

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 5: The Sword Remembers - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 5: The Sword Remembers

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If there'd been a warning in the morning horn, it sounded only like hunger.

Soren woke jammed in the elbow of an upper bunk, mouth dry, stringy hair stuck to the frost lining the stone wall. Someone, Tavren, probably, had ratcheted his blanket down to half-mast, and the extra cold drove the air right through the threadbare tunic he'd kept on out of habit.

He flexed his fingers. They hurt less than yesterday, but not by much.

Below, the bunkhouse filled up with light in slow pulses, blue first, then gray shot with brown where the dawn spilled over the city's roofs.

The boys were already making noise. Most groaned and turtled deeper into their mats, but a few clattered about, slamming lockers, muttering curses, shoving reed-stuffed footwraps into place.

Soren blinked against the ache behind his eyes, then let himself drop, legs bent, landing softer than he felt.

Someone had left a basin by the door, packed with a cake of ice and two fingers worth of tinny water. Soren broke its surface with a knuckle, wiped the stinging slush across his teeth and cheeks, then inched a look at his reflection.

The cut above his brow had closed into a crust, which would go unnoticed so long as he didn't bleed again today. He ran his thumb along the line of his jaw, thinking about how much of him was knifed up already, how little of it ever deserved the scar.

Tavren was waiting by the door, grinning at the unfinished brawl in Soren's face. He wore the same smile as yesterday and, Soren guessed, as every other day he'd been forced to live. "Today's for first blood," Tavren said. "Hope you brought some stew in your bones."

Soren didn't answer. He edged past, lips tucked in, and headed into the courtyard.

The training yard had been raked but not salted, so the sand crusted together in knuckles and ridges.

Every few steps, the boys tripped or kicked up a spray of powder so cold it stung through any open skin. At the edge, posted up like an idol disdained by all but necessity, stood the instructor.

Soren didn't dare a full look at first, but what he saw in half-glimpse was enough: the instructor's left leg wrapped hock to knee in what looked like shredded sail, his hands stitched with white scars crossing bone like a map no sane man would try to follow.

His tunic bore the blue and gray of House Ashgard but was so faded it looked like a ghost's interpretation. He said nothing as they filed in; just eyed them, one by one, as if drawing up the tally before the cull.

The wooden swords, such as they were, had been tossed into a heap overnight. Soren found one with a length close to his own arm, the grip roughed up by a previous owner's teeth marks and black with the memory of old, sweaty hands.

He rolled it over in his palm, weighing the balance. It felt awkward and embarrassing. '*A weapon should know who owns it,*' he thought, then tried to chase the idea out of his skull.

The instructor barked. The effect was immediate: every boy froze, then scrambled into a line drawn in the sand.

He stalked down the row, pausing now and then to appraise or deride. His voice came gravelly, forced through a throat that seemed to squirm at the effort of speech.

"You stink of sleep and shit," he told Tavren, "but at least you stand like you know something." A nod for Soren, eyes narrowing to pinholes. "You. Gutter." The insult was not unique, but Soren braced his chest.

"If you die from cold, Ashgard saves feed. If you die from training, Ashgard gets better feed. Don't die for either." The instructor's boot crushed a patch of ice into the foot of the next boy, one of the farmstock, who yipped and jerked his leg back.

He held his hands behind his back and let the wind do most of the talking for a full minute. Then, without looking at them, barked again: "Stances!"

What followed passed less as instruction and more as collective penance. Each failed form was met with a rod, and the rod had a memory for the same spot on the calf or forearm until welts grew loud enough to listen.

Soren learned quickly not to hesitate, but his own memory betrayed him, old bruises thrummed with new ones, and every time a shout went up or the rod whistled close, something in his spine threatened to crumple.

Tavren's failures came often but loud, so the rod glanced off him as if shamed by association; the noble boy, Rhain, Soren guessed, from the way everyone else kept eyes down when he moved, tried to overthink each correction, dissecting it before his body could react. The instructor didn't care. He would as soon junk a slow learner as a sick pig.

When the sun barely crested over the wall, the boys were ordered into pairs. Soren got Rhain.

Up close, the noble's hands tremored worse than his face did, skin ghosting white where the knuckles gripped the sword. Rhain spoke first, but so softly Soren nearly missed it: "I apologize in advance, if I bleed on you."

Soren shrugged. "You won't."

Rhain blinked, then lifted the blade in textbook guard. Soren mirrored as best he could, fighting the urge to hyperventilate.

The first exchange was pathetic. Soren's sword slipped from his hand, caught Rhain's shoulder, then tangled in Rhain's shirtsleeve so both weapons danced together before clattering to the sand. At the sideline, Tavren hooted: "Maybe ask for the girl's one next time, Soren!" The instructor didn't even look up.

The second rep went worse for Rhain. He tried to sidestep on the frozen sand and instead landed on his hip. Soren didn't laugh, but thought he maybe could have.

By the third, Soren noticed the way his own hand adjusted the grip, thumb set just so at the crossbar, as if it remembered finer work than he deserved to know.

On the fourth attempt, he let the stiffness melt out of his elbow, and the sword moved with a line he didn't design. It caught the noble's blade in a half-circle and flicked it free.

The instructor's boot appeared in the gap between them. "That," he said, "again."

They did. Ten, maybe twenty more times. Soren lost track of the count. What he noticed instead was the growing shock of recognition, his body kept doing what his mind had not yet conceived.

A twist here, a slide down that seam of pressure and opening, a feint that made Rhain blink, then flinch, and finally, smile a hairline crack wide.

"Where did you learn that?" Rhain whispered, close enough now to risk real conversation.

Soren fumbled, nearly said the gutter, but caught himself. "Nowhere."

"Liar." But Rhain's voice held no anger, just a raw, bare curiosity that made Soren bristle.

There were more drills. Sand turned to mud, then froze again under the shade of the wall. Tavren cracked a boy's tooth, spat half a mouthful of blood, and refused to clean up after.

By the time the sun had traversed to the far end of the pit, Soren's arms were pudding, Rhain's shirt was stained in three places, and everyone else looked ready to be thrown into the same pit as the city's latrine.

But Soren could not stop rehearsing in his mind the impossible fluency, the way the wooden blade answered the correction of every mistake with a logic too crisp to belong to him alone.

Muscle memory didn't explain it. It was as if the sword wanted to teach him. *'That's not real. That's not sane,'* he thought, but the idea nested and built in him all the same.

Training dismissed them nether than spent. Soren retreated to the barracks and found his bunk already commandeered by the stench of Tavren's feet.

He tiptoed, retrieved his satchel from under the mat, and pressed two fingers to the outline of the hidden shard. It was still there, radiating heat like an accusation.

He waited for the others to sleep. Then, in the hush of night, he unwrapped the fragment again.

Shadow played over its surface, casting vague patterns against the wall. Soren turned it in his fingers, wondered if it could ever speak like the storybooks lied about.

There was no voice, no vision, nothing. Only the memory of a moment, bright as a fuse:

Right foot back.

He repeated it, eyes half-shut, until the phrase became an anchor, a promise of something not quite his, not yet. The cold didn't touch him. The dark was softer than expected.

He slept that night with the shard in his palm and, for the first time in memory, did not dream of dying.