaris, Thorne. Duel off record, here and now."

Soren knew this one: no out, no witnesses but the three knights. Maybe, he thought, a chance to make or break a future.

Dain went for blood. Soren recognized the style, a blend of city and noble, grace stapled onto violence.

It was the best fight he'd ever had, and the first where he was not sure who was teaching whom. The world blurred down to sword, forearm, and the taste of metal as Dain's blade swept past his ear. Soren let the overlay run wild, let Valenna have the moment, just to see who she would make him.

When it ended, they both stood, winded, bleeding at the sleeve and nowhere else.

Vale nodded. "Good. Both survive. Remember that."

Brecht added, "If you don't, you get replaced."

Veyne said nothing. But as Soren retreated, he caught the duelist's eyes on him again, same as before: not reading, but waiting for something stubborn to declare itself.

He counted that a win.

The night, again, was a pageant of exhaustion. Soren stayed up, trimming his nails, then watched the moonswath as it cast the flags pale and delicate. He heard, distantly, the bell for midnight drills.

He listened for Valenna, but she only murmured: *"See? You're not the worst after all."*

He let the moonlight cut across his cot, eyes open, body singing with ache, and wondered if there was a better word for haunted, or if that would have to do.

Juno snored in the next room. Soren grinned, then slept.

He woke once, hours before dawn, to the sound of something tapping at the window.

When he peeled back the frost, there was nothing there, only the echo of the sound, and his own reflection, wide-eyed and a little less sure of itself than yesterday.

He closed it, then, and slept again, chasing whatever dream had tried knocking.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 26: The Quiet Blade - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 26: The Quiet Blade

Chapter 26: The Quiet Blade

All day, the sky threatened. Wind prowled Soren's boots with sharp teeth, and the yard radiated ruckus: swords snapped the air, wooden shields ricocheted sound off the stone, and everywhere, the bright staccato churn of bodies desperate to impress.

He tried not to shiver, but the cold out here was precise, practiced, and could find flesh even under three layers of roughspun.

The ring filled fast. Soren watched the line of trainees press toward the chalked border as if crowding would help them escape.

A few were from the city, but most wore the ill-fitting pride of outlander sons. The Velrane knights stalked the edges, bored but vigilant, their blue-and-silver tabards immaculate against the haze of kicked-up frost.

Up on the balcony, nobles hunched in jewel-dark coats, hissing commentary through cupped hands. Even the great bastard, Veyr Velrane himself, loitered at the banister, elbows propped as if to ensure gravity remembered him.

They called names. Jarek Fenn first, a slab of neck and shoulder, smirking like his jaw was carved that way. Soren heard laughter before he registered his own name next, "Thorne."

The sound of it made his teeth grit and then refuse to un-grit.

Jarek swung his practice sword overhead, arcs so wide Soren imagined he could just step back and let the wind do the work.

Someone in the crowd muttered Soren's odds, tiny, not worth the effort to round up to one. He flexed the fingers of his right hand, then shifted his stance, boots scudding to the edge of the line.

Next to Jarek, Soren looked underfed. He admitted it. But the more that Fenn grinned, the more it felt like the trick wasn't to fight him but to end this whole miserable spectacle.

Jarek flicked his blade, "Ready, gutter?" The word landed heavy, but there was no heat to it, just reflex.

Soren stared at the point between Jarek's eyes. "You could run a second lap around the ring before you wound me."

"Big talk," said Jarek, but the crowd loved it, even if they only ever loved to see a mouth get shut.

A knight up on the wall banged a staff. "Begin!"

Jarek went at him, a bellow, then the kind of start Soren remembered from city brawls: telegraphed, huge, the kind where the first punch exists mainly to terrify.

The sweep should have knocked Soren into the dirt, but he let it slip past, let the weight of Jarek's own momentum pull him forward.

Soren didn't counter. Not yet. Instead, he let the blade ride low, wrist cocked at the last minute to deflect without yielding space.

A round of oohs from the crowd. Even the blue-bloods stilled, as if maybe the outcome was not yet fixed.

Jarek reset. This time, he jabbed, fast, a blunt shot at the chest, expecting a flinch. When Soren didn't, the tip gouged his coat, but not the skin.

He took another half-step back, again let the swing over-commit. It was easier than the drills, Jarek only had one speed, and it was "prove."

By the third pass, Soren didn't hear Valenna's voice, but he knew what she would have said: *"He's not fighting you. He's fighting the air between."*

Jarek tried a feint, left, then a low cut meant to sweep him down.

Soren planted, locked knees, let the blow glance off his thigh, and as Fenn overreached, stepped in, brought his own sword up in a clean line.

Not a slash, just a touch, like he was ringing a bell inside Jarek's ribs. The other boy froze, then gasped, and Soren let the tip rest there, not pushing, just making it clear.

The yard upchucked noise, confusion braided with a thin seam of real awe. A few throats started to boo, but it was short-lived.

Jarek staggered back, clapped his hand to his ribs as if checking he was still there, then hunched over. Soren bowed, just enough for theatre.

On the balcony, Veyr Velrane cocked his head, one brow rising. Soren tried not to watch, but in the corner of his vision he caught the up-nod of someone who'd expected amusement and gotten something else.

The knight with the staff called it. "Point and match, Thorne."

He waited for shame, or pride, or even just the urge to shout. But there was nothing. Soren let the sword drop, hands loose, pulse settling into the even, dull rhythm of *'again, again, again.'*

He watched as Jarek retreated, muttering at the ground, then turned to meet the next set of eyes waiting to see if maybe this wasn't luck, if maybe it could happen again.

Overhead, the nobles started betting triple on the remaining matches. Soren could almost taste the bitterness of the coin that would never be his.

The next pair took their spots. The girl's blade shook in her grip, the boy across from her already sneering. It would be quick.

A hand landed on Soren's shoulder, heavy as a favor owed. He turned to find Dain Telmaris, yesterday's ghost, today's bench-warmer.

"You could have stretched it out," Dain said, voice low. "Made him sweat."

Soren shrugged. "He'll sweat enough, next time."

Dain held his gaze for a long second, then grinned like it hurt to do so. "Not bad, gutter. Not bad at all."

Soren shrugged off the compliment, but didn't hate it.

As they walked off the ring, he caught a last glimpse of Veyr Velrane, mouth drawn into a straight, unreadable line. Soren wondered how many seconds it would take for his name to go up the ranks, and how many more before someone tried to cut it off.

'Doesn't matter,' he told himself. He'd already started thinking through the next fight, and the one after that, and the one after that...

"Thorne!" someone called, sharp as a thrown stone.

He turned, saw a junior knight waiting at the far end of the yard, fingers jittering as if eager to hand off whatever errand destiny required.

"Come," the knight said. "They want to look at you."

Soren followed, steps even, trying not to limp from where Jarek's blow had landed. The crowd peeled away, but the echo of his name lingered.

On the balcony, Veyr watched. Only this time, he smiled with his eyes, as if somewhere between the start and finish, the whole game had shifted a hair closer to interesting.

Soren looked up, met the stare.

He didn't smile back, but he let the moment hang, just long enough to make it a promise.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 27: The Knife Worth Owning - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 27: The Knife Worth Owning

Chapter 27: The Knife Worth Owning

The Solar was a lie. Warmth barely lived here, even with the fire gnawing at logs as thick as Soren's thigh, a fire that, in theory, should have made the air hum like an angry hive.

Instead, it struggled to soften the edges of the high chamber's glass, the windows bowing so wide and clear they could have scalped the roofs off the city below.

The yard was a snow-smear now, a strip of white bordered in soot and the ant-logic of moving bodies: recruits, stewards, the mirror-polished threat of Velrane's own line.

Above it all, the Solar held its altitude, a retina flick of gold and blue that reminded Soren who owned the sun.

Veyr Velrane waited at the center table, a sheet of parchment spread under his palm. Every edge of the table was mapped and mapped again, ink lines, wax coins for towns, gem-shards glassed in after the borders moved, and the little bone chips the staff used to mark lost sons as if keeping score in a game.

The room's only luxury was a wall-to-wall map, a quilt stitched with the ambition and hindsight of four centuries.

Soren had seen the map once, after curfew, through the slit of a half-closed door. In the dark, the rivers looked like wounds, stitched and then unstitched into whatever shape the last war required.

He wasn't the focus today.

In fact, Veyr's eyes only darted to Soren's name once on the roster, a flick and a thumb-bracket, then back to the work.

Soren, two floors below, was a rumor in the pit, a shadow the others assumed was either a snitch or a test.

Veyr had moved his own name up the ledger. Soren's was underlined. Not a neat line, but a nervous one, done fast.

The doors clapped without warning.

Lord Callen Velrane arrived like a weather system, frost melting off his cloak in wet, angry drips.

The Lord was a suspension bridge held together by thirty years of war and two bad knees; when he moved, the coat flared out, and every eye learned to get out of the way.

He scanned the Solar once, saw Veyr at the table, and dismissed the geometry of the room as if it was for people with softer problems.

He didn't say a word. He just let the silence draft its own instructions.

Veyr did not look up at first; he inked a number next to a city...Eidengard?, then set the pen aside with both hands.

Even his movements had practice in them. "You asked for numbers. They're not good." Not a hint of apology. Just the fact, collapsed to a single node.

Callen didn't blink. "I told you to find a solution." His voice was rarefied, a thin strip of patience stretched tight. Soren had imagined, more than once, what it would take to cut it clean.

Veyr said, "I have one. But you won't like it."

That almost got a smile from the old man, almost. "If I wanted to like the solutions, I'd have hired the poets."

Veyr glanced at the roster, and though Soren wasn't there to see it, he could bet the motion: Soren's name, highlighted, close to the list's end. "Soren Thorne," Veyr said, low and careful. "I want him reserved as my blade."

A slow exhale from Callen. "He's gutter. Not even bannered."

"He's better than the banners," Veyr said. "He doesn't fight for you. Doesn't fight for himself. It's like he's seen the game but refuses to play until he can rewrite all the rules."

Callen grunted. "You're feeling sentimental. Hunger does that. One winter out of the city and suddenly every bastard seems like an orphaned prince."

"He's not a bastard," said Veyr. "He's a disaster. If he lives, he'll be more trouble than every cousin and every son your sisters spent half their dowries pushing through these rooms."

Callen shook his head. "I know the type. They shine young, burn out younger. You remember Ashgard's last gutter-prodigy? He died in two moves and left a city in flames."

"He won't die," Veyr said, and this time the certainty anchored the words. "Unless you let one of the others kill him for sport, and then we all lose."

Callen paced to the window, watching the yard. The snow made even the smallest movements hemorrhage color into the white. He traced something on the glass, just once, a finger sketching a narrow spiral, then gone.

"You want to put your name behind an orphan with no debt to the house. You want to make him your knight."

"When he's ready," said Veyr. "Or after you're dead, and I do it anyway."

A pause. A long, cold draft. The fire in the Solar gave up, popping a coal in protest.

"Your mother warned me you'd be insubordinate," Callen said. "But she didn't warn me you'd be clever enough to get away with it."

Veyr said nothing. His hands were folded on the map, like he was afraid anything looser would betray nerves.

Callen allowed the silence to ripple, then: "Fine. He's yours, if he doesn't die first." The Lord walked over to the table, put a hand on the edge, and leaned in, two wolves, always negotiating who got to use the teeth.

"But if you make a fool of the house because you want a better story, I'll cut him out myself. And you know I don't bluff."

Veyr said, soft, "No bluff. You never have."

Lord Callen turned, cloak snapping, and walked through the doors as if exiting a duel he'd finished before drawing the blade. The Solar held the cold long after he left.

Veyr let his fingers drum the map, slow and almost tender. He circled Soren's name again, this time with a steadier hand.

Down in the pit, Soren finished his drills and felt the afterburn of a decision being made, somewhere, on his behalf.

He did not know what had been promised. Only that the trajectory of his life, like so many before him, had just been bent by the orbit of someone else's need.

It felt right. Or as close to right as the world allowed.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 28: Not Yet a Knight - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 28: Not Yet a Knight

Chapter 28: Not Yet a Knight

On good mornings, the Emberward stank of oil, ash, and promise. Most days it managed only two of the three.

Soren lay on a cot so clean he'd spent the night counting its stitches, checking for traps. No one had tried to garrote him, not even the pillow.

Sunrise filtered through a grid of glass blocks inset above the door, dotting the floor and wall with identical squares of watery gold.

He rolled onto his back, waited for the familiar pressure of a dorm-mate's elbow in the ribs or the stinking foot dangling over his throat. Nothing.

Only the weight of a blanket that could have fetched half a week's pay on the old block.

Soren stretched, toes brushing the footboard, and debated: steal the impossible-riches bedding for later, or admit he'd grown soft and keep it.

In the end he settled for folding the blanket at the foot, which seemed polite and also just enough like theft to amuse him.

Outside, the Emberward yawned to life.

He laced boots, shrugged the new tunic over yesterday's shirt, scarlet at the cuffs, Velrane's new color, already stained by the damp ink of its own insignia.

The badge at the breast was a sunburst, cheaper than gold but laquered so hard it reflected his own face: narrow, brow furrowed, mouth tensed between grin and scold.

He followed the noise to the mess, a hall that had been chiseled straight from the cliff's edge.

Spread across the central table, a mix of faces he'd only half-memorized: some from drills, others from the yard, all of them likely to outlive him.

The morning's porridge steamed in a vat at the center, beside bricks of cheese and torn bread still warm at the core.

He recognized Lyrik on sight, the only recruit motivated enough to have combed his hair, but too slouched in his seat to keep it from falling over one eye.

Lyrik caught Soren watching and raised a spoon, lazy salute.

"Gutterboy arrives," he announced, perfectly audible to the table.

Soren ignored it, ladled porridge into a bowl, then wedged himself between two strangers at the bench nearest the fire.

A girl two seats down glanced over, quick, then resumed eating with her head lowered.

Soren saw the set of her jaw: determined, maybe angry, maybe just used to holding on through the first bite so no one could steal from her bowl.

Opposite, a tank-shaped recruit methodically sawed slices from the cheese, stacking them onto bread until gravity staged a rebellion. He looked at Soren with something between challenge and invitation.

"You're with Velrane now," the tank said. "Dane."

"Soren." He tore a bit of bread, focused on the chew: salty, dense, exactly the kind he'd miss if he ever left.

Lyrik rapped the table with his knuckles, striving for attention. "You hear the new rumor?" he said, not needing an answer.

"They're bringing in a master from Blackridge for next week's duel. Means the Houses are watching, means somebody's getting promoted whether they want it or not."

"Or demoted," added Dane, picking cheese from his teeth. "Depends if you're lucky. Or slow."

Soren let the words roll past, watching the others. The girl with the held-tight mouth caught him at it.

"Mira," she said. Her voice barely crested above the din, but her eyes were clear: blue-tinged, the color of snow just before it kills you.

He nodded, then, after an awkward span, "First day?"

She snorted, actually snorted, like it offended her to be asked. "I was here before you. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

Soren smiled at the bowl, which didn't require conversation back.

The table's mood ticked upward as porridge gave way to bread-fights and chore lists. Lyrik collected gossip from each end, annotating every rivalry with a stage-whispered aside.

Mira ate with one hand under the table, like she expected someone to break the other. Dane's appetite outlasted the first round of bread, and required a second.

Soren only spoke when forced, and then only in answers short enough to be mistaken for mistakes. Even that earned a laugh out of Lyrik, who repeated Soren's rejoinders as if they were puns.

By the end, Soren caught himself relaxing. The strangeness of noble-born camaraderie, how it tilted between derision and invitation, made him uneasy, but at least no one here expected him to kneel.

—

They assembled outside, boots crunching the court's rim of black ice. The wind sheared off the cliff and flung itself through the archways, chilling every joint to the marrow.

Soren scanned the yard's geometry: the wide open, ringed by three stories of glass and stone, shadowed in the crook of the main tower.

From above, Veyr Velrane leaned across a balcony, flanked by two men with the posture and hair of genuine tutors. Soren didn't look up more than once; he knew better than to meet a noble's eye before being invited.

They started, as always, with footwork. The master in charge, a stiff-backed ex-knight with the beard trimmed to a fatal angle, whistled them into lines, then into pairs. "Rhythm, not speed. If I see even one of you skipping a beat, you'll spend the afternoon sanding the floor with your face."

Partners cycled. Soren drew Mira first. She moved like the last day of winter: tight, full of pent-up violence, but with a precision that impressed him.

Her boots found the marks with microsecond accuracy. "You're making me look bad," she muttered, only half annoyed.

"They'll kill you if you make them look worse," he replied, barely moving his lips.

She smirked. "Don't worry. You can take the blame next time."

They switched off. Lyrik, next; he fought every instruction, improvising so often Soren wondered how he was still alive.

"Too slow," said Lyrik, then, "No, too fast!" as Soren switched tempo mid-step, forcing him to backpedal and catch himself. By the third round, Lyrik was winded and Soren unmarked, and the instructors took note.

The next drill was more showy: staves, point-control, make the opponent miss, then punish the miss. Soren liked this one. The memory overlay, the one he'd trained with since the yard in Ashgard, took over, mapping every flaw in his partner's form before it could be corrected.

Each time a staff swept at his neck or knee, Soren slipped or redirected, sometimes not even looking at the attack.

Valenna's lessons ran under his skin like an old, secret pulse. He wondered, idly, if any of the others felt the world slow down when the violence started.

Most of them just looked confused.

By noon, they'd moved on to sparring. Short rounds, scored not by touches but by how well you could keep your blade and fingers intact.

Soren won the first, lost the second, drew the third. "Lucky," muttered his opponent, Dane, this time, whose swings were clumsy but almost terminally surefooted.

In the background, he heard Lyrik whispering to Mira: "He never sweats. Even when he loses."

"Maybe he's already dead," Mira replied, quiet.

It didn't bother Soren, but he played up the joke for their sake, rolling his eyes at every win and feigning fatigue when the swordmaster drifted nearby.

He knew better than to show his best work unless someone paid for it in advance.

Two hours later, they ended with a formation drill, group against group. The best teams, Soren saw, were ones that ignored the hierarchy and just tried not to trip themselves.

He let Mira and Lyrik run it, following their lead, positioning himself in the slot most likely to be ignored by the instructor.

Even so, the swordmaster clocked him twice, the second time with a hail-mary punch to the ribs that Soren recognized as an old city trick.

When the horn sounded for dismissal, he kept to the back of the cluster. The air in his lungs felt more his than it had in days.

—

The yard didn't clear so much as disperse, the recruits peeling off for chores or food or the luxury of being away from authority.

Soren picked at his sleeve, working the dampness out, then noticed a page, barely past childhood, face too round for the livery, waiting by the door. The boy, when he realized Soren had noticed, scurried up the rest of the way.

"You're Soren Thorne?" the page asked.

"Depending on who's asking."

The kid went red, stammered, produced a folded slip sealed with the house sunburst. Soren broke it without thinking. Two lines, inked in the same hand as the previous night's map:

Report to the Solar at evening bell.

—Veyr

He pocketed the note.

From the other side of the yard, Lyrik shouted, "Uh-oh! Summoned already, are we?"

Mira said, "Tell the Young Master we want better bread."

Dane just shrugged, more interested in the cheese ration he'd scored.

Soren didn't react, but tucked the note deeper anyway.

"Interest usually means extra work," he said, not to anyone in particular.

The page seemed pleased that his task was complete, and jogged off to the kitchens, voice trailing with the hope of hot food, or maybe just a moment of not being noticed.

Soren hung back, arms loose at his sides, then drifted to the edge of the yard. The last light of afternoon burned off the cliff and caught the glass in the tower, reflecting a perfect, razor line across the old practice posts.

He watched it for a time, saw the way the sun picked out every chip and scar left by those before him. He let the memory run.

"Practice," Valenna had always told him. But today, the practice felt less like a sentence, and more like a start.

He drew the line in the air, once, then again. The line felt real.

But Soren stood for a while longer, just in case it needed to be.

—

On the upper balcony, Veyr leaned forward, watching Soren's outline form and reform against the yard's clutter.

His mouth quirked, not quite a smile. Then, hands behind his back, he waited for the evening bell to see what would walk through the Solar's door.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 29: The Shape of a Knight - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 29: The Shape of a Knight

Chapter 29: The Shape of a Knight

The Hall of Arms smelled of ancient steel and human effort, sweat ground into the wood, oil rubbed into leather, and the mineral tang of blades handled by a thousand different palms.

Soren breathed it in, letting the scent tell him what his eyes already knew: this place had been forming warriors since before anyone in this room drew breath.

The vaulted stone chamber loomed above them, its ceiling lost in shadow. Weapon racks lined the walls like sentinels, holding steel of every shape and purpose.

Banners hung between them, some so faded their house colors had bled into a uniform murk.

The training dummies stood in silent judgment, their wooden bodies scarred by decades of strikes, splinters held together by the stubbornness of old oak and dried sweat.

Soren's boots made no sound on the polished floor. He noted the worn paths where countless feet had traced the same patterns, day after day, year after year.

In some spots, the stone had been rubbed so smooth it almost gleamed, catching the light from the brazier that burned at the center of the room.

The brazier's flames cast dancing shadows across the ceremonial armor of a full Knight standing guard in the corner.

The steel caught the light and threw it back, a wink of fire against polished metal. Soren wondered how many had stood where he stood now, looking at that armor and wondering if they would ever earn the right to wear it.

"Form up!" The command cracked through the air like a whip.

Master Durnach, the Velrane arms instructor, stood at the center of the hall, his scarred face set in lines of permanent disapproval. His voice sounded like it had been dragged over gravel, then beaten with a hammer for good measure.

Despite his age, at least sixty winters, Soren guessed, Durnach's posture remained unbending, spine straight as a sword blade.

"Half-circle, now. Don't waste my time."

Soren moved with the others, forming a half-moon around the instructor. He felt rather than saw the presence behind them all, Veyr Velrane, arms folded across his chest, watching the proceedings with that calculating gaze Soren had come to recognize.

The young noble said nothing, but his attention hummed in the air like a drawn bowstring.

Master Durnach surveyed them, his eyes lingering on each face just long enough to make them uncomfortable. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped to a rumble.

"Bladecraft is more than skill with a sword. It is the discipline of turning one's entire body, mind, and will into a weapon. It is a path, and like all paths worth walking, it is marked by trials."

The words hung in the air, heavy with meaning. Soren kept his face carefully blank, though his mind raced behind the mask.

"The path of Bladecraft is divided into ranks," Durnach continued, pacing slowly before them. "Each rank represents not just skill, but understanding. Commitment. Sacrifice."

He stopped, eyes narrowing. "You are all trainees. The lowest rank. Barely worth the steel you're permitted to touch."

A boy to Soren's right shifted uncomfortably. Durnach's gaze snapped to him like a striking snake.

"Something to say, boy?"

"No, Master Durnach."

"Good. Because the first lesson of Bladecraft is knowing when to hold your tongue."

Durnach resumed his pacing.

"Above trainee comes squire. A squire has proven basic competence with a blade and begun to understand the discipline required. Initiates serve the higher ranks, maintain the armory, and train daily under supervision."

Soren calculated silently. *'Squire. Three months of drills, maybe four if I'm unlucky.'*

"After squire comes the basic knight. A knight has mastered the basic forms, can fight with multiple weapons, and understands tactical discipline. Knights may be assigned to guard duties within the grounds and may participate in formal competitions."

'Six months as a Knight, minimum,' Soren thought. *'Unless there's a way to accelerate.'*

"Above Knight is a Knight-Commander. Commanders have begun to develop their own style within the framework of traditional forms. They assist in training lower ranks and sometimes are assigned to escort nobles outside the grounds."

That caught Soren's attention. Escort duties meant proximity to Veyr. Proximity meant opportunity.

"Then comes Swordmaster. These are candidates who have proven themselves worthy of consideration for full weapon mastery. They undergo special trials, serve directly under high ranking officials, and may be claimed by a noble house for personal service."

The air in the room seemed to thin. Soren felt his pulse quicken slightly. *'Claimed by a noble house.'* That was the gate he needed to pass through.

"Finally for you guys, there is Warden of the Code. They are the True Knights who have passed all trials, sworn the oaths, and been accepted into the Order. They serve the realm, uphold the Code, and carry the honor of their house until death."

Durnach paused, letting the weight of the final rank settle over them.

"Each rank has its privileges. Each has its duties. Each has its price." His eyes swept over them again. "The Code binds us all. A Knight who breaks it is worse than a trainee who never took the oath at all."

'The Code,' Soren thought. *'Another set of rules to navigate. Another game board to learn.'*

"A Knight serves their lord with absolute loyalty," Durnach continued. "They protect the innocent, uphold justice, and defend the realm. They do not use their skills for personal gain or vengeance. They do not act without honor. They do not refuse a lawful command from their sworn lord."

The instructor's voice had taken on an almost ritualistic cadence, as if reciting from memory words he had spoken a thousand times before.

"A Knight may be claimed by a noble as personal sword. This bond is sacred, second only to the Knight's oath to the Code itself. Once claimed, a Knight serves at their lord's pleasure, until death or formal release."

Soren kept his breathing steady, his face impassive. But behind that mask, his mind was calculating with cold precision. *'Trainee to Squire to Knight to Commander to Swordmaster to Warden. Five promotions. Each with its own timeline, its own challenges, its own opportunities to fail.'*

Or to succeed.

He was already mapping the fastest route, identifying the chokepoints, the places where he could gain advantage. The others around him shifted restlessly, hearing only rules and requirements, burdens and expectations.

Soren heard opportunity.

Valenna's voice remained silent, unusually so. But he didn't need her commentary for this.

Deep in his chest, where the shard rested against his heart, he felt that quiet, coiled readiness she had been sharpening in him since they first met. It was a tension, like a bowstring drawn but not yet released.

Master Durnach finished his explanation with a final warning about the consequences of failure, then dismissed them with a curt nod.

The half-circle broke apart, recruits drifting toward the door in twos and threes, already muttering about the impossibility of it all.

Soren turned to leave, and as he did, his eyes met Veyr's across the hall. The young noble hadn't moved from his position, arms still folded, expression unreadable. For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

No words passed between them. None were needed. They both knew the same thing now, the title they were waiting for had a name, and Soren had just learned exactly how to reach it.

Swordmaster. The rank at which Veyr could claim him.

Soren nodded, once, almost imperceptibly. Veyr's mouth curved in the ghost of a smile.

Then Soren turned and followed the others out, his steps measured and unhurried, as if he had all the time in the world.

He didn't. But he had a map now. And Soren Thorne had always been good at finding his way, even in the dark.

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 30: Through the Halls of Velrane - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 30: Through the Halls of Velrane

Chapter 30: Through the Halls of Velrane

Morning light spilled across the barracks floor like watered-down mead, just enough to illuminate the dust motes but not enough to warm anything.

Soren tugged his worn boots on, the leather stiff from yesterday's training. His muscles ached with the pleasant burn of progress, Master Durnach's lecture on Bladecraft ranks still ringing in his ears.

Five promotions between him and what he needed. Five hurdles, five tests, five chances to fail.

'Or *succeed*,' he reminded himself, checking the position of the shard against his chest. Valenna remained quiet this morning, but he felt her presence like a winter draft under a door, constant, subtle, impossible to ignore.

He was halfway across the yard, heading toward the training area for morning drills, when a familiar figure cut across his path.

Veyr Velrane moved with the casual authority of someone who never questioned his right to interrupt anyone's day. His mismatched hair, the blonde and black streaks, caught the sun in ways that seemed deliberately theatrical.

"You've seen the yards. You've seen the mess hall," Veyr said curtly. "That's not the estate. Come on."

He didn't wait for a response, just turned and started walking, clearly expecting Soren to follow.

Soren hesitated for only a moment. Missing morning drills would earn him a reprimand, possibly extra duties. But refusing Veyr Velrane would be... unwise. He fell into step behind the noble, trying to match the longer stride without looking eager.

"Should I tell Master Durnach—" Soren began.

"Already handled," Veyr cut him off, not bothering to look back. "He knows you're with me today."

They passed through a side entrance Soren hadn't used before, the stonework growing finer with each corridor they traversed.

Tapestries replaced the bare walls, the woven scenes depicting battles and ceremonies Soren couldn't name.

The floor changed from packed earth to stone to polished marble in a progression that mapped the exact social distance between Soren's origins and Veyr's birthright.

The corridor widened suddenly, opening into a space so vast that Soren's footsteps faltered. The Great Hall of House Velrane stretched before him, its ceiling arching impossibly high above polished marble floors.

Towering columns carved with the house heraldry, silver falcon wings on black, lined the hall like silent sentinels. Morning light streamed through stained glass windows, painting the marble in pools of amber, crimson, and azure.

"This is where we host the formal feasts," Veyr said, his voice echoing slightly in the cavernous space.

"Endless, tedious affairs where everyone pretends to enjoy themselves while plotting how to stab each other in the back."

He gestured toward the far end of the hall. "My father sits there, of course. I'm placed three seats down, close enough to be seen but far enough that I don't have to participate in the serious conversations."

Soren took in the massive dining table that dominated the center of the hall. It could easily seat fifty people, with room for servants to move between the chairs.

"I've never even seen a dining table that could seat more than six," he admitted, the words slipping out before he could catch them.

Veyr turned, eyebrow raised. "Six? Where was that, a tavern?"

"Trade caravan," Soren replied, keeping his tone neutral. "A merchant I traveled with as a child sometimes let the hired hands eat at his table when we made good time."

"Hmm." Veyr's expression shifted to something harder to read.

"Well, trust me, you're not missing much. The food gets cold before it reaches you, and you spend the entire night listening to old men complain about border disputes that have been going on since before you were born."

He turned abruptly, gesturing for Soren to follow. "Come on. More to see."

They wound through corridors that grew increasingly ornate, passing servants who bowed to Veyr and pretended not to notice Soren at all.

Eventually, they reached a set of double doors carved with intricate patterns of vines and books. Veyr pushed them open without ceremony.

The library of House Velrane unfolded before them, a forest of shelves stretching two stories high. Ladders on brass rails provided access to the upper reaches, where leather-bound volumes sat in neat rows.

Sunlight filtered through tall windows, catching the dust motes that danced in the air like tiny stars.

"My prison from age six to sixteen," Veyr said, running his fingers along the spine of a nearby book.

"I spent every morning here with tutors, memorizing the lineage of every major house until I could recite them backward in my sleep."

He pulled a volume from the shelf, flipping it open to reveal pages of family trees, names and dates written in careful script.

"The complete genealogy of House Kaldris. Fascinating reading, if you enjoy tracing exactly how many cousins married each other to keep their bloodline 'pure.'"

Soren approached one of the shelves, eyeing the books with a mixture of wariness and fascination. "My first 'library' was a locked merchant's wagon I used to sneak into as a boy," he said.

"There were weathered ledgers and half-torn maps. I taught myself to read from shipping manifests."

Veyr snapped the book shut, returning it to the shelf. "Probably more useful than what they made me read. At least you learned something practical." He paused, studying Soren. "Can you really read? Most of the recruits can barely write their own names."

"I can read," Soren confirmed. "Not as fast as you, probably. But well enough."

"Interesting." Veyr seemed to file this information away for later use. "That explains a few things."

Before Soren could ask what things, Veyr was moving again, leading him through another door and down a long corridor lined with portraits of stern-faced men and women in Velrane colors.

"My ancestors," Veyr explained, not slowing his pace. "Each one more disappointed in their descendants than the last. My father's portrait will join them someday, looking down at me with the same expression."

They passed through an arched doorway, and suddenly the stone world of the estate gave way to something entirely different.

The private gardens of House Velrane spread before them, a stark contrast to the massive architecture they'd just left behind.

Quiet paths wound through beds of winter flowers, white hellebores, witch hazel with its spidery yellow blooms, and snowdrops hanging like tiny lanterns from green stems.

Stone benches edged ponds where thin ice formed delicate patterns around the edges.

Despite the season, the garden felt alive, protected from the worst of winter's bite by the walls that surrounded it.

"I come here when I need to escape my father's lectures," Veyr said, his voice softer here. "The gardeners know to pretend they don't see me."

He sat on one of the stone benches, gesturing for Soren to join him. After a moment's hesitation, Soren complied, acutely aware of the strange picture they must make, the noble heir and the gutter recruit, sitting side by side in a garden meant for contemplation.

"It's peaceful," Soren acknowledged, unsure what else to say. "I'm more used to sleeping in ditches and under carts than in gardens, but I admit the flowers don't smell bad."

That earned a small laugh from Veyr. "High praise indeed." He plucked a snowdrop, twirling it between his fingers. "You've slept in a lot of ditches, then?"

Soren shrugged. "When you travel with caravans, you take what shelter you can get. Ditches are actually better than some alternatives. Fewer rats than stables, usually."

"You traveled with caravans before Ashgard took you in?"

"Something like that." Soren kept his tone casual, though he felt Veyr's curiosity like a physical pressure.

"Did odd jobs for scraps of food. Learned to make myself useful enough that they'd keep me around."

Veyr was silent for a moment, still turning the flower between his fingers. "Thorne isn't your birth name, is it?"

The question was direct, but not accusatory. Soren considered lying, then decided against it. "No. I didn't have a surname until recently. Thorne is something I took for myself."

"Why Thorne?"

"Because thorns survive," Soren said simply. "They protect what matters. And they make people think twice before grabbing."

Veyr nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him. "Smart choice." He stood, dropping the snowdrop onto the bench between them. "One more place to show you."

They left the gardens, retracing their steps through part of the main building before taking a different turn. This path led them outdoors again, but to a section of the estate Soren hadn't seen before.

A smaller, private yard opened before them, walled off from the main training grounds. Unlike the public yards, this one contained practice dummies built for live steel, their wooden bodies reinforced with metal plates at vital points.

The sand here was finer, the markers for footwork more precisely laid out. At one end stood a rack of weapons, real weapons, not the blunted training swords used in the main yard.

"This is where the family trains," Veyr explained. "And those close to the family. The elite guard, personal swords, occasionally a particularly promising recruit."

He ran his hand along the hilt of one of the swords. "Only those close to us use it. You might be allowed here soon, if you continue to progress."

Soren absorbed this, recognizing the statement for what it was, both a compliment and a challenge. "These dummies are built for more complex drills," he observed.

"Yes. Precision work. Killing strikes, not just disabling ones." Veyr drew one of the swords, testing its balance. "Have you fought with live steel before? Not in training, I mean."

"Not in tournaments," Soren said carefully. "But yes, I've fought. In alleys, against grown men who didn't care about rules or fair play."

"And you survived." It wasn't a question.

"I'm standing here, aren't I?"

Veyr resheathed the sword. "That's what makes you different from the others. They've trained for combat. You've actually been in it."

They left the private yard, climbing a narrow staircase that wound up one of the towers. It led to a small balcony overlooking the city below, the sprawl of Nordhav stretching out beneath them.

From this height, the city looked almost beautiful, its flaws softened by distance and the blanket of snow that covered the worst of its grime.

Veyr leaned against the stone railing, looking out over the view. "If you weren't here, if you weren't training, where would you be?" he asked, his tone half-serious.

Soren considered the question, looking out at the city where he'd once been just another shadow. The shard pulsed gently against his chest, a reminder of how much had changed.

"Moving," he answered honestly. "Always moving. Until something caught me."

Veyr smirked, not looking at him but out at the horizon. "I think it just did."

The words hung between them, loaded with meaning Soren wasn't sure he fully understood yet. But he felt the weight of them, the way they settled like a contract neither had signed but both acknowledged.