

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight

Chapter 31: The Arcana Path

Chapter 31: The Arcana Path

Midday frost crusted the flagstones, defiant against the weak winter sun. Soren adjusted his stance as he waited with the other recruits in the training yard, his breath clouding before him.

The usual chatter filled the air, boasts about yesterday's matches, complaints about the cold, speculation about today's drills. Tavren's voice carried above the others, recounting some exaggerated feat that had most of the trainees laughing.

Soren flexed his fingers, working feeling back into them. *'Another day of the same drills,'* he thought, eyeing the weapon rack. *'At least it keeps the blood moving.'*

The laughter died suddenly. The great iron gate at the yard's edge creaked open, drawing everyone's attention.

Soren expected Master Durnach with his perpetual scowl, or perhaps one of the senior knights come to evaluate their progress.

Instead, an old man entered.

He wore robes of deep midnight blue, lined with intricate silver glyphwork along the hem and sleeves.

His gray hair was tied back in a simple knot, and he carried a long, weathered staff that looked more like a walking stick than a weapon.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about him, no dramatic entrance, no shimmering aura of power, no air of intimidation. He simply walked in as if he had all the time in the world and nowhere particular to be.

Whispers rippled through the assembled recruits.

"That's the mage?" someone murmured behind Soren.

"He looks like my grandfather," another voice replied, followed by poorly suppressed laughter.

Tavren nudged the recruit beside him. "If he trips over that robe, we're all in trouble."

From the front row, a trainee Soren recognized as one of the Blackridge recruits muttered loudly enough for those nearby to hear: "I thought mages wore pointy hats."

Soren kept silent, watching. The old man, Kaelen Veyth, if the rumors were true, approached the center of the yard with unhurried steps.

He seemed to take no notice of the whispers or the barely concealed smirks. His face remained placid, his eyes taking in the assembled recruits with mild interest.

When he reached the center, he planted his staff on the ground with a soft tap and nodded to the trainees.

"Good day to you all," he said, his voice softer than Soren had expected, but somehow carrying to every corner of the yard.

"I understand you've been training hard with blade and bow. Today, we'll try something different."

The master of arms stepped forward, his usual stern expression firmly in place. "Recruits, this is Master Kaelen Veyth, mage of House Velrane. You will show him the same respect you show me."

Soren glanced up toward the balcony overlooking the yard. Sure enough, Veyr Velrane stood watching, arms resting on the stone railing. Beside him, taller and more imposing, Lord Callen Velrane observed the proceedings with a face carved from granite.

Kaelen Veyth smiled slightly. "Who would like to demonstrate their skills first? Come at me one by one, any weapon you prefer."

The recruits exchanged glances, a mixture of confusion and eagerness on their faces. A tall, broad-shouldered boy from Kaldris stepped forward, a practice sword already in hand.

"I'll go first," he announced, confidence radiating from him like heat.

Kaelen nodded, making no move to draw a weapon of his own. He simply stood there, staff planted beside him, looking for all the world like he was waiting for a merchant cart to pass by.

The Kaldris boy circled once, then charged with surprising speed for his size. His blade whistled through the air in a powerful overhead strike.

Kaelen tapped his staff once on the ground, a gesture so small Soren nearly missed it. A sudden arc of force, invisible but unmistakable, swept across the flagstones.

The charging recruit's legs went out from under him as if he'd hit a sheet of ice. He crashed down hard, sword clattering away, looking as bewildered as a fish suddenly finding itself on land.

Kaelen hadn't moved from his spot.

A hush fell over the yard.

The second volunteer approached more cautiously, a girl from Coralward with quick eyes and quicker feet. She feinted left, then right, her blade weaving an intricate pattern as she sought an opening.

Kaelen murmured a single word that Soren couldn't quite catch. Frost bloomed across the girl's blade, spreading like spilled ink until it reached her fingers.

She gasped, her numbed hand opening involuntarily, the sword dropping to the stones with a dull clang.

By the third match, the smirks had vanished. By the fourth, a tense silence had fallen over the yard. By the fifth, even Tavren wasn't making jokes anymore.

Each opponent fell in turn, disarmed, swept off their feet, or left too winded to continue, while Kaelen Veyth barely seemed to exert himself.

His movements were minimal, precise, and devastatingly effective. He never struck a cruel blow, never humiliated his opponents beyond the simple fact of their defeat, but each match ended decisively.

Soren watched with growing fascination. He tracked Kaelen's footwork, his timing, the way his staff moved in small, economical gestures.

There was a pattern to it, almost like Bladecraft in its precision, but different, stranger. It bent the rules of space and force in ways Soren's training couldn't account for.

'It's like watching someone fight the air itself,' he thought, his eyes narrowing as he studied each subtle movement.

The shard at his chest pulsed once, warm against his skin. Valenna remained silent, but he sensed her attention sharpening, focusing on the mage's techniques with the same intensity as his own.

Up on the balcony, Veyr leaned toward his father, a slight grin playing across his features.

"They always forget," Veyr said, just loud enough for Soren to catch. "He's not just a mage. He's our mage."

Lord Callen's expression never changed. "They forget because they've never seen him in a real fight."

Kaelen dispatched his latest opponent, Lyrik, who had approached with more bravado than sense, with a gesture that sent the boy's sword spinning from his grasp as if plucked by invisible fingers.

"Are there any more volunteers?" Kaelen asked, looking around the yard. His breathing remained steady, his posture relaxed, as if he'd spent the last half hour in quiet conversation rather than combat.

No one stepped forward. The recruits shifted uneasily, exchanging glances, each silently hoping someone else would volunteer.

Soren felt a strange certainty settle over him. He didn't understand what he had just witnessed, and that was precisely why he needed to experience it firsthand.

He stepped forward.

"They were cocky," he said, his voice calm in the silence of the yard. "That's why they lost. I'm not."

He paused, aware of every eye upon him, including those from the balcony.

"I've never fought a mage before. I want to see what it's like."

Kaelen studied him for a long moment. The faintest hint of amusement flickered in the old man's eyes, there and gone so quickly Soren might have imagined it. Then he nodded once.

"Very well."

Soren drew his practice sword, the weight familiar in his hand. He settled into a ready stance, centered and balanced, watching Kaelen with unwavering focus.

The mage lowered the tip of his staff toward the ground, his posture shifting almost imperceptibly.

"Then come, boy," Kaelen said. "Let's see if your blade can cut through the wind."

Chapter 32: The Boy Who Challenged Arcana

Chapter 32: The Boy Who Challenged Arcana

The cold air still smelled faintly of scorched wood from the mage's last spell. Soren felt it in his lungs, the acrid reminder of what magic could do to solid matter in seconds. The crowd parted before him, their silence heavier than any noise as he stepped into the circle.

His boots crunched against the gravel, each step deliberate. The sound seemed unnaturally loud in the hush that had fallen over the yard. He kept his eyes forward, though he sensed the weight of dozens of stares pressing against him from all sides.

Up on the balcony, Veyr's expression shifted, part warning, part curiosity. His mismatched hair caught the winter light as he leaned forward slightly, fingers drumming once against the stone railing. Beside him, Lord Callen remained impassive, arms folded across his chest, his face a study in controlled indifference.

Soren stopped at the center of the circle, the practice sword hanging loose but ready in his grip. The blade felt inadequate suddenly, a child's toy brought to face something elemental.

"I've never faced a mage before," he said, his voice carrying easily in the silence. "I'd like to see how far steel gets me."

The mage stood opposite him, lean but not frail, with the quiet confidence of someone who had never needed to prove his strength.

His hair was the pale gold of wheat under frost, and his robes were lined with muted blue runes that seemed to shift slightly when Soren tried to focus on them.

The slender staff in his hand was capped with an amber crystal that caught the light oddly, as if it contained something alive.

"Aric Solvarren," the mage introduced himself with a slight incline of his head. His sharp, amused eyes weighed Soren like pieces on a chessboard, calculating values and potential moves. When he spoke, each word was delivered with deliberate clarity. "Curiosity can be costly, boy."

Soren met his gaze. "So I've been told."

Around them, the recruits whispered among themselves, their voices a hushed current of anticipation. Soren caught fragments, bets being placed, predictions of how quickly he would fall. Some sounded almost eager to see him fail, still nursing the sting of their own defeats at the mage's hands.

"—won't last ten seconds—"

"—never seen anyone try to rush a mage before—"

"—going to be entertaining, at least—"

Up on the balcony, Veyr leaned closer to his father. "He won't last a minute," he muttered, just loud enough for those below to hear.

Lord Callen didn't look away from the circle. His cold gray eyes remained fixed on the scene unfolding below. "Or he'll last too long," he replied. "Either result will tell me something."

Aric clasped his hands behind his back, studying Soren with renewed interest. Then, with a fluid motion, he brought his staff forward and tapped it once against the ground.

Faint light coiled around him like breath in winter air, pale blue tendrils that twisted and writhed with a life of their own.

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed once, warm and insistent. He felt Valenna's presence sharpen, focusing with keen interest on what was about to unfold.

'Watch the chest, not the hands or the crystal,' she whispered in his mind. 'The movement begins there.'

Soren shifted into his opening stance, blade angled low, knees bent, eyes fixed on the mage's chest as instructed, deliberately avoiding the glowing crystal that seemed designed to draw attention.

He breathed in slowly, tasting the lingering scorch in the air, feeling the weight of the moment press down around him.

The silence in the yard grew so complete it felt sharp enough to cut. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

The first flicker of magic sparked in the air and Soren moved.

Chapter 33: A Boy Against a Mage

Chapter 33: A Boy Against a Mage

The courtyard fell silent as Soren stepped forward, his sword steady in his grip.

The world narrowed to this moment, this challenge. He felt the weight of every eye upon him, the recruits lining the edges of the training yard, their whispers

dying on the winter air. They expected to see him burned to ash before he could even raise his blade.

Kaelen Veyth stood opposite him, gray robes settling around his tall frame, silver embroidery catching the pale sunlight at his cuffs.

The House Velrane mage lifted one eyebrow, his mouth curving into a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"S you've never crossed a mage before?" His tone was teasing, but Soren caught the edge beneath it, the hint of something sharper. "This should be educational for everyone."

Soren didn't answer. He simply set his stance, feet planted firmly on the packed earth, blade angled low. The shard against his chest pulsed once, warm through his shirt.

'No flourish. No hesitation. Just survive the first strike,' Valenna whispered in his mind, her voice cool and certain.

The mage's fingers twitched, a subtle movement that Soren might have missed if he hadn't been watching so intently. A spark ignited in the air between them, bright as a star fallen to earth. In the space of a heartbeat, it expanded, stretching into a whip of flame that lashed across the space between them.

Soren slipped aside, blade kept low, feeling the heat sear past his cheek as he narrowly escaped the burn. The smell of singed hair filled his nostrils.

'Fire is breath,' Valenna's voice came again, steady as stone. *'Cut its rhythm, and you cut the mage.'*

Without hesitation, Soren rushed forward, closing the distance before Kaelen could prepare another strike. His blade hummed through the air, stopping just short of the mage's ribs, only to slice through empty space as the figure wavered and vanished like smoke.

An afterimage. A trick.

"Quick," Kaelen's voice drifted from behind him, amusement mingling with something like genuine surprise. "Too quick for a commoner."

Soren spun, finding not one but three Kaelens circling him, each identical down to the last silver thread at their cuffs. Their movements mirrored each other perfectly, faces wearing the same calculating smile.

His pulse quickened, but he forced himself to breathe evenly, listening to Valenna's guidance.

'The real one breathes. Steel answers breath, not shadow.'

He stilled, watching the three figures, ignoring their identical appearances and focusing instead on what lay beneath. There, a slight rise and fall of the chest, the faintest cloud of breath in the winter air from only one of the three.

Soren lunged without warning, his blade carving through the first illusion as if it were mist. He pivoted, ignoring the second phantom, and drove straight for the third, the one that breathed. His steel stopped precisely at Kaelen's arm, the tip pressing against cloth and skin with just enough force to draw a thin line of blood.

Gasps erupted from the watching recruits. Someone swore loudly in disbelief.

Kaelen's grin sharpened, surprise giving way to something more dangerous. With a flick of his palm, a shield of flame roared up between them, forcing Soren back.

The heat was overwhelming, searing the ground and sending the nearest recruits staggering away with shouts of alarm.

Sweat rolled down Soren's face, his skin tight from the proximity of the flames. Still, he held his ground, refusing to retreat further. The fire cast Kaelen's face in dancing shadows, making him look more demon than man.

'I can't match that,' Soren thought, gripping his sword tighter. 'But I can show him I'm not afraid.'

He slashed forward, blade cutting into the wall of fire. The metal glowed red-hot almost instantly, but he pushed through, feeling the heat blister his knuckles as he forced the point forward until it emerged from the other side of the flames, coming to rest mere inches from Kaelen's throat.

The courtyard froze.

Soren's sword hovered near Kaelen's neck, the blade still glowing from the heat. At the same time, Kaelen's other hand was raised, palm filled with crackling energy aimed directly at Soren's chest. Both could strike. Both stopped.

Silence reigned, broken only by the soft hiss of cooling metal.

The recruits stood dumbstruck, mouths agape. Some who had been lounging against the walls now stood rigid, eyes wide with disbelief that a lowborn boy had lasted more than a heartbeat against a House mage, let alone stood equal in this moment of mutual threat.

Kaelen chuckled softly, not insulted but intrigued. The deadly energy in his palm dissipated like morning mist, and he lowered his hand with deliberate slowness.

"Well now," he said with a sly smile. "Not bad."

Chapter 34: The Lowborn Blade

Chapter 34: The Lowborn Blade

Kaelen lowered his hand, amusement playing across his features as he smiled faintly at Soren.

The duel hung suspended between them, over but undeclared. Both could have killed. Neither did. The silence in the courtyard pressed down like a physical weight, heavy enough to crush lungs.

Lord Callen's voice cut through it, sharper than any blade.

"That will do."

The words fell with the finality of an executioner's ax, severing the moment clean from its tension. Soren felt the heat from his blistered knuckles pulse in time with his heartbeat as he lowered his sword, the metal still warm against his palm.

The whispers started immediately, rippling through the gathered recruits like wind through dry grass.

"Lucky peasant," someone hissed from the back row.

"Did you see how he—"

"—impossible, he must have cheated—"

"—never seen anyone move like that against a mage—"

Soren kept his eyes forward, not giving them the satisfaction of a reaction. The shard against his chest hummed with a quiet vibration that only he could feel, Valenna's presence sharp and alert beneath his skin.

Kaelen circled him slowly, head tilted like a curious bird examining something unexpected in its path.

The mage's robes whispered against the packed earth as he moved, studying Soren from different angles with the detached interest of a scholar presented with a rare specimen.

"You watch flame as if you've seen it before," Kaelen murmured, leaning in close enough that only Soren could hear him. His breath smelled of cloves and something metallic. "Strange, for a boy who's never left the gutter."

Soren met his gaze without flinching, refusing to give ground even as his mind raced through the implications of the mage's words.

Valenna's voice slipped into his thoughts, cool as winter shadow: *'Do not bask in their stares. Men love what they fear, until they decide to cut it down. Stay small. Stay sharp.'*

He answered only with a slight nod, leaving words unsaid.

Up on the balcony, Veyr maintained a carefully measured expression, but his eyes gleamed with undisguised vindication. His fingers tapped once against the stone railing, a private rhythm of satisfaction. Lord Callen stood beside him, face unreadable as carved granite, his silence a judgment held in perfect suspension.

The crowd of recruits began to disperse, some casting backward glances at Soren, others deliberately avoiding his eyes. The air felt different now, charged with something new, fear, perhaps, or respect. Or both.

A figure detached itself from the shadows beneath the balcony, moving with fluid grace across the courtyard.

He resembled Veyr in height and the sharp angle of his jawline, but where Veyr's mismatched hair drew immediate attention, this man's was a uniform midnight black with a distinctive violet sheen that caught the winter light.

His eyes, deep amethyst, cut through pretense with unsettling precision. He wore a high-collared coat embroidered with House Velrane's crest, its tailoring so perfect it seemed an extension of his body rather than mere clothing.

"Well, well," the newcomer said, his voice pitched to carry just far enough. "My brother's fire didn't cook you after all." He stopped a precise distance from Soren, close enough to converse but far enough to maintain superiority. "Perhaps our House does need a blade like you...raw, unpolished, but... useful."

His smile was perfect, practiced, revealing nothing while promising everything. It was the smile of someone already playing three moves ahead in a game whose rules Soren had yet to fully grasp.

"Ayren Velrane," Soren said, recognizing the name from whispers in the barracks. The second son. The shadow prince.

Ayren's eyebrow ticked up a fraction. "You know me. How flattering." His gaze flicked over Soren's sword, his stance, lingering momentarily on the singed edges

of his sleeve. "I look forward to seeing what other surprises you might offer, Thorne."

He turned and walked away without waiting for a response, his steps measured and unhurried, as if he had all the time in the world and knew exactly how to spend it.

The courtyard emptied gradually, recruits drifting back to their duties, knights resuming their posts. Soren sheathed his blade, feeling the weight of every whisper at his back. The morning's frost had melted beneath his boots, leaving dark impressions in the earth where he had stood his ground.

He wasn't just a recruit anymore. He was something more dangerous: noticed.

'Not good. Not safe,' he thought, scanning the yard one last time before turning toward the barracks. *'But necessary.'*

As he walked away, Valenna's whisper curled through his mind, amused and proud: *'Now they see what I saw. Let them choke on it.'*

The words settled into Soren's bones like winter marrow. He made it halfway across the courtyard before his hands started shaking, not from fear, but from the slow burn of realization. The shard at his chest pulsed with each step, matching the rhythm of his heart as it hammered against his ribs.

'They're watching now,' he thought, flexing his blistered knuckles. The pain helped center him, a sharp reminder that he'd survived something most wouldn't have attempted. 'All of them. Every move I make from here on out gets measured.'

He passed through the archway leading back to the barracks, boots echoing off stone that suddenly felt less like shelter and more like the walls of a cage.

The familiar sounds of training drifted from the main yard, wooden swords clacking together, instructors barking corrections, the steady thud of bodies hitting sand. Normal sounds. Safe sounds.

Sounds that no longer included him.

A recruit he didn't recognize stepped into his path, forcing him to stop. The boy was maybe sixteen, with the soft look of someone who'd never missed a meal and the calculating eyes of someone who'd learned to survive by picking the right enemies.

"You're the one who fought the mage," the boy said, not quite a question.

Soren studied him, noting the way the recruit's stance favored his left leg, the fresh bruise along his jaw that spoke of recent defeats in the practice ring. "I am."

"My name's Corwin. Corwin Ashfeld." The name came with a slight lift of the chin, as if it should mean something. When Soren didn't react, the boy's expression tightened. "My father serves House Kaldris. He told me to watch for... opportunities."

The word hung between them like a blade waiting to fall. Soren felt Valenna's presence shift beneath his skin, coiling tighter with interest.

"What kind of opportunities?" Soren asked, though he suspected he already knew the answer.

Corwin glanced around, then stepped closer. His breath smelled of mint leaves—the expensive kind that came from the southern provinces. "The kind where a smart man knows when to step aside. And when to push someone else forward."

'Politics,' Soren realized with a sinking feeling. *'They want to use me as a weapon against someone else.'*

"I'm not interested in your father's games," he said, moving to step around the boy.

Corwin's hand shot out, not quite touching Soren's arm but close enough to make the threat clear. "Everyone's interested in something, gutter rat. The question is whether you're smart enough to know what's good for you."

The shard flared with sudden heat against Soren's chest, and for a moment he felt Valenna's rage bleed through their connection, ancient fury at being dismissed, at being threatened by children playing at war. His hand drifted toward his sword hilt before he caught himself.

'Not here. Not now. Too many witnesses.'

"My name is Soren Thorne," he said quietly, meeting Corwin's eyes with steady calm. "Not gutter rat. If your father wants to speak with me, he can do it himself."

He stepped around the boy, ignoring the way Corwin's face flushed red with embarrassment. The recruit called after him, voice pitched just loud enough to carry.

"You think you're special because you got lucky once? Everyone gets lucky once, Thorne. The question is what happens when your luck runs out."

Soren kept walking, but the words followed him like smoke. By the time he reached his bunk, three more recruits had found excuses to cross his path. None spoke directly, but their eyes held the same calculating look as Corwin's. Measuring. Weighing. Planning.

He sat heavily on the edge of his cot, pulling off his boots with fingers that still trembled slightly from the morning's exertion. The leather was scuffed and worn, a reminder of how far he'd come from the streets. How far he still had to go.

'Valenna,' he thought, pressing his palm against the shard through his shirt. 'What did you see in that fight?'

Her voice came immediately, sharp with approval and something darker. *'I saw a mage who expected an easy victory and found steel instead. I saw nobles taking note of a new piece on their board. And I saw you refusing to break under pressure.'*

'Is that good or bad?'

'Both. Always both, little knife. The strong survive by being useful until they're strong enough to be feared. You've just moved from useful to... interesting.'

He understood. Interesting meant dangerous. Dangerous meant watched. Watched meant every mistake would be magnified, every success scrutinized for weakness.

The barracks door creaked open, admitting a familiar figure. Mira entered with her usual careful grace, eyes sweeping the room before settling on Soren. She approached his bunk, movements deliberate and unhurried.

"Heard you made quite the impression," she said, settling onto the adjacent cot without invitation. Her voice carried the same flat tone she used for everything, but he caught something else underneath, curiosity, maybe even respect.

"News travels fast."

"News travels faster when it involves someone nearly getting himself killed for no good reason." She pulled a small cloth bundle from her pocket, unwrapping it to reveal strips of clean bandage and a vial of something that smelled like herbs and alcohol. "Let me see your hands."

He hesitated, then extended his blistered knuckles. Her touch was gentle but efficient as she cleaned the burns, her fingers cool against his heated skin.

"Why?" she asked quietly, not looking up from her work.

"Why what?"

"Why challenge a mage when you could have just watched like everyone else? What did you hope to prove?"

The question cut deeper than he expected. He watched her wind the bandages around his knuckles, noting the way her own hands showed calluses from sword work, small scars from countless training sessions.

"I needed to know," he said finally. "What it felt like. What I was capable of."

"And now you know?"

He flexed his newly bandaged fingers, testing the range of motion. "Now I know it's not enough."

She looked up then, blue eyes sharp with something he couldn't quite read. "Nothing ever is, is it? That's what makes us dangerous."

Before he could ask what she meant, she stood and moved toward the door. She paused at the threshold, glancing back over her shoulder.

"Be careful, Soren. You're not the only one they're watching now."

The door closed behind her with a soft click, leaving him alone with the weight of her words and the growing certainty that his life had just become infinitely more complicated.

Chapter 35: A Knife at the Table

Chapter 35: A Knife at the Table

The great hall doors closed with the finality of a tomb sealing, the last whisper of recruits fading into silence. The sound hung in the air for a moment, then dissolved like salt in water.

Soren's presence lingered in the room like the memory of a wound, felt but no longer seen. The duel in the courtyard had changed something, shifted the balance in ways Callen Velrane clearly hadn't anticipated.

Lord Callen sat motionless at the head of the long table, his goblet untouched before him. His eyes, cold and sharp as winter steel, flicked from son to son before settling on the mage.

The light from the high windows caught the silver in his ash-gray hair, making it gleam like polished armor.

"Explain," he said. The single word carried the weight of command that had bent a thousand men to his will over the decades.

Kaelen clasped his hands behind his back, his posture casual yet calculating. The sleeves of his robe still carried the faint scorch marks from the morning's encounter.

"He should not have lasted three breaths," Kaelen said, his voice measured and precise. "Yet he read my illusions, and he cut through flame without flinching." He paused, letting the implications settle across the table. "That is not chance. It is... instinct. And instinct is dangerous."

Veyr leaned forward, seizing the moment. His mismatched hair, blonde and black streaks, caught the light as he moved, casting strange shadows across his eager face.

"That is why I want him," he said, words quick and sharp. "You saw it...no polish, no pretense. Just precision." His eyes gleamed with unconcealed hunger. "He belongs to us before another house takes notice."

Ayren Velrane sat opposite his brother, one elegant finger tracing the rim of his goblet. His midnight hair carried that distinctive violet sheen in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Where Veyr burned with obvious ambition, Ayren's face remained a perfect mask, revealing nothing but what he chose to show.

"Or perhaps," Ayren said, his voice smooth and edged like glass, "he belongs to no one." His perfect smile never reached his amethyst eyes. "A gutter-born blade that cuts even flame? Intriguing, yes... but unpredictable." He tilted his head slightly, studying his father's reaction. "What happens when it cuts the hand that wields it?"

He lifted his goblet, sipping as though savoring the thought.

"Still, every throne needs its dagger. Better ours than another's."

Lord Callen's fingers drummed once against the polished table, the only sign of his internal deliberation. His expression remained immobile as carved stone as he listened, weighing each word like a merchant assessing gold.

"He is a knife," Callen said finally, his words cutting without wasted breath. "Nothing more. And knives are easy to lose... or to turn."

He let the silence grow, filling the chamber like invisible smoke. The crackle of the hearth-fire was the only sound, punctuating the tension with occasional pops and hisses.

"Veyr, you may keep him close," Callen continued. "But the leash will not be yours alone." His gaze flicked between Kaelen and Ayren. "Both of you...will test him further. If he breaks, the problem ends itself. If he does not..."

A pause, deliberate as a blade drawn slowly from its sheath.

"Then perhaps this House gains a weapon no other dares hold."

The decision lingered in the chamber like smoke after a battle. Each son smiled for a different reason.

Veyr's lips curved with satisfaction, the triumph of getting what he wanted.

Kaelen's expression held only curiosity, the patient interest of a man who had seen too much to be easily surprised.

Ayren's smile remained perfect and unchanged, revealing nothing of the schemes clearly unfolding behind those violet eyes.

And Callen showed nothing at all.

The family was unified only in one thing: Soren Thorne was no longer just a recruit.

He was now the knife on their table, and every man present wanted a hand on the hilt.

—

In the barracks that night, Soren sat on the edge of his cot, the rough wool blanket bunched beneath his fingers. The memory of the duel replayed in his mind, the heat of the flame against his skin, the weight of dozens of stares pressing down on him like physical things.

He flexed his bandaged hand, feeling the pull of blistered skin beneath Mira's careful wrapping.

'They're watching now,' he thought, scanning the dim barracks where other recruits pretended not to stare. *'All of them.'*

The shard pulsed against his chest, warmer than usual. Valenna's presence hummed beneath his skin, alert and restless.

'Did I make a mistake?' he asked her silently.

'No mistake,' came her reply, cool and certain. *'But a choice that cannot be undone. You are no longer invisible, little knife.'*

A shadow fell across his cot. Soren looked up to find Dane looming over him, the big recruit's face unreadable in the half-light.

"They're saying you've got magic," Dane said without preamble, his voice pitched low enough that only Soren could hear. "That's how you stood against Kaelen."

Soren met his gaze steadily. "And you believe that?"

Dane's shoulders shifted in what might have been a shrug. "Doesn't matter what I believe. Matters what they believe." He jerked his chin toward the far corner of the barracks where Tavren sat surrounded by his usual crowd, their heads bent together in whispered conversation.

"They're drawing lines," Dane continued. "Picking sides. Those who think you're worth following, those who think you need to be put down." He paused, his massive hands hanging loose at his sides. "Thought you should know."

Before Soren could respond, the barracks door swung open with a creak that silenced all conversation. A page entered, the same round-faced boy who had delivered Veyr's message earlier. His eyes scanned the room before settling on Soren.

"Thorne," the boy called, his voice cracking slightly. "Lord Veyr requests your presence. Now."

The silence in the barracks deepened. Soren felt every eye turn toward him, a prickle of attention against his skin. He rose from his cot, careful to keep his movements unhurried.

"Thanks for the warning," he murmured to Dane as he passed.

The big recruit nodded once. "Watch your back."

Soren followed the page through corridors that grew progressively more ornate with each turn.

Tapestries replaced bare stone, their embroidered scenes depicting battles where House Velrane's banners flew victorious over fallen enemies. The floor beneath his boots changed from packed earth to polished marble, each step echoing in the silence.

The page stopped before a set of carved doors and knocked twice. "He's inside," the boy said, then scurried away before Soren could ask any questions.

The doors swung open, revealing a chamber unlike any Soren had seen in the estate. Books lined the walls from floor to ceiling, their leather spines gleaming in the light of oil lamps. Maps spread across tables, held down by crystal weights at each corner.

The air smelled of ink, old paper, and something sharper, some herbal concoction that made his nose tingle.

Veyr Velrane sat in a high-backed chair near the window, a book open in his lap. He didn't look up when Soren entered, his mismatched hair falling across his forehead as he turned a page with deliberate slowness.

"Close the door," Veyr said, still not looking up.

Soren obeyed, letting the heavy door swing shut behind him. The sound seemed to seal him in, cutting off his retreat.

Veyr finally raised his head, his eyes finding Soren's with unsettling directness. "You made quite an impression today," he said, marking his place in the book with a ribbon before setting it aside. "Not many recruits would have the courage...or the stupidity...to face Kaelen as you did."

The noble rose, moving to a side table where a decanter stood beside two glasses. He poured amber liquid into both, then offered one to Soren.

"Blackridge whiskey," he explained when Soren hesitated. "Consider it a reward for not dying in the courtyard."

Soren accepted the glass but didn't drink. The liquid caught the lamplight, glowing like trapped fire. "I wasn't trying to impress anyone," he said.

Veyr's mouth curved in a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "And yet you did. My father included." He took a sip from his own glass, studying Soren over the rim. "He's decided you're worth keeping alive. For now."

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed once, a warning flare of heat. Valenna's voice whispered in his mind: *'Be careful. He offers a leash disguised as friendship.'*

"What does that mean for me?" Soren asked, keeping his tone neutral.

Veyr moved to the window, looking out at the darkened courtyard below. "It means you're no longer just another recruit. It means opportunities. Training. Access." He turned, fixing Soren with a penetrating stare. "It means you belong to House Velrane now. To me, specifically."

The words settled in the air between them, heavy with implication. Soren took a careful sip of the whiskey, letting the burn coat his throat as he considered his response.

"And if I don't want to belong to anyone?" he asked.

Veyr laughed, the sound sharp and genuine. "Then you're in the wrong place, Thorne. Everyone belongs to someone here." He set his glass down with a soft clink. "The question isn't whether you serve, but how, and who, and what you get in return."

He crossed to one of the map tables, gesturing for Soren to join him. The parchment spread before them showed the northern territories, House Velrane's lands marked in gold, surrounded by the colors of rival houses.

"Tomorrow you begin special training," Veyr said, tracing a finger along the border where Velrane gold met Kaldris blue.

"Kaelen will teach you to recognize and counter basic magic. My brother Ayren will instruct you in the politics of the Houses."

His finger stopped at a small mark on the map, a castle sitting at a strategic mountain pass. "And I will show you what it means to be the sword of House Velrane."

Soren studied the map, noting the careful detail, the tiny notations in a script too small to read easily. "Why me?" he asked, looking up to meet Veyr's gaze. "There are dozens of recruits with better bloodlines."

"Bloodlines," Veyr scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. "Half the nobles in this kingdom can't hold a sword without cutting themselves. You may be gutter-born, Thorne, but you have something they lack."

His eyes gleamed in the lamplight. "You have nothing to lose. That makes you dangerous. And I like dangerous things."

The shard warmed against Soren's skin, Valenna's presence sharpening with interest. *'He sees a weapon, not a person,'* she whispered. *'But weapons can choose their targets.'*

Veyr watched him expectantly, waiting for a response. Soren knew this was a moment of decision, a line drawn that would shape everything that followed.

He thought of the courtyard, of the way the flames had parted before his blade. He thought of the whispers that followed him now, the lines being drawn among the recruits. He thought of how far he'd already come from the streets of Nordhav, and how much further he might go.

"When do we start?" he asked.

Veyr's smile widened, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. "We already have."

The whiskey burned in Soren's stomach, a small fire to match the one kindling in his chest. He was no longer just surviving. He was climbing.

And the view from the top, he suspected, would be worth the scars earned in the ascent.

Chapter 36: Masks and Daggers (1)

Chapter 36: Masks and Daggers (1)

Dawn seeped through the barracks windows like watered wine, too weak to properly warm but strong enough to wake every recruit. Soren rolled his stiff neck, the whiskey from last night's conversation with Veyr Velrane still clinging to the back of his throat.

His muscles ached from yesterday's training, a dull throb that had become as familiar as breathing.

The barracks hummed with unusual activity. Whispers cut through the typical morning grunts and complaints, recruits hunched in small clusters, glancing in Soren's direction before returning to their hushed conversations.

"Now it's Ayren," he caught from a pair of wide-eyed boys folding their blankets with unusual precision. "First Veyr takes him for special training, now his brother wants a turn."

"Wonder what's left when they're done," another muttered.

Soren ignored them, focusing on lacing his boots. The shard against his chest pulsed once, warm through his shirt. Valenna remained silent, but he felt her presence sharpening, like a blade being honed.

Tavren's shadow fell across him, blocking the weak sunlight. The recruit's face was twisted into his customary sneer, though something new lurked behind his eyes, something that might have been fear if Tavren were capable of admitting such weakness.

"Enjoy your new masters, gutter-rat," he spat, voice pitched to carry across the barracks. "They'll use you up and toss what's left to the dogs."

Soren continued tying his boot, not bothering to look up. "At least they found a use for me," he replied, keeping his voice level. "Still waiting to hear what yours might be."

Tavren's face flushed red, but before he could respond, Dane's massive form appeared behind him.

The big recruit didn't speak, just stood there like a mountain contemplating whether an avalanche was worth the effort. Tavren muttered something under his breath and stalked away.

Dane settled onto the cot beside Soren, the wooden frame creaking in protest under his weight. "Careful with Ayren," he said quietly, his voice low enough that only Soren could hear. "His tongue cuts deeper than his sword."

Soren glanced up, surprised at the warning. "You've met him?"

"Seen him work," Dane replied, running a callused thumb along a scar on his palm. "He doesn't need to draw blood to leave a mark."

Before Soren could ask more, the barracks door swung open. A page entered, not the round-faced boy who usually carried Veyr's messages, but a thin, sharp-featured youth with the pinched expression of someone who'd spent his life delivering bad news to important people. His eyes scanned the room with clinical efficiency before settling on Soren.

"Thorne," he said, voice clipped and precise. "Lord Ayren requires your presence."

The barracks fell silent, all pretense of disinterest abandoned as every recruit turned to watch. Soren stood, straightening his tunic and checking that the shard was securely hidden beneath. He felt their stares like physical things, pressing against his skin.

'Another test,' he thought. 'Another chance to fail or climb.'

He followed the page through the door, leaving the whispers to bloom in his wake.

The corridor stretched before them, different from the route he'd taken to Veyr's chambers the night before. Where that path had been lined with battle maps and weapons, this one felt colder, more austere.

The floor beneath his boots was polished to a mirror shine, reflecting the tapestries that hung at precise intervals along the walls.

Soren studied them as he passed. Each displayed not battles or hunts, but intricate genealogical trees, branches spreading across the fabric in silver and gold thread, names woven in script so perfect it seemed impossible that human hands had created it.

Between the tapestries hung portraits, severe-faced men and women with Velrane features, their eyes following him as he passed.

No trophies adorned these walls, no captured banners or mounted weapons. Just bloodline and legacy, stretching back generations, each face a reminder of what Soren was not and could never be.

The page stopped before a set of doors carved from pale wood so light it was almost white. Unlike the heavy oak of Veyr's chambers, these were delicate, inlaid with mother-of-pearl that caught the light from wall sconces.

"Lord Ayren awaits," the page said, opening the door without knocking. He gestured Soren through, then pulled the door closed behind him with a soft click that felt somehow final.

The chamber beyond was flooded with morning light, streaming through windows that stretched from floor to ceiling along the eastern wall.

The glass was so perfectly clear it seemed almost nonexistent, as if the wall itself had been cut away to reveal the sky beyond. The light spilled across polished tables arranged in a precise grid, each surface gleaming like still water.

Unlike Veyr's chaotic space, with its scattered maps and half-finished projects, this chamber breathed order.

Shelves lined the walls, stacked with scrolls arranged by size, ledgers organized by color, wax stamps sorted in trays, and sealed letters bundled with silk ribbon. Nothing was out of place. Nothing was unnecessary.

At the center of the room, seated at a long table of polished ebony, Ayren Velrane worked.

His quill moved across parchment with fluid precision, the scratch of nib on paper the only sound in the otherwise silent chamber. He didn't look up when Soren entered, didn't acknowledge him in any way.

Soren stood just inside the doorway, uncertain whether to announce himself or wait to be recognized. The shard pulsed against his chest, a single beat that felt like a warning.

'Power play,' he thought, recognizing the tactic from the streets. *'Make them wait. Make them uncomfortable. Show them who controls the time.'*

He settled his weight evenly between his feet, relaxed his shoulders, and waited. One breath. Two. Three. The silence stretched, but Soren refused to break it. He'd waited out worse than noble arrogance before.

Finally, after what felt like minutes but was likely only seconds, Ayren set down his quill. He looked up, violet eyes assessing Soren with the clinical detachment of a merchant appraising livestock.

"You are on time," he said, his voice smooth and cultured, each word precisely shaped.

"That's the least I expected." There was an undercurrent of amusement in his tone, as if Soren had performed a simple trick that was mildly entertaining.

Ayren gestured to the chair opposite his own. "Sit. We will begin."

Soren crossed to the indicated chair, noting how even his footsteps seemed too loud in this pristine space. He sat, keeping his back straight, hands resting on his thighs rather than the immaculate table surface.

Ayren studied him for a moment longer, then reached for a stack of parchments to his right. Each sheet was marked with a different sigil, house crests rendered in precise detail with colored ink.

"My brother believes in teaching through the sword," Ayren said, his elegant fingers sorting through the parchments. "A useful approach, for certain lessons. But there are battlefields where steel is useless, Thorne. Battlefields where the only weapons are words, glances, and the careful application of silence."

He selected a parchment marked with a blue wolf's head, House Kaldris, and slid it across the table.

"The northern mountain lords," Ayren said, tapping the sigil with one perfectly manicured finger. "They fly frost banners and claim their keeps were carved from glacier ice by the hands of gods. They think themselves unbreakable." His eyes fixed on Soren's. "What happens to stone pressed too hard?"

Soren considered the question, aware that this was not about geology but politics. "It... resists?" he ventured, knowing even as he spoke that the answer was insufficient.

Ayren's mouth curved in a smile that held no warmth. "It shatters," he corrected, the words precise as a knife between ribs.

"Apply enough pressure to the right point, and even the mightiest fortress crumbles to dust. Remember that when dealing with those who believe themselves invincible."

He set the Kaldris parchment aside and drew out another, this one marked with golden scales on a green field.

"House Deymar," he continued. "Trade and coin. Their vaults run deeper than their loyalty, and their daughters are bartered like cattle at market. They sell family as currency and call it heritage." He raised an eyebrow at Soren. "To deal with them effectively, what currency would you offer?"

Soren thought of the merchants he'd known, their greedy eyes always calculating profit. "Gold?" he suggested, though something in Ayren's tone suggested this was too obvious an answer.

"Never pay with gold," Ayren corrected, his voice sharp with disapproval. "Pay with rumor. A whisper in the right ear about an untapped market, a suggestion of a rival's weakness, the hint of a secret others would pay to know." His smile

returned, thin as a blade. "Their coin can buy armies, but information buys their souls."

Another parchment, this one bearing a crimson axe crossed with a black arrow.

"House Relvarn, border warlords," Ayren explained. "Too eager to draw blades, not eager enough to count coin. What does that make them in the game of houses?"

Soren studied the sigil, thinking of the warriors he'd seen in Nordhav, all muscle and no subtlety. "Dangerous," he said. "But predictable."

Ayren nodded, the first sign of approval he'd shown. "Yes. And that makes them useful hounds, provided you hold the leash. A simple enemy is a gift, Thorne. Remember that when you're surrounded by complicated ones."

Finally, Ayren drew out a parchment bearing the Velrane crest, the sun-cut gold and streak of red on white that Soren had seen flying above the estate.

"And what of House Velrane?" Ayren asked, his tone softer now, almost intimate. "What is our greatest weapon in this game of thrones and shadows?"

Soren thought of Veyr's words from the night before, of the flames Kaelen had commanded in the courtyard, of the wealth evident in every corner of the estate.

"Fire," he suggested. "Or wealth."

Ayren's expression didn't change, but disappointment radiated from him like a physical chill. "No," he said quietly. "We rule not with flame, not with coin. We rule with silence." He leaned forward slightly, eyes locked on Soren's. "Silence makes men imagine...and fear imagination more than steel."

Soren nodded, filing the lesson away with the others. Each correction felt like a small cut, precise and stinging, a reminder that this room was as much a battlefield as any practice yard.

"You're not unintelligent," Ayren said after a moment, gathering the parchments back into a neat stack. "But you think like a soldier...direct, linear, concerned with immediate threats rather than distant consequences."

He tapped the stack against the table, aligning the edges perfectly. "That will change. It must, if you're to be of use to this house."

Soren kept his face carefully neutral, though he felt Valenna stir beneath his skin, her presence alert and watchful.

Chapter 37: Masks and Daggers (2)

Chapter 37: Masks and Daggers (2)

Ayren leaned back in his chair, fingers steeped beneath his chin. His violet eyes narrowed slightly, and the room seemed to grow colder despite the morning sun streaming through the windows.

"Tell me, Soren Thorne...what is your house?" The question sliced through the air, sudden and sharp as a blade in the dark.

Soren felt his pulse quicken. This wasn't about politics anymore; this was personal. The truth was simple, but admitting it here felt like laying down a weapon.

"I have none," he said, meeting Ayren's gaze steadily. "I'm gutter-born."

"Gutter-born," Ayren repeated, rolling the words on his tongue like he was tasting an unfamiliar wine. His lips curved into a smile that never reached his eyes. "Then you are the most dangerous kind. A blade with no sheath, no scabbard, no master. Such blades cut everything...including the hand that wields them."

The shard pulsed against Soren's chest, a single beat of warning. He kept his face carefully blank, though his mind raced with implications.

Ayren leaned forward, the movement so fluid it seemed choreographed. "Would you betray my brother, if another house offered you more?"

The question hung in the air between them, a trap laid bare. Soren felt sweat prickle at the back of his neck. One wrong word here could undo everything.

Valenna's voice flickered in his mind, cool and urgent: *'Do not let him pin you. Speak as if you were playing.'*

Soren took a slow breath, considering his words with the care of a man handling broken glass. "Depends on what they offered," he said finally, "and how sharp their leash was."

For a moment, silence stretched between them, thin as a blade's edge. Then Ayren laughed, a sound smooth, cold, and theatrical, like ice breaking over a frozen lake.

"Good," he said, genuine amusement dancing in his eyes. "You learn faster than most recruits. Perhaps you'll even survive."

He rose from his seat in one fluid motion, the chair sliding back without a sound. Soren watched as Ayren crossed the chamber, moving toward a glass cabinet he hadn't noticed before.

Inside, ceremonial masks rested on velvet stands, faces carved from polished wood, hammered silver, and gleaming onyx.

Ayren's fingers, long and elegant, selected one with deliberate care. The mask was obsidian dark, with veins of amethyst that caught the light in ways that perfectly matched his eyes. He lifted it from its stand, the movement reverent.

"The Midnight Court mask," Ayren said, his voice soft with something like affection. "Worn only during the darkest negotiations, when blood prices are set and alliances broken."

He placed it briefly before his face, his eyes gleaming through the eyeholes. The effect was unsettling, Ayren's features, already sharp and perfect, became something inhuman, a creature of shadow and calculation.

He lowered the mask, setting it down with the same precision with which he'd lifted it. "Remember this, Thorne: men wear armor on the battlefield, but masks at court. Only fools fight without either."

Soren nodded, understanding washing over him like cold water. The lesson wasn't about houses or politics, it was about survival in a world where words could kill as surely as steel.

Ayren stepped closer, his voice dropping to a smooth, deliberate murmur. "My brother wants a knight. My father wants a knife." His eyes fixed on Soren's, searching for something in their depths. "I want... to see if you can be both."

The words settled in Soren's stomach like stones, heavy with implication. The shard against his chest seemed to pulse in time with his heartbeat, a reminder of all he had to lose.

"Return tomorrow," Ayren said, turning away in clear dismissal. "We've only begun carving you into something useful."

Soren rose from his chair, recognizing the command for what it was. He bowed slightly, not too deep, which would suggest servility, but enough to acknowledge Ayren's position.

The noble's back was already turned, his attention returned to the papers on his desk, as if Soren had ceased to exist the moment the conversation ended.

The corridor outside felt unnervingly silent after the intensity of Ayren's chamber. Soren's boots made no sound on the polished floor, as if the very stone had been trained to swallow noise.

He passed the tapestries of bloodlines and portraits of dead nobles, their painted eyes seeming to follow him with new interest.

As he walked back toward the barracks, Valenna's voice murmured in his mind, clearer now that he was alone. *"That one plays with daggers, not blades,"* she warned. *"Be careful...the cut is slower, but it bleeds longer."*

Soren clenched his fist around the shard beneath his shirt, feeling its warmth against his palm. The weight of this new battlefield pressed down on him, a place where the wounds were invisible but no less fatal.

'Knights and knives,' he thought, remembering Ayren's words. Could he be both? Did he want to be either?

The barracks door loomed ahead, and with it, the stares and whispers that awaited. Behind him lay a path into power and danger in equal measure. Ahead, the uncertain futures of those who would either rise with him or fall beneath him.

Soren took a deep breath and pushed forward. One step at a time. One battle at a time. One mask at a time.

The shard pulsed once more against his heart, as if in agreement.

Soren stood at the doorway to the barracks, bracing himself for the onslaught of stares and whispers. The morning's lesson with Ayren Velrane still echoed in his

mind, each perfectly articulated word etched into his memory like knife marks on wood.

'Knights and knives...huh' he thought again, the phrase turning over in his mind as he pushed the door open.

The expected hush fell over the room. Recruits froze mid-conversation, their eyes tracking him as he moved toward his cot.

Soren kept his face carefully blank, his shoulders relaxed despite the tension coiling beneath his skin. He'd worn this mask in Nordhav's streets too many times to count, the look that said he noticed everything but cared about nothing.

"Still alive, then?" Dane asked as Soren reached his bunk. The big recruit was polishing his boots with methodical care, his massive hands surprisingly gentle with the worn leather.

"For now," Soren replied, sitting down on his cot. The thin mattress barely yielded beneath his weight.

Chapter 38: The Swordmaster's Eye

Chapter 38: The Swordmaster's Eye

The page arrived just before sunset, his face flushed from running.

"Lord Veyr commands your presence in the Old Yard," he said, not meeting Soren's eyes. "Now."

Soren set aside the practice blade he'd been polishing and rose from his bunk. The other recruits pretended not to watch, but their sudden silence betrayed their interest. He felt their stares on his back as he followed the page through the door.

"Which way?" he asked when they reached the main corridor.

The page pointed toward the eastern wing. "Past the armory, down the stone steps. The master is waiting." He hesitated, then added in a lower voice, "He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Soren nodded his thanks and set off alone, his footsteps echoing against the cold stone. The eastern wing was older than the rest of the complex, its walls darkened by centuries of torch smoke. The air grew colder as he descended the narrow staircase, carrying the metallic scent of old blood and sweat that no amount of scrubbing could remove.

The Old Yard opened before him like a wound in the earth. Unlike the main training grounds, with their even flagstones and carefully maintained equipment, this place wore its age like a veteran displayed scars.

The stones were cracked and pitted, dark stains marking where countless men had bled and fallen. Iron rings jutted from the walls, their surfaces worn smooth by generations of chains and ropes.

No banners hung here, no audience benches lined the walls, just bare stone and the weight of history.

Soren's boots scraped against the grit as he entered. The yard felt impossibly silent after the constant noise of the barracks. Even the wind seemed reluctant to enter this place.

"You're late."

The voice cut through the silence like a blade. Soren turned to face its source.

A man stood in the shadow of the eastern wall, his figure half-hidden by the gathering dusk. He stepped forward, and Soren fought to keep his expression neutral.

The man was tall and whipcord lean, his body a map of old violence. White hair hung to his shoulders, though Soren guessed he wasn't much past fifty.

A jagged scar ran from his left temple to his jaw, pulling the corner of his mouth into a permanent sneer. Where his right eye should have been was a leather patch, worn and darkened with age.

His remaining eye was the pale blue of winter ice, and it fixed on Soren with immediate, cutting assessment.

"Kaelor Varas," the man said, his voice a growl that seemed to scrape along the stones. "House Velrane's Swordmaster." He circled Soren slowly, his gaze dissecting every detail. "You're the gutter trash they want me to polish."

Soren kept his face carefully blank. "Soren Thorne."

Kaelor snorted. "I know your name, boy. I know everything about you that matters." He completed his circle, stopping directly in front of Soren. "Which isn't much."

The man's breath smelled of cloves and something stronger, brandy, perhaps. But his eye was clear and sharp, missing nothing.

"Draw your blade," Kaelor ordered, stepping back and drawing his own sword in one fluid motion. The steel caught the fading light, revealing nicks and scratches that spoke of real combat, not practice.

Soren drew his practice sword, settling into the opening stance he'd been taught. The familiar weight in his hand was reassuring after the uncertainty of the moment.

Kaelor's laugh was a harsh bark. "Gods, that stance. Who taught you to stand like that? A drunken fishwife?" He moved forward without warning, his blade a silver blur.

The sword was knocked from Soren's hand before he even registered the attack. Pain flared across his knuckles where Kaelor's blade had struck them.

"Again," Kaelor said, stepping back. His face showed neither satisfaction nor disappointment, only cold assessment.

Soren retrieved his sword, flexing his stinging fingers. He set his stance again, this time adjusting his weight distribution, remembering Valenna's lessons.

'He's testing your edges,'

her voice whispered in his mind. *'Let him see just enough.'*

Kaelor attacked again, this time with a low cut that should have swept Soren's legs from under him. Soren jumped back, barely avoiding the strike, only to feel Kaelor's boot connect solidly with his chest. He stumbled backward, struggling to maintain his balance.

"Pathetic," Kaelor spat. "You telegraph every move before you make it. Your eyes give you away." He tapped his own remaining eye. "Windows to the soul, boy. Learn to shutter them."

They continued for what felt like hours. Kaelor would attack, Soren would try to defend, and inevitably find himself disarmed or struck or thrown to the ground. Each time, Kaelor's criticism grew more cutting, more precise.

"Your rhythm is off."

"Your grip is too tight."

"You're fighting the blade instead of using it."

"Stop thinking so much and feel the steel."

Sweat soaked through Soren's shirt despite the cold air. His muscles burned, and fresh bruises bloomed across his ribs and shoulders. Blood trickled from a split lip

where he'd caught the flat of Kaelor's blade. Yet the swordmaster showed no sign of tiring, no hint of mercy.

'He's looking for your breaking point,' Valenna murmured. 'Don't give him one.'

After a particularly brutal sequence that left Soren gasping on his knees, Kaelor paused, his single eye narrowed in contemplation.

"You're still fighting like you're in the gutter," he said, his voice oddly quiet now. "Street fighting keeps you alive, but it won't make you a knight. Stop trying to survive each strike. Start thinking three moves ahead."

Soren pushed himself to his feet, every muscle screaming in protest. He wiped blood from his lip with the back of his hand and readied his stance once more.

Something shifted in Kaelor's expression, not approval, exactly, but acknowledgment. "Again," he said. "This time, forget everything you think you know. Feel the rhythm."

Soren exhaled slowly, letting his awareness expand. The weight of the sword in his hand, the texture of the grip against his palm, the subtle shifts in Kaelor's weight that telegraphed his next move. He stopped trying to predict or plan, instead surrendering to the flow of combat.

When Kaelor attacked this time, Soren moved with the strike rather than against it, letting the force carry him into his next position. Their blades met with a clean ring of steel, the impact jarring his arm but not breaking his grip.

For the first time, he lasted more than five moves before Kaelor found an opening. The swordmaster's blade stopped a hair's breadth from Soren's throat.

"Better," Kaelor said, stepping back. "Again."

They continued as darkness fell completely over the yard. Servants lit torches along the walls, their flickering light casting long shadows across the scarred stones.

Soren lost count of how many times he'd been struck, disarmed, or knocked down. But slowly, imperceptibly, something changed. He began to anticipate Kaelor's patterns, to feel the rhythm of combat rather than just reacting to it.

He still lost every exchange, but now he lasted longer. Ten moves. Fifteen. Once, nearly twenty before Kaelor's blade found its mark.

Finally, after what might have been hours, Kaelor stepped back and sheathed his sword. His white hair was damp with sweat, the only sign that the session had required any effort from him at all.

"Enough," he said. "You'll do."

Soren lowered his blade, chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath. Every inch of his body throbbed with pain, but beneath it was a strange, quiet satisfaction. He hadn't won, hadn't come close, but he had endured.

Kaelor approached, stopping just close enough that Soren could see the web of fine scars that crossed his face like a map of old battles.

"Listen carefully, boy, because I won't say this twice," the swordmaster said, his voice low and rough. "A knight isn't armor or vows. He's a weapon. Your only choice is to stay sharp..." He tapped Soren's chest with a callused finger, directly over the hidden shard. "...or rust."

Something in his tone made Soren wonder if Kaelor somehow knew about the shard, about Valenna. But the moment passed, and the swordmaster stepped back.

"Same time tomorrow," Kaelor said, turning away. "Don't be late again."

He walked into the shadows at the edge of the yard, his footsteps fading until Soren stood alone among the torchlight and scarred stones.

Soren sheathed his sword, wincing as his battered muscles protested the movement. Blood and sweat mingled on his skin, and tomorrow would bring fresh bruises to join today's collection. Yet beneath the pain was a clarity he hadn't felt before.

The Velranes were shaping him, each in their own way. Veyr with his ambition, Ayren with his masks and whispers, and now Kaelor with his brutal, efficient steel. They were forging him into something new, not just a recruit, not just a knight, but a weapon calibrated to their specific needs.

The question that remained, as he limped back toward the barracks, was whether he would be the blade that served them or the one that eventually cut their hands.

Chapter 39: Whispers in the Yard

Chapter 39: Whispers in the Yard

Soren staggered through the barracks door, each step a negotiation between pain and gravity. His right eye had swollen nearly shut, and the taste of copper lingered on his split lip.

Kaelor Varas had spent the afternoon teaching him exactly how much he didn't know about swordplay, primarily by beating it into him with methodical precision.

The usual evening chatter died as he entered. Dozens of eyes tracked his progress across the room, cataloging each bruise, each bloodstain, each unsteady step. The silence had weight, pressing against his skin like a physical thing.

He made it to his cot before anyone spoke.

"By the Eight," Dane whistled low, his massive frame casting a shadow over Soren. "Did you fall down the mountain, or did someone push you?"

Soren eased himself onto the thin mattress, his ribs protesting every movement. "Training," he managed, the word scraping his dry throat.

"Training?" Dane's eyebrows shot up. "With who? We were all in the main yard all day. You weren't there."

The question hung in the air, drawing attention from the surrounding bunks. Soren felt the shift in the room's atmosphere, curiosity hardening into something sharper, more dangerous.

"Kaelor Varas," he said simply, reaching for his water skin. No point lying when the truth would come out anyway.

The name rippled through the barracks. Whispers bloomed in its wake, spreading from bunk to bunk like fire through dry brush.

"—the Swordmaster himself—"

"—skipping regular drills for private lessons—"

"—must have someone important backing him—"

Tavren's voice cut through the murmurs, deliberately loud. "Well, well. Looks like the gutter rat found himself a noble patron." His sneer was audible even from across the room. "Wonder what he did to earn that kind of attention."

A few laughs followed, mean-spirited and brittle. Soren ignored them, focusing instead on unlacing his boots with fingers that felt twice their normal size. The shard pulsed warm against his chest, Valenna's presence alert but silent.

Dane settled his bulk onto the adjacent cot, the wood frame creaking in protest. "So," he said, keeping his voice low, "you're getting special treatment."

It wasn't a question. Soren looked up, meeting the big recruit's steady gaze. Dane's face revealed nothing, no envy, no judgment, just calm assessment.

"Not the kind anyone would want," Soren replied, gesturing to his battered face. "Kaelor doesn't believe in going easy."

"That's not the point," Dane said. His massive hands rested on his knees, knuckles scarred from years of fighting. "Special is special, even if it hurts. The others see it. They don't like it."

Soren glanced around the barracks. Most recruits were pretending not to watch, but their attention was palpable. Tavren had gathered his usual crowd, their heads bent together in whispered conversation that occasionally broke into laughter when they looked his way.

"They can like it or not," Soren said, falling back on the mask he'd perfected in Nordhav's alleys, face blank, eyes flat, voice even. "Doesn't change anything."

Dane shrugged his massive shoulders. "Maybe not. But it changes how they see you. How they'll treat you." He paused, then added, "Just watch your back. Some of them might decide to give you their own special training."

Before Soren could respond, the barracks door swung open with a bang that silenced all conversation. Veyr Velrane strode in, his mismatched hair catching the lamplight, his stride confident and unhurried.

The young noble wore riding clothes, though Soren doubted he'd been anywhere near a horse. His boots were too clean, his cheeks too free of wind-burn.

Every recruit scrambled to their feet, all except Soren, whose body flatly refused the command to stand. Veyr waved them down with a casual flick of his wrist.

"At ease," he said, his voice carrying the easy authority of someone who'd never had to raise it to be heard. His eyes scanned the room before settling on Soren. "Ah, there you are! I've been looking for you."

He crossed to Soren's cot, ignoring the stares that followed him. Up close, his smile had an edge of genuine amusement, as if Soren's battered condition was somehow entertaining.

"I see Kaelor didn't kill you," Veyr observed, perching on the edge of Dane's vacated cot. "That's promising. Most don't survive their first day with him."

The barracks had gone deathly quiet. Every recruit stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe as the heir to House Velrane chatted casually with the lowest-born among them.

"He tried his best," Soren replied, keeping his voice neutral despite the pain radiating from what felt like every inch of his body.

Veyr laughed, the sound bright and sharp in the silence. "I'm sure he did! But talent always shows, doesn't it?" He glanced around at the watching recruits, his smile widening. "That's why Kaelor asked for him specifically, you know. Said he saw something worth sharpening."

The lie was so smooth Soren almost believed it himself. Kaelor hadn't asked for him, Veyr had arranged the whole thing, probably with his father's reluctant blessing. But the falsehood served its purpose. Soren could almost feel the atmosphere in the barracks shifting, jealousy tempered by a new uncertainty.

If the fearsome Swordmaster had personally selected Soren, perhaps there was more to the gutter rat than they'd assumed.

"It's good for all of you, really," Veyr continued, addressing the room at large now. "House Velrane needs strong blades. When one of your own rises, it reflects well on everyone." His smile never wavered, but his eyes were calculating as they swept across the faces watching him. "We all benefit when talent is recognized, don't we?"

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the barracks, though Soren noted that Tavren and his closest allies remained silent, their expressions sullen.

Veyr clapped his hands together once, the sound sharp as a whip crack. "Excellent! I'm glad that's settled." He rose, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from his immaculate coat. "Thorne, you'll continue with Kaelor tomorrow. The rest of you, carry on with your regular training. Make us proud."

With that, he strode out as suddenly as he'd arrived, leaving a wake of whispers and speculative glances behind him.

Dane returned to his cot, settling his bulk down with a grunt. "Well," he said quietly, "that's one way to handle it."

Soren nodded, feeling the weight of dozens of recalculating stares. Veyr's intervention had been skillful, not denying the special treatment, but reframing it as something that benefited everyone. A rising tide lifts all boats, even if some rise higher than others.

But not everyone would buy it. Already, he could see the recruits sorting themselves into camps, those who accepted Veyr's explanation, those who resented it, and those who were still deciding which way to lean.

From the doorway where Veyr had exited, a shadow detached itself from the wall. Soren caught a glimpse of violet-black hair and the gleam of amethyst eyes as Ayren Velrane slipped away, a cold smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

The second son had been watching the entire exchange, Soren realized, perhaps had even orchestrated it.

One test layered atop another, like nested blades.

The evening passed in a blur of pain and whispered conversations. Soren cleaned his wounds as best he could, choking down the stale bread and hard cheese that passed for dinner.

Most recruits gave him a wide berth, uncertain how to treat him after Veyr's visit. A few nodded in his direction, a newfound respect in their eyes. Others glared when they thought he wasn't looking.

He was wrapping a bandage around his split knuckles when a shadow fell across his cot. Looking up, he found Kaelen, the mage, watching him with undisguised amusement.

"Still in one piece, I see," Kaelen observed, his robes rustling softly as he moved closer. "Kaelor must be getting soft in his old age."

Soren tied off the bandage, wincing as the rough cloth caught on raw skin. "Or he's saving the worst for tomorrow."

"Probably," the mage agreed cheerfully. "He likes to break recruits down methodically. Like carving a statue...first the rough shape, then the details." He studied Soren's battered face with clinical interest. "Most give up after the first day. The pain becomes... unbearable."

"I've had worse," Soren said, though in truth he couldn't remember when.

Kaelen's eyebrows rose slightly. "Have you? Interesting." He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "What did he teach you today? Besides how to bleed efficiently."

The question caught Soren off guard. He considered lying, then decided against it. The mage would know.

"That I telegraph my moves," he admitted. "That I fight to survive each strike instead of planning ahead."

Kaelen nodded, satisfaction flickering across his features. "Good lessons. Hard to learn, harder to unlearn." He straightened, his gaze suddenly distant. "Pain is an excellent teacher, but a dangerous master. Remember that when he has you on the ground tomorrow."

With that cryptic advice, the mage turned and left, his robes swirling around his ankles like smoke. Soren watched him go, wondering if the conversation had been another test, another assessment from yet another angle.

The barracks gradually settled into night routine. Lamps were extinguished one by one, plunging the room into darkness broken only by the occasional glow of a dying ember in the hearth.

Soren lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling he couldn't see, every heartbeat pulsing through his bruised body.

Around him, the sounds of sleep filled the darkness, snores, mumbled words, the creak of wooden frames as bodies shifted. But beneath those familiar noises ran an undercurrent of whispers, too low to make out individual words but clear enough to recognize the topic.

Him. His sudden rise. His special training. His unknown past.

The shard warmed against his chest, Valenna's presence stirring in his mind.

'They sharpen you with words now, not just steel,' she whispered, her voice clear despite the darkness. 'Listen to them. The blade that fears the whetstone stays dull.'

'I'm not afraid of them,' Soren thought back.

'No,' she agreed. 'But being sharpened by steel is simple, little knife. Being sharpened by envy is far deadlier. Steel only cuts the body. Envy cuts deeper...it finds the cracks in your spirit and widens them until you shatter from within.'

Soren shifted, trying to find a position that didn't press on some new bruise or cut. *'So what do I do?'*

'Use it,' came the reply, cold and certain. *'Let their jealousy make them careless. Let their whispers reveal their alliances. Every blade turned against you shows you where the real threats lie.'*

The logic was sound, but it offered little comfort. Soren closed his eyes, feeling the ache in his bones settle into something deeper, more permanent.

Tomorrow would bring more pain from Kaelor's relentless training. More tests from the Velrane brothers. More whispers from recruits who saw him as either a threat or an opportunity.

He thought of Dane's warning about watching his back. In Nordhav's alleys, threats came from the front, direct, honest in their violence. Here, they would come wrapped in smiles and false camaraderie, poison disguised as wine.

Chapter 40: Blood in the Mess Hall

Chapter 40: Blood in the Mess Hall

The mess hall was a battlefield fought with spoons instead of swords.

Soren hunched over his bowl, methodically shoveling the bland porridge into his mouth. Each bite tasted like wet paper, but he'd eaten worse. Much worse. The shard rested cold against his chest, a small weight that had become as familiar as breathing.

Around him, the hall buzzed with noise, boasts about training scores, complaints about blisters, the clatter of wooden spoons against wooden bowls.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, their voices rising and falling in that peculiar rhythm that happened when people with too much energy were confined to benches.

He kept his eyes on his food, but his ears caught the whispers.

"—special training with Kaelor—"

"—Veyr's new pet—"

"—probably on his knees for the nobles—"

The last one came from two tables over, just loud enough to carry. Soren didn't look up. He'd learned long ago that reaction was what they wanted. Reaction was weakness.

He took another bite of porridge, chewing slowly. Three days had passed since his first session with Kaelor Varas.

The bruises had faded from purple to yellow-green, but new ones had joined them, a rainbow of pain across his ribs and back. Progress, Kaelor called it. You only bruised where you failed.

Footsteps approached from behind—heavy, deliberate, making no attempt at stealth. Soren felt the presence stop directly behind him, looming like a storm cloud.

"Well, if it isn't Veyr's pet project," a voice drawled, loud enough to draw attention from nearby tables. "Eating all alone? No noble masters to feed you scraps today?"

Soren recognized the voice without turning. Jerric Halworth. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a face that might have been handsome if it wasn't perpetually twisted into a sneer.

Son of a minor noble from the western provinces, but he carried himself like he was heir to the throne.

The mess hall quieted slightly, conversations dying as heads turned toward the confrontation. Soren continued eating, each movement measured and controlled.

"What's wrong, gutterborn?" Jerric pressed, moving around to the opposite side of the table so Soren would have to look at him. "Forgot how to speak to your betters?"

Soren raised his eyes slowly. Jerric stood with arms crossed over his chest, his recruit's tunic stretched tight across shoulders built from years of proper nutrition and supervised training. Behind him, three of his usual followers watched with anticipation, already smirking at whatever was about to unfold.

"I speak when there's something worth saying," Soren replied, his voice level.

The mess hall grew quieter still. Spoons paused halfway to mouths. Conversations trailed off mid-sentence.

Jerric's face flushed red. "Bold words from someone who should be cleaning the latrines instead of training with the Swordmaster." He leaned forward, planting his palms on the table. "Everyone knows you didn't earn your place here. What did you do, gutterborn? Beg? Steal? Or just spread your legs for the right noble?"

A few nervous laughs rippled through the hall. Soren set his spoon down carefully, the wood making a soft click against the table. The shard pulsed once against his chest, a flutter of warmth like a half-forgotten memory.

"I earned my place," he said quietly. "The same as anyone. With steel."

"Steel?" Jerric laughed, the sound sharp with mockery. "That's what they're calling it now?" He straightened, looking around at his audience, playing to the crowd. "No wonder you're an orphan...your parents probably killed themselves to be rid of you."

The words struck like a physical blow. Soren felt his breath catch, a sudden tightness in his chest that had nothing to do with bruised ribs. The shard flared hot against his skin, pulsing with a rhythm that matched the sudden roaring in his ears.

'Your parents killed themselves to be rid of you.'

The words echoed, amplified by memory, the orphanage matron's cold eyes, the street vendor who'd chased him away from his stall, the night watchman who'd caught him sleeping in a doorway. All of them had said some version of the same thing. Abandoned. Unwanted. Trash.

The shard burned hotter, its pulse quickening to match his heart. Valenna's presence stirred beneath his skin, no words yet, just a sensation like a blade being drawn from its sheath.

Jerric was still talking, his mouth moving, more insults spilling out, but Soren couldn't hear them over the blood rushing in his ears.

The world narrowed, colors sharpening, sounds receding. He felt his hands clench into fists beneath the table, knuckles popping one by one.

'He doesn't know,' a distant part of his mind whispered. 'He's just guessing. Just trying to hurt you.'

But it didn't matter. The shard pulsed again, hotter still, and something inside Soren snapped.

He lunged across the table. Bowls and cups clattered to the floor. Jerric's eyes widened in surprise, he'd expected words, not violence, but he had no time to react before Soren's fist connected with his jaw.

The impact jarred up Soren's arm, a shock of pain that felt clean and right. Jerric staggered backward, off-balance, and Soren followed, vaulting over the table with a fluid grace that spoke of street fights rather than training yard duels.

His second blow caught Jerric in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs in a whoosh that carried the sweet scent of expensive wine. The taller boy doubled over, gasping, and Soren brought his knee up hard into his face.

Blood erupted from Jerric's nose, spraying across Soren's tunic in a warm mist. The sight of it, bright red against the dull fabric, only fueled the rage burning through him. He drove his elbow down between Jerric's shoulder blades, sending him crashing to the floor.

Somewhere beyond the roaring in his ears, he heard shouts. Cheers from some, cries of alarm from others. None of it mattered. Nothing mattered except the body beneath him, the face that had spoken those words.

Soren straddled Jerric's chest, pinning his arms with his knees. His fists rose and fell in a rhythm older than training, older than thought, the brutal, efficient violence of someone who'd learned to fight not for honor or sport, but for survival.

Each blow landed with a wet sound that should have been sickening but instead felt righteous. Knuckles split against teeth. Blood smeared across skin. Jerric's struggles weakened, then stopped entirely as consciousness fled.

Still, Soren's fists rose and fell.

Blood flecked his face, hot and sticky. His knuckles screamed with pain, skin torn, possibly bones broken. The shard against his chest pulsed in time with each blow, a second heartbeat urging him on.

'Enough,' that distant part of his mind whispered. *'He's done. You've won.'*

But the rage hadn't burned out yet. It coiled inside him like a living thing, hungry for more. Another blow. Another. And another.

Then, cutting through the haze, Valenna's voice rang clear and cold in his mind.

'Good,' she said, satisfaction dripping from the word like honey from a blade. *'Violence silences envy. You did right, boy.'*

Her approval washed over him, cooling the rage to something more controlled, more purposeful. His fist paused mid-air, trembling with the effort of restraint.

Jerric lay motionless beneath him, face barely recognizable beneath the mask of blood. His nose was flattened, lips split in multiple places. At least two teeth had been knocked loose, visible in the bloody froth around his mouth. One eye was already swelling shut, the skin around it purpling rapidly.

Soren became aware of the silence around him. The mess hall had gone completely still, every recruit frozen in place, watching with expressions that ranged from horror to grudging respect. No one had tried to stop him. No one had dared.

He rose slowly, knees protesting after being pressed against the hard floor. Blood dripped from his knuckles, pattering on the stones like rain. His chest heaved with exertion, each breath carrying the copper-salt taste of violence.

"Anyone else have something to say about my parents?" he asked, his voice unnervingly calm despite the storm that had just passed through him.

No one spoke. No one moved.

"I didn't think so."

The doors at the far end of the hall burst open with a bang that echoed off the stone walls. Master Durnach stormed in, his weathered face darkening as he took in the scene, Jerric unconscious and bloodied on the floor, Soren standing over him with crimson hands, the circle of silent recruits maintaining a careful distance.

"What in the eight hells happened here?" Durnach demanded, striding forward. His gaze locked on Soren, narrowing dangerously. "Thorne? Explain yourself."

Soren met his eyes without flinching. "He insulted my family," he said simply. "I corrected him."

Durnach's jaw tightened, but something in his expression shifted, not approval, exactly, but understanding. He'd been a warrior long enough to recognize the aftermath of justified violence.

"Get him to the healers," he barked at two nearby recruits, who jumped to obey, carefully lifting Jerric's limp form. Blood smeared the floor where he'd lain, a dark stain that would likely never fully wash out.

Durnach turned back to Soren. "Report to my office when you've cleaned yourself up," he said, his voice gruff but not angry. "There will be consequences."

With that, he turned and followed the recruits carrying Jerric, leaving Soren alone in the center of the silent hall.

The rage had burned itself out, leaving only a cold, clear certainty in its wake. Valenna's presence settled beneath his skin, satisfied and approving. *'They needed to see,'* she murmured. *'Now they know. You are not prey.'*

Soren flexed his damaged hands, feeling the sting of split knuckles, the deeper ache of possibly broken bones. It didn't matter. The pain was clean, honest in a way that words could never be.

He returned to his seat, ignoring the stares that followed him. His bowl had survived the chaos, though his porridge had gone cold.

He picked up his spoon with bloody fingers and resumed eating as if nothing had happened.

Around him, the mess hall remained unnaturally quiet. Recruits returned to their meals with mechanical movements, eyes darting to Soren and away again.

Some looked fearful, others calculating, a few even impressed. But all of them looked at him differently now.

Not just as Veyr's chosen. Not just as the gutter-born recruit with special training.

But as someone terrifying to cross.

Soren finished his porridge in silence, savoring the quiet. The shard had cooled against his chest, but its presence felt stronger somehow, more defined. As if it approved of what had happened. As if this had been necessary.

'Maybe it was..'