

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 4: The Ash-Bound Ledger - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 4: The Ash-Bound Ledger

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The city's old coliseum let out its ghosts at dawn, each one clinging to the fog as if unfinished business could anchor them a few hours longer.

Soren waited at the edge of the grounds, boots sunk ankle-deep in rutted frosting, until the first bell fractured the quiet.

The gates, iron teeth, chains bristling with last year's rust jerked open one crank at a time, and the boys shuffled through, each hunched like cargo refusing to admit it knew its own destination.

Inside was a stone ring, oval as a broken egg, with the inner yard tracked by grooves where bodies had circled for centuries.

The air was an undertow of sweat, piss, and the sweet tang of clove used to mask them. He counted near a hundred others, a few already dividing themselves, the gutterbred with their knife scars and bare feet, the country boys slapped red by winter, and a scattering of pressed sons in wool and polished boots.

Some clutched practice staves, a few had padded jerkins, and one or two just hugged themselves, skins pale as worms' underbellies.

Soren kept to the edge, plotting exit lines between the pillars. His cloak was barely thicker than old newsprint; the cold fingered up under his tunic, each muscle tensed to flinch at the first wrong move.

His satchel rode high under his arm, and with every step he pictured the Remnant shard inside, its silence heavier than steel, as if waiting for some private signal to wake.

At the coliseum's high curve, a row of silent men in mottle-blue coats watched with predatory attention. House Ashgard's colors.

Most were old scars and sunken cheeks, a few young ones still with the arrogance of unscarred skin.

They sipped from steel flasks, nudged each other, pointed at the incoming stock. Soren could feel their eyes like chalk lines drawn over his shoulders.

At ground level, two tables stood on the pavers: one hosting a ledger in smeared ink, heavy as a punishment book; the other stacked with numbered slips and bags of chalk dust.

Between them perched a captain, face set in a permanent scowl, jaw ruined by an unrepentant break. Soren moved closer when called, careful not to make more eye than necessary.

Ahead of him in line, a boy nearly his own height, but built like a collapsed barn, long arms, ribs caged in burlap, spoke his name in a cracked alto: "Tavren." He grinned back at Soren, revealing a brown ruin of teeth, then spat on the ring's sand. "Hope you brought your own plank, cityboy."

Soren didn't answer. The scribe at the ledger table, a girl not much older than himself, hair wound in a black braid and face sharp as a glass file, looked up and fixed him dead center. Her eyes weren't the kind to blink first.

"Name?" she said.

"Soren," he managed, and stared not at her, but at the battered edge of the ledger.

The captain grunted, unimpressed. "House?"

He said nothing. The scribe dipped the quill, then wrote: just Soren.

"Sign," said the captain, stabbing a finger at the page stained ash-gray. The inkpot was dry, so Soren took the cue and pressed a thumb into the tin of char-dust by the ledger, then stamped it into the page's empty slot.

There was a low snort, maybe a laugh, from the direction of the coliseum's wall.

Soren didn't look to see who it was, but the prickle at the back of his neck suggested the bluecoats found it hilarious.

He stepped aside, letting the next in line close the gap. Tavren elbowed past, stinking of nerves and sour mash, and squared himself at the table like a man already famous for leaving tables in splinters.

The captain didn't even ask for his mark, just motioned for the scribe, who wrote "Tavren, of the pit."

'The pit.' Soren thought. That's how they saw all of them.

At the end of the line, a noble's son appeared, Soren could tell by the skin, pale as bone meal and flushed at the cheeks, and by the cut of the outer jacket, silk even under a dusting of travel filth.

The boy's left jaw was purpling with a fresh bruise, one eye puffed half-shut, hair perfectly combed except for the spot where blood had dried in the roots.

He didn't look afraid, but neither did he belong. The scribe's pen paused an extra moment.

The performances were now. Each new recruit was handed a slip, a length of rope, and, incongruously, a raw potato.

Soren inspected the slip: 54. Tavren snatched his, which was the number 7, then flicked the potato at a cluster of farmboys, who scattered as if bricks might follow. The captain's face never changed.

"Barracks and training order," said the scribe, voice metallic. "Report at the third bell or lose your count. First infraction gets you water rations. Second, a whip. Third, disqualified. Or dead, if you're unlucky." She didn't look up until she added, "Most are."

There was a shove at Soren's back. Tavren's muggy breath hit his ear. "Hope you don't mind company. They bunk us by number."

Soren shrugged, then found the stairs leading up to the third tier of the dormitory ring. The steps were cut for taller men; his legs strained to clear each rise.

At the landing, he found the right room, a box of brick and hay ticking with eight other bodies, most already slumped on mats or arguing over blanket slices.

Tavren tossed his satchel at the bunk nearest the window, then stripped off his shirt and showed the world his entire system of healing knife tracks.

Soren took the pallet furthest from the others, back to the wall.

He waited until no one was watching, then pressed his satchel under the mattress, palm on the Remnant shard.

A faint warmth bled through the canvas, a pulse, two, sharp and quick. Like a heartbeat. For a stutter, he thought it might even speak again, but the silence stayed absolute, not even his own thoughts daring a word.

He curled on the bunk, drew the frayed blanket to his chin. From the courtyard below, the bluecoats barked orders, and the sound of moving bodies and potato-muffled curses drifted thick through the window slats.

Night would fall early, and tomorrow's trials would come with it. He flexed his fingers, feeling the phantom scratch of coal dust still under the nails.

'Sleep with one eye open,' he thought, and almost laughed.

But he did, anyway.