

# CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT

## Chapter 51: Petals in Blood

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Midnight dragged its fingers across the stones of House Velrane, but Soren's eagerness wouldn't let him sleep.

He slipped from his cot, careful to avoid the creaking floorboard by Dane's bunk. The other recruits were lost to dreams or nightmares, their breathing creating a symphony of snores and sighs in the darkened barracks.

None stirred as he retrieved his practice sword from beneath his bed, the wooden blade a poor substitute for steel but all he was permitted to carry.

His body protested each movement. Kaelor's "special training" had left his muscles screaming, his joints stiff, his skin a canvas of purple-black bruises layered atop fading yellow ones. Days of punishment remained, each promising fresh torment. Yet here he was, seeking more pain in the dead of night.

'Stupid,' he thought, easing the door open just enough to slip through. 'Kaelor will kill you tomorrow if you're too exhausted to stand.'

The shard warmed against his chest as he crept through the silent corridors, navigating by memory and the occasional guttering torch. Valenna's presence stirred, a whisper of awareness in the back of his mind.

*"You'll break yourself if you chase shadows," she murmured, her voice like cool water over stones. "Your body needs rest, not more punishment."*

Soren ignored her, his mind fixed on the dusty book he'd discovered in the forgotten library. The Nine Petals of the Blade.

The incomplete diagrams that had tantalized him with glimpses of power beyond anything Kaelor taught in the yard. The knowledge Valenna had poured into him, burning and transforming.

The training yard stood empty under starlight, the practice dummies ghostly silhouettes against the stone walls. Moonlight painted everything in shades of silver and ash, turning the dirt to pale dust beneath his feet.

The night air bit at his skin, cold enough to make his breath cloud before him.

Perfect. No eyes to judge. No mouths to mock. Just him and the blade and the night.

He moved to the center of the yard, each step deliberate despite the pain that accompanied it. His palms still wept clear fluid where the blisters had split and reformed, split and reformed, over days of gripping heated hilts and weighted swords.

He flexed his fingers, feeling the skin stretch and burn.

The memory of the book's diagrams floated before his mind's eye, overlaid with Valenna's deeper knowledge.

The First Petal, the foundation, the beginning. Without mastering it, the other forms would remain forever beyond his reach.

He set his stance, adjusting his feet until they matched the precise positioning he'd memorized. Weight distributed perfectly between ball and heel, knees bent just so, spine aligned. The practice sword felt awkward in his hands, too light after days of Kaelor's weighted training.

*'The Seed Awakens,'* he thought, recalling the form's proper name. He took a breath, held it, then began the sequence.

The blade wavered immediately, his exhausted muscles betraying him. Where the movement should have been fluid, it jerked. Where it should have flowed like

water, it stuttered like a dying heartbeat. His timing faltered, the rhythm that had seemed so clear in his mind dissolving into chaotic impulses.

He reset, tried again. Worse this time, his strength overshot the motion, turning what should have been a precise cut into something crude and graceless. The practice sword felt like a club in his hands, all subtlety lost.

"Damn it," he hissed, the words misting in the cold air. He shook out his arms, ignoring the fresh spikes of pain the movement triggered. "Again."

Each attempt failed more spectacularly than the last. His shoulders spasmed as he tried to trace the elaborate pattern, muscles locking when they should have yielded. His legs trembled beneath him, threatening to give out entirely. The blisters on his palms split open again, blood slicking the wooden hilt, making his grip treacherous.

Still, he continued. Again and again and again, driving his broken body through motions it couldn't possibly perform in its current state. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cold, trickling down his temples, stinging his eyes. His breath came in harsh gasps that tore at his raw throat.

The shard against his chest pulsed with increasing urgency, Valenna's presence sharpening with what might have been concern.

*"Technique is not mimicry, Soren,"*

she said finally, her voice cutting through his frustrated haze. *"You can't force a flower to bloom with fists."*

He snarled, the sound more animal than human. "Then I'll tear it out of the earth."

He drove himself harder, pushing past the wall of pain, past the limitations of flesh and bone. His world narrowed to the next movement, the next breath, the next failure.

Blood dripped from his palms, spattering the dirt beneath him, marking each attempt like primitive tallies.

Midnight bled into the small hours, the moon tracking its inevitable path across the star-strewn sky. Soren lost count of his attempts somewhere after thirty, each one blurring into the next in an endless cycle of frustration and determination.

Then, on what might have been his fiftieth try, or perhaps his hundredth, something changed.

His body, pushed beyond conscious control, surrendered to something deeper. The movement flowed, not from thought but from some wellspring beneath thought. For a fraction of a second, the blade cut exactly as it should, tracing the perfect arc through the night air.

And there, just there, a faint ripple disturbed the space before him, like heat rising from summer stones. It vanished almost before he registered it, gone between one heartbeat and the next.

The shard pulsed once, hard, a flare of heat against his chest. Not quite approval, but acknowledgment. Valenna remained silent, but he felt her watching, assessing.

He tried to recapture that moment, that feeling of surrender. Fifty more attempts yielded nothing but increased pain and frustration.

His shoulders locked completely on the fifty-first try, muscles seizing in protest of the continued abuse. His legs finally gave out on the fifty-second, sending him crashing to his knees in the blood-speckled dirt.

Still, he tried. From his knees now, the forms distorted but the intent unchanged. His vision blurred, either from sweat or exhaustion or some combination of both. The practice sword felt impossibly heavy in his trembling hands.

By the time the eastern sky showed the first hints of dawn, a pale lightening at the edge of the world, Soren could no longer lift the blade. His arms hung useless at his sides, every muscle from fingertip to shoulder a mass of quivering agony. Blood and dirt caked his clothing, sweat plastering his hair to his forehead.

He lay back on the cold stones, staring up at the fading stars. His chest heaved with each labored breath, the shard pulsing in time with his thundering heart.

"First Petal," he whispered, the words a promise, a prayer, a curse. "First Petal..."

Dawn crept higher, painting the yard in shades of gold and rose that did nothing to warm his exhausted body.

Soon Kaelor would arrive for the day's punishment. Soon the other recruits would fill the space with their shouts and clashing blades. Soon the world would intrude on this private battlefield.

But in this moment, lying broken in the dirt, Soren made a vow to the indifferent sky above. He would master this form, this First Petal. He would force it to bloom, to yield its secrets.

Even if it destroyed him first.

## Chapter 52: The First Bloom

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Dawn spilled like watered blood across the eastern sky as Soren dragged himself back to the training yard, each step a negotiation between determination and agony.

His hands, wrapped in strips of cloth he'd torn from his spare shirt, throbbed with every heartbeat. The bandaging was crude, already dark patches bloomed where reopened blisters wept through the fabric.

The yard stood empty, caught in that liminal space between night and day. Perfect. No witnesses to his failure. No eyes to mock his obsession.

*'One more time,'* he thought, the words a mantra that drowned out his body's screaming protest. *'Just one more time.'*

The shard nestled against his chest remained cool and silent. Valenna's presence hovered at the edge of his awareness, watchful but offering nothing, no encouragement, no guidance, no criticism. Testing him, perhaps. Or simply waiting to see if he would break.

He wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

Soren moved to the center of the yard, his practice sword clutched in his bandaged hands. Each breath sent spikes of pain through his ribs where Kaelor's training blade had found him repeatedly. His legs trembled beneath him, muscles liquefied by last night's endless failed attempts.



The memory of those failures burned hotter than any physical pain. Dozens of attempts, perhaps hundreds, and only that single, fleeting moment of success. A ripple in the air, gone almost before he registered it. The barest hint of what might be possible.

Not enough. Nowhere near enough.

He closed his eyes, recalling the diagrams from the hidden manual. The Nine Petals of the Blade. The First Petal..."The Seed Awakens"...its precise angles and postures illustrated in faded ink. He could see it perfectly in his mind's eye: the stance, the distribution of weight, the alignment of hips and shoulders, the breath that powered it all.

*'Start again,'*

he told himself. *'From the beginning. From the foundation.'*

Soren planted his feet in the dirt, adjusting their position with meticulous care. Shoulder-width apart, right foot forward, left foot angled just so.

He bent his knees slightly, feeling the way this shifted his center of gravity. His spine straightened, each vertebra stacking perfectly atop the next.

The practice sword felt awkward in his bandaged hands, the wood slick against blood-dampened cloth. He adjusted his grip, finding the balance point where the blade became an extension of his arms rather than a separate object.

He drew a deep breath, held it, then released it slowly through his nose. The sun crept higher, painting the yard in hues of amber and rose. The air remained still, as if the world itself held its breath in anticipation.

The first attempt was clumsy, his exhausted muscles refusing to obey with the precision the form demanded. The blade wavered mid-strike, the arc incomplete, the timing fractured.

Soren reset his stance, ignoring the trembling in his legs, the burning in his shoulders. He focused inward, beyond the pain, beyond the exhaustion. The second attempt was smoother, still flawed, but closer to the ideal that burned in his mind.

*'Again,' he commanded himself. 'But this time, no wasted movement. No hesitation. No doubt.'*

The third attempt began like the others, the same stance, the same breath, the same intention.

But as he moved into the form, something shifted within him. Not surrender, exactly, but a letting go. His consciousness seemed to sink deeper into his body, past the surface pain, into a place where movement existed before thought.

The blade cut the air with sudden, startling precision. His hips rotated at exactly the right moment, transferring power through his core to his shoulders, arms, wrists. The practice sword became a blur of motion, tracing an arc so perfect it seemed to leave a visible trail in its wake.

And there, just there, the cut didn't end with the blade.

The air before him rippled, like heat rising from sun-baked stone. A thin line of disturbance extended perhaps a handspace beyond the wooden edge, causing dust motes to dance and swirl in its path. For a heartbeat, it hung there, tangible and undeniable.

Then it was gone, the air settling back to stillness as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened. Something real.

The realization hit Soren like a physical blow. The sword aura...that extension of will beyond flesh that Kaelor had demonstrated, he'd touched it. Created it. Manifested it, however briefly and weakly.

The effort caught up with him all at once. His knees buckled, legs folding beneath him as if the bones had suddenly dissolved. He hit the dirt hard, practice sword clattering beside him. His chest heaved with labored breaths, each one burning as

if he'd swallowed fire. Darkness crowded the edges of his vision, the world tunneling down to a narrow point of awareness.

He tasted iron on his tongue, blood from where he'd bitten the inside of his cheek without realizing it. The metallic flavor spread through his mouth, strangely satisfying in its reality. This was no dream, no hallucination born of exhaustion. This had happened.

*"Shaky, flawed, but real,"* Valenna's voice finally broke through the silence, cool and measured. *"You've plucked the stem."*

Soren lay flat on his back, staring up at the lightening sky. Her words weren't praise, not exactly, but acknowledgment. Recognition that something had changed, however small and imperfect.

"Not... enough," he managed between ragged breaths.

*"No,"* she agreed dispassionately. *"A stem without petals is just a weed. But it's a beginning."*

The shard pulsed once against his chest, neither hot nor cold, simply present. Soren reached for the practice sword, dragging it across his body until it lay flat against his chest. The wood felt warm against his sweat-soaked tunic, alive somehow in a way it hadn't been before.

Lying there in the dirt, body broken but spirit flaring like a torch in darkness, Soren made a vow, not to the indifferent sky above, not to the silent shard against his chest, but to himself.

"I will force it open," he whispered, the words carrying the weight of an oath. "Petal by petal. Whatever it costs. Whatever it takes."

The shard pulsed again, warmer this time, like a heartbeat answering his own. A resonance. A recognition. Perhaps even a warning.

Soren closed his eyes, letting the exhaustion claim him at last. But even as consciousness slipped away, the memory of that ripple in the air remained, burned into his mind like a brand.

A beginning. A seed. A stem.

And soon, the first petal would unfurl.

## Chapter 53: Silent Observations (1)

*Chapter 53: Silent Observations (1)*

Ayren's words clung to Soren like frost. "Know them better than they know themselves."

The memory of that cold voice followed him into the training yard, where morning light cast long shadows across packed dirt. His muscles still ached from yesterday's session with Kaelor, but the pain had become a familiar companion, almost comforting in its constancy.

Soren settled against the stone wall, legs stretched before him as if resting. The practice sword lay across his lap, his bandaged hands resting lightly on the worn wood. To any observer, he appeared to be catching his breath between drills.

But his eyes never stopped moving.

*'Not about making friends,'* he reminded himself, watching Tavren demonstrate a complex parry to his usual circle of admirers. *'About survival.'*

The training yard hummed with activity, recruits paired off in practice bouts, others working through forms alone, a few gathered around the water barrel trading insults and boasts. On the surface, mere daily routine. Beneath it, Soren now understood, lay the true battlefield Ayren had sent him to map.

He observed Marken first, a tall, rangy recruit with quick hands and quicker feet. The boy moved like a dancer, his blade describing perfect arcs through the morning air. But there, when pressed from the left, a slight hesitation, a fractional widening of his stance. A weakness, carefully hidden but present nonetheless.

Soren's gaze shifted to Dane, the massive recruit currently battering his opponent's guard with methodical power. Strength to spare, endurance that seemed limitless, but slow to change tactics. Three times now, the same approach, the same sequence. Predictable, if one knew what to watch for.

The shard pulsed once against his chest, a gentle warmth that seemed to sharpen his vision. He didn't need Valenna's prompting to understand the importance of this task. Knowledge was armor. Knowledge was weaponry. Knowledge, properly applied, meant survival.

He spent the morning this way, eyes half-lidded but missing nothing. Who favored their right leg? Who tired quickest? Who fought with anger rather than technique? The details accumulated, small pieces of a larger puzzle that began to form patterns in his mind.

More telling were the interactions between bouts. Tavren and his followers clustered near the weapon racks, their laughter cutting through the general din whenever someone outside their circle faltered.

Marken and three others always practiced near the eastern wall, sharing water and occasional quiet conversations. Lone wolves like Kale kept to themselves, trusting no one, speaking to few.

By midday, Soren had identified at least four distinct factions among the recruits, with several outliers who shifted allegiance as circumstances dictated. The politics

of the yard were as complex as any noble court, with hierarchies established through skill, birth, and the subtle currency of respect.

"Pathetic," Kaelor's voice cut through Soren's observations, the swordmaster's single eye fixed on a pair of recruits whose bout had devolved into an awkward grapple. "If you want to dance, find a tavern. This is a training yard, not a wedding feast."

The recruits separated immediately, faces flushed with embarrassment. Kaelor stalked toward them, his uneven gait somehow enhancing rather than diminishing his menace. "Again," he barked. "And this time, remember you're holding swords, not your mother's skirts."

Soren noted how the other recruits reacted to the swordmaster's approach, some straightening their stances, others subtly increasing the intensity of their practice, a few edging away to avoid attention. Fear, respect, resentment, all visible in the minute adjustments of bodies and expressions.

He filed these reactions away alongside his other observations. Kaelor inspired different responses in different recruits. Understanding those differences might prove valuable later.

The afternoon brought new insights. As fatigue set in, masks slipped. Tempers flared more readily, alliances became more apparent, weaknesses more pronounced. Soren watched it all from his position against the wall, moving occasionally to avoid drawing attention but always returning to his role as the invisible observer.



"Water?"

The voice startled him from his thoughts. Dane stood before him, offering a ladle from the barrel. The big recruit's face revealed nothing of his intentions.

Soren accepted with a nod, careful to keep his expression neutral. Was this a gesture of friendship? A test? Or merely courtesy extended to a fellow sufferer of Kaelor's attention?

"You've been watching all day," Dane said, his voice low enough that only Soren could hear. "Figured you must be thirsty by now."

The water tasted of iron and dust, but Soren drank deeply before responding. "Resting," he said, the lie coming easily. "Kaelor's special training takes its toll."

Dane's eyes narrowed slightly, not with suspicion but with something closer to assessment. "Must be important, whatever he's teaching you," he said, taking the ladle back. "Important enough for Tavren to be plotting how to break your other hand once the first heals."

The warning, for that's what it was, came without inflection, as if Dane were commenting on the weather. Soren filed this information away with the rest. Tavren's jealousy had teeth, it seemed. Another detail in the emerging map.

"Thanks for the water," Soren said, neither confirming nor denying his awareness of the threat.

Dane shrugged his massive shoulders. "Everyone needs water," he replied, then moved away, returning to his practice partner without a backward glance.

Interesting. Not quite an alliance offered, but a connection made. Soren added this to his mental catalog: Dane, independent, observant, willing to share information but not commit to sides.

The shard warmed against his chest, Valenna's presence stirring with what felt like approval. "Yes," she whispered, her voice clear despite the yard's clamor. "The strongest blade is the one they don't see coming."

As evening approached and shadows lengthened across the yard, Soren gathered his observations like a miser counting coins. He now knew which recruits favored their right leg, Tavren, Marken, the twins from the eastern provinces, which tired quickest, Kale, despite his fierce offense, which fought with anger rather than technique, half a dozen at least, all of them dangerous in different ways..

More importantly, he understood the web of relationships that bound them together or set them apart. Who respected whom. Who resented whom. Who feared whom. The invisible lines of power and influence that defined their small society.

*'Knowledge,' he thought as he finally rose, muscles protesting the movement after hours of stillness. 'More dangerous than any blade.'*

## Chapter 54: Silent Observations (2)

*Chapter 54: Silent Observations (2)*

He made his way back to the barracks as twilight fell, his mind still cataloging, still analyzing. The real work would begin now, in the close quarters where recruits shed the day's pretenses along with their training gear.

Soren wasn't sure if Ayren would be proud or concerned by how quickly he'd taken to this task. Perhaps both. After all, a weapon that learns too well might one day turn in its wielder's hand.

The thought brought a grim smile to his lips as he passed through the barracks door, ready for the night's observations.

The barracks at night revealed secrets the training yard could never expose.

Soren lay on his cot, eyes closed but ears attuned to every whisper, every rustle of movement in the darkness. The thin blanket did little to cushion his battered body against the hard mattress, but discomfort had become such a constant companion that he barely noticed it anymore.

Around him, the night symphony of the barracks played out in predictable movements, snores, murmurs, the occasional creak of wooden frames as bodies shifted in sleep or restlessness. But beneath these obvious sounds ran currents of information for those who knew how to listen.

Three cots to his left, Marken whispered to Jost, their conversation a barely audible stream of complaints about Kaelor's newest drills. The words themselves mattered less than the ease between them, the comfortable back-and-forth of longtime allies.

Near the far wall, Tavren's distinctive laugh cut through the darkness, followed by hushed voices from his circle. Soren caught fragments..."special treatment" and "put him in his place"...enough to confirm Dane's warning from earlier. Tavren was indeed plotting something, though the specifics remained unclear.

The shard pulsed once against Soren's chest, neither warning nor encouragement, simply acknowledgment. Valenna was awake, watching through his eyes, listening through his ears.

*'This is how you survive,' he reminded himself as the night deepened. 'Not with steel alone, but with knowledge.'*

He tracked the patterns of movement in the darkness—who rose to share whispered conversations, who passed contraband food or drink, who maintained careful distance from whom. The physical arrangement of the barracks, he realized, was itself a map of alliances and tensions. Those who trusted each other slept closer together. Those with grievances maintained space between their territories.

As the hours crawled past, Soren added each new observation to his mental catalog. Kale, the solitary fighter, spoke in his sleep, fragments of what sounded like prayers to gods Soren didn't recognize.

The twins from the eastern provinces shared a secret language of hand signals, communicating silently across the room when they thought no one was watching.

Most telling were the nightmares. At least three recruits woke gasping from bad dreams, their momentary vulnerability revealing more about their fears than any daytime interaction could. Tavren, surprisingly, was among them, the confident bully apparently haunted by something that left him trembling in the small hours.

*'Fear,' Soren thought, filing this away. 'Everyone has it, even those who seem fearless.'*

By the time gray light began seeping through the high windows, Soren had constructed a detailed map of the barracks' invisible landscape. Who feared. Who desired. Who hated. Who allied. The web of relationships that defined their small society became clearer with each passing hour.

He rose before the others, slipping out to the washing area while most still slumbered. His reflection in the polished metal mirror revealed a face transformed by exhaustion and purpose, the dark circles beneath his eyes lending him a haunted appearance that matched his internal state.

*"You're learning,"* Valenna's voice whispered through his mind as he splashed cold water on his face. *"Not just to see, but to understand what you see."*

*'Is that what Ayren wants?'* he thought back at her as he dried his face on a rough cloth. *'Understanding?'*

*"Ayren wants weapons,"* she replied, her tone cool and certain. *"Understanding is merely the edge that makes the blade deadly."*

Soren considered this as he made his way to the training yard for another day of observation. The knowledge he'd gathered already felt heavy, a burden of secrets and vulnerabilities that could destroy lives if wielded carelessly. Was that power what Ayren sought? The ability to break men with information rather than steel?

The thought should have disturbed him more than it did.

The pattern continued for days. In the yard, Soren watched how they fought, the strengths they displayed, the weaknesses they tried to hide. In the barracks, he listened to what they said and, more importantly, what they didn't say. In the mess hall, he observed who sat where, who shared food, who maintained careful isolation.

Slowly, inexorably, the complete picture emerged.

Tavren was afraid of his father.

The revelation struck Soren as he watched the arrogant recruit fumble a simple parry, his usual swagger replaced by tight shoulders and darting glances toward the barracks. A letter had arrived that morning, Soren had seen the servant deliver it, had noted how Tavren's face had drained of color as he read the contents before shoving it into his tunic.

*'Fear of disappointing daddy,'* Soren thought, adding this to his mental catalog. The irony wasn't lost on him, the boy who tormented others for their low birth was himself terrified of falling short of noble expectations.

He shifted his position against the wall, wincing as the movement pulled at healing blisters on his palms. Three days of careful observation had yielded a treasure trove of vulnerabilities.

Marken's gambling debts to older recruits. Jost's sister working in one of Nordhav's brothels, a source of shame that made him violent when anyone mentioned family. Kale's obvious illiteracy, hidden behind bluster and avoided reading assignments.

Each weakness was a blade waiting to be drawn. Each fear a lever that could move mountains, if applied correctly.

The shard pulsed against his chest as Dane approached the water barrel, the big recruit moving with his usual unhurried gait. Soren had been watching him closely, trying to penetrate the careful neutrality that seemed to define everything about the man.

## Chapter 55: The Flicker of Will

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The iron weight strapped to Soren's forearm felt like it had been forged from a fallen star, impossibly dense and growing heavier with each passing moment.

His shoulders burned, muscles twisting into knots that would take days to unravel.

Twenty repetitions had become thirty, then fifty, then "until I say stop"...which apparently meant until his body betrayed him or the sun burned out, whichever came first.

"Higher," Kaelor barked, circling like a predator. "Edge level, wrist locked. You drop that blade again and I'll add another plate."



Sweat trickled into Soren's eyes, salt stinging worse than the lash of Kaelor's training sword. He blinked it away, refusing to spare even a hand to wipe his face. The last time he'd made that mistake, Kaelor had cracked his practice blade across Soren's knuckles hard enough to leave them swollen for days.

"Footwork," the swordmaster growled, his single eye narrowed to a slit. "You're dragging your heel like a drunken farmer. Again."

Soren reset his stance, ignoring the trembling in his thighs. Four hours into today's special training, and they'd barely scratched the surface of what Kaelor had planned. The other recruits had finished their drills long ago, casting sideways glances of mingled pity and satisfaction as they retreated to the relative comfort of the barracks.

The training yard shimmered in the afternoon heat, dust hanging in the air like suspended gold. Each breath felt like inhaling fire, the grit coating his throat and lungs. Soren tasted copper, blood from where he'd bitten the inside of his cheek during a particularly vicious correction. He'd learned not to spit it out. Showing weakness only extended the torment.

"First sequence," Kaelor commanded, his voice cutting through the haze of pain and exhaustion. "Full extension. And if your form wavers once more, we start from dawn tomorrow."

The threat wasn't idle. Twice now, Kaelor had dragged him from his cot before sunrise, forcing him through punishing drills while the other recruits slept. The message was clear: failure had consequences beyond mere pain.

Soren drew a ragged breath and began the sequence, thrust, parry, riposte, cut. Movements that had once seemed complex now flowed from muscle memory, his body responding despite the screaming protest of overtaxed tendons. The weighted practice sword cut arcs through the dusty air, each position flowing into the next with hard-won precision.

Kaelor stalked around him, training sword tapping against his leg in a rhythm that matched Soren's heartbeat. Waiting for a mistake. Hungry for it.

"Faster," he ordered as Soren completed the sequence. "A real opponent won't stand politely while you arrange your feet."

Soren bit back the retort that threatened to escape, that no real opponent would fight someone wearing iron plates strapped to every limb. Talking back only earned extra weight and extra hours. He'd learned that lesson on the second day, when a single muttered complaint had resulted in a weighted helm that left his neck aching for days.

He began again, driving his exhausted body through the movements with renewed intensity. Thrust, extending fully despite the weight dragging at his arm. Parry, redirecting an imaginary blow with a twist that sent pain shooting through his wrist. Riposte, a lightning counter that required perfect timing to avoid overbalancing. Cut, the final strike, delivered with whatever strength remained in his trembling muscles.

Again and again he repeated the sequence, each repetition blurring into the next. Time lost meaning. The world contracted to the next movement, the next breath, the next moment of enduring. His lungs burned. His vision narrowed, darkness creeping in at the edges. Still, he continued, driven by something beyond mere stubbornness.

'Don't fall,' he told himself as his knees threatened to buckle. 'Don't you dare fall.'

"Combination sequence," Kaelor barked suddenly, changing the pattern without warning. "Everything. Now."

Soren's mind raced to catch up with the command. The combination sequence blended all the forms they'd practiced over the past week, a punishing series of attacks, defenses, and counters that required perfect recall and execution. Under normal circumstances, it was challenging. With weighted limbs and hours of exhaustion already dragging at him, it seemed impossible.

But impossible had become his daily bread in House Velrane.

He launched into the sequence, forcing his body to obey through sheer will. Sweat poured down his face, stinging his eyes, soaking the thin shirt that clung to his back. His breath came in harsh gasps that tore at his raw throat. The iron weights seemed to double, then triple, defying the laws that governed such things.

Halfway through, his vision began to swim, the yard blurring into smears of gold and brown. His lungs couldn't draw enough air, each breath shallower than the

last. The shard against his chest, which had remained cool and silent throughout the ordeal, suddenly flared warm, a pulse of heat that matched the frantic rhythm of his heart.

*'Don't stop,'* he commanded himself as darkness threatened to swallow him whole. *'Finish it.'*

The final movements of the sequence approached, a complex combination of thrust, turn, parry, and decisive cut that required perfect balance and timing. His body moved by instinct now, conscious thought drowned beneath waves of pain and determination.

As he executed the final cut, something shifted.

For a single heartbeat, the practice sword felt different in his hands, heavier, yes, but also more substantial, as if its presence had somehow expanded beyond the physical constraints of wood and leather. The movement felt cleaner, sharper, his will extending through the blade and beyond it.

The air before him rippled faintly, dust motes dancing in a pattern that couldn't be explained by mere physical movement. A whisper of pressure, like the moment before a storm breaks, pulsed outward from the blade's edge.

Soren's eyes widened, his exhausted mind struggling to process what had just happened. Had he imagined it? Some hallucination born of pushing his body beyond its limits?

But no, the sensation had been real. For that single, perfect moment, he'd touched something beyond mere physical technique. The sword aura Kaelor had demonstrated days ago, he'd grasped it, however fleetingly.

Then it was gone, the moment passing so quickly he might have missed it had he blinked. The practice sword returned to being just wood and leather, heavy in his trembling hands. The air stilled, dust settling back into its random patterns. The shard cooled against his chest, its brief flare of heat fading like a memory.

Soren completed the sequence, his movements mechanical once more, the transcendent moment already slipping away despite his desperate attempt to hold onto the feeling. Empty. He felt suddenly, inexplicably empty, as if something essential had been offered then snatched away.

He looked up, expecting Kaelor to have missed the momentary phenomenon. Instead, he found the swordmaster's single eye fixed on him with an intensity that felt physical, his weathered face unreadable.

Kaelor had seen it. Somehow, he had known exactly what to watch for.

Silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken assessment. Soren waited for acknowledgment, for confirmation that he hadn't imagined the moment of connection. For perhaps the first time since training began, he craved Kaelor's approval, some recognition that the endless punishment had purpose beyond mere torment.

"Again," Kaelor said finally, his voice betraying nothing. "Until it isn't a mistake."

The words hit harder than any physical blow. Not praise. Not even acknowledgment. Just a raising of the bar, a new standard to meet. What had been impossible yesterday was now merely expected, and falling short was no longer an option.

Soren reset his stance, muscles screaming, lungs burning, vision still swimming at the edges. The emptiness inside him crystallized into something harder, more determined. If that brief flicker of aura was possible once, it could be summoned again. He would force it to answer his call, bend it to his will.

The sun began its descent toward the western horizon as Kaelor drove him through the sequence again and again. No matter how perfectly he executed the movements, the momentary connection with something greater remained elusive. Each failure added another layer of frustration, another coal to the fire burning in his chest.

By the time Kaelor finally called a halt, the yard lay in shadow, the first stars appearing in the deepening blue above. Soren could barely stand, his legs threatening to fold with each heartbeat. His arms hung like dead things at his sides, the practice sword a distant memory his fingers could no longer feel.

"Remove the weights," Kaelor ordered a servant who had materialized at the yard's edge. "Same time tomorrow."

With that, he turned and walked away, his uneven gait carrying him into the gathering darkness without a backward glance. No acknowledgment of the breakthrough. No guidance on how to recapture it. Just the expectation that tomorrow would bring more of the same punishing regimen.

The servant worked in silence, unbuckling the iron plates that had become extensions of Soren's limbs. Each removal brought a conflicting sensation, relief as the weight disappeared, agony as blood rushed back into compressed tissue. By the time the last plate came off, Soren felt hollowed out, an empty vessel wrung dry of everything but stubborn determination.

He stood alone in the yard, swaying slightly, the cool evening air raising goosebumps on his sweat-soaked skin. The stars multiplied overhead, indifferent to the small drama that had played out beneath them.

*'I did it,'* he thought, the realization settling into his bones despite Kaelor's dismissal. *'I touched it. Just for a moment, but I touched it.'*

The shard pulsed once against his chest, a flicker of warmth that might have been acknowledgment. Valenna's presence, which had remained distant throughout the day's training, suddenly sharpened in his mind.

*"A spark,"* she whispered, her voice like cool water over stones. *"Not a flame, not yet. But yes, what you felt was real."* Her tone carried an edge of satisfaction he rarely heard. *"The barest echo of true aura, but more than most achieve in years of training."*

*'How do I hold it?' he asked silently, desperate for guidance Kaelor had refused to provide. 'How do I make it stay?'*

*"You don't," she replied, her presence already fading back to its usual distance. "Not yet. First the body breaks, then the will hardens. Only then can the spark become flame."*

Soren dragged himself toward the barracks, each step a negotiation between determination and collapse. His body was half-ruined, muscles torn and rebuilt so many times they no longer remembered their original purpose. But his mind remained fixed on that single, perfect moment, the ripple in the air, the extension of will beyond flesh.

Tomorrow would bring more pain, more punishment, more impossible demands. Kaelor would push him beyond today's limits, forcing him to find new reserves of strength and determination. The other recruits would watch with mingled fear and fascination as he was systematically broken and remade.

But something had changed. That brief connection with something greater had shown him a glimpse of what might be possible. Not just technique, not just physical mastery, but something transcendent, power that extended beyond the constraints of flesh and bone.

He would find it again.



# Chapter 56: On Time (1)

*Chapter 56: On Time (1)*

Soren arrived at Ayren's chamber half an hour before the appointed time, his boots silent on the polished stone.

The corridor stretched empty in both directions, torches casting long shadows that seemed to reach for him with smoky fingers. No servants bustled past, no pages rushed on errands. Just silence and the weight of House Velrane pressing down from above.

Perfect. Early was better than late. Early meant prepared.

He positioned himself beside the unadorned wooden door, back straight despite the protests of muscles still recovering from Kaelor's attentions.

The bruises beneath his tunic had faded from angry purple to sickly yellow-green, but they made their presence known with each breath. He ignored them. Pain had become background noise, hardly worth acknowledging.

The shard rested cool against his chest, Valenna's presence a distant thing, watchful but silent. She'd been quiet since his breakthrough in the yard, as if waiting to see what he would do with the spark he'd found.

Minutes crawled past. Soren remained motionless, conserving energy, practicing the stillness that had kept him alive on Nordhav's streets. His mind reviewed the information he'd gathered over the past days, weaknesses cataloged, alliances mapped, secrets unearthed. Each fact honed to a cutting edge, ready to be presented.

When the door finally opened, he didn't flinch.

Ayren emerged, violet eyes widening fractionally at finding Soren already waiting. The surprise vanished almost before it registered, his face returning to its usual mask of cold assessment.

"Follow," he said simply, turning back into his chamber without waiting for acknowledgment.

Soren obeyed, closing the door behind him with careful precision. The room felt colder than he remembered, the air still and lifeless despite the small fire burning in the grate. Maps and ledgers covered every available surface, the organized chaos of a mind that never truly rested.

Ayren took his place behind the desk, not offering Soren a seat. A test, perhaps, to see how long he could stand comfortably while delivering his report. Soren kept his expression neutral, betraying nothing of the calculations running behind it.

The silence stretched, heavy and expectant. Ayren made no move to break it, his attention seemingly absorbed by a parchment on his desk. His quill scratched across the surface, the sound unnaturally loud in the quiet chamber.

Soren recognized the tactic, the same one he'd used himself when stalking prey in Nordhav's alleys. Make them speak first. Make them fill the emptiness. Make them reveal themselves through impatience.

He waited, matching Ayren's silence with his own. Two could play this game.

Minutes passed, marked only by the soft scratching of the quill and the occasional pop from the fireplace. Soren's legs began to ache from standing motionless, but he refused to shift his weight or show discomfort. His face remained a careful blank, his breathing even and controlled.

Finally, without looking up, Ayren spoke.

"Your report." The words weren't a question but a command, delivered with the casual certainty of one accustomed to being obeyed.

Soren inclined his head slightly, though Ayren wasn't watching to see it. "I've compiled information on all twenty-three recruits, as requested."

He began without preamble, his voice stripped of emotion or emphasis. "Tavren Morwell. Third son of Lord Kaster Morwell, a minor noble with land holdings east of the city. Excellent swordsman, poor archer. Maintains a circle of five loyal followers, mostly younger sons of allied houses. Weaknesses: fear of disappointing his father, who reportedly threatened to disinherit him after a gambling incident last year. Drinks to excess when stressed. Carries a talisman for luck, a small wooden carving his mother gave him before her death."

Soren continued, moving methodically through the list he'd prepared. Each recruit dissected with clinical precision, their strengths noted but their weaknesses emphasized. Family connections, personal habits, private fears, all laid bare in his monotone recitation.

"Marken Thale. No noble blood but considerable wealth, his father owns three shipyards in Nordhav's harbor. Skilled with blade and bow. Maintains careful neutrality in barracks politics, though clearly allied with Jost Danner in private. Gambling debts to at least two older recruits. Weakness: his younger sister's illness, spends most of his stipend on expensive medicines sent from the capital."

On and on he went, the catalog of secrets and vulnerabilities growing with each name. Who envied whom. Who hated whom. Who might be manipulated through ambition, fear, or desire. The information delivered without judgment or embellishment, simply facts, sharp and clean as newly forged steel.

Ayren remained motionless throughout, his quill continuing its steady progress across the parchment. Nothing in his posture or expression suggested whether he found the report satisfactory or lacking. Only when Soren reached the final name did he set the quill aside and look up.

"Adequate," he said, the word falling between them like a stone in still water. "Now tell me how you would use it."

Soren blinked, caught off guard despite his preparations. He'd expected critique of his methods, perhaps, or questions about specific details. Not this immediate pivot to application.

"Use it?" he repeated, buying time to organize his thoughts.

Ayren's mouth curved in a cold smile that never reached his eyes. "Information is nothing. Leverage is everything." He rose from his chair in one fluid motion, moving to a slate board mounted on the wall. "Watch and learn, Thorne. This is where knowledge becomes power."

He picked up a piece of chalk, its white surface stark against his pale fingers. With quick, precise strokes, he began drawing lines between names Soren had mentioned, creating a web of connections that grew more complex with each addition.

"Tavren fears his father," Ayren said, chalk tapping against the slate. "Marken needs money for his sister's medicines. Do you see it? The lever that moves them both."

Soren studied the intersecting lines, understanding dawning like a cold sunrise. "Tavren could provide Marken with funds, his family has wealth to spare. In return, Marken's silence about Tavren's drinking..."

"Good," Ayren nodded, adding another line. "But think deeper. What happens when Marken becomes indebted to Tavren? When his sister's health depends on Tavren's generosity?"

"Marken becomes a tool," Soren replied, the words tasting bitter yet somehow satisfying. "Tavren gains an ally who appears neutral to others—valuable for spreading information or influence."

"And if Marken resists?" Ayren pressed, chalk poised.

Soren hesitated only briefly. "Then his sister suffers."

## Chapter 57: On Time (2)

*Chapter 57: On Time (2)*

Ayren's smile widened fractionally. "Precisely. One connection, properly leveraged, creates ripples throughout the entire structure." He turned back to the slate, adding more lines, more connections. "Now, what of Kale and his hidden illiteracy? How might that serve us?"

For the next hour, Ayren transformed Soren's raw information into a complex tapestry of potential manipulations. Each recruit's weakness became a pressure point, each relationship a potential fulcrum. The chalk lines multiplied until the

slate resembled a spider's web, with House Velrane at its center, unseen but controlling every strand.

Soren watched, absorbing the lessons with growing unease yet undeniable fascination. This was knowledge weaponized, information transformed into power with surgical precision. Nothing wasted. Nothing overlooked. Every fact bent toward advantage.

"Your turn," Ayren said suddenly, offering the chalk. "Two recruits both seek recognition from Kaelor, the coveted position as his personal assistant for the coming tournament. Show me how you would use them against each other."

Soren took the chalk, its weight insignificant yet somehow heavier than Kaelor's training sword. He studied the web of connections, considering the question carefully.

"I would identify which recruit Kaelor actually favors," he began, chalk hovering near the slate. "Then ensure the other learns of it, not directly, but through carefully placed rumors. His jealousy would drive him to discredit his rival."

"Pedestrian," Ayren interrupted, disapproval evident in the single word. "You're thinking too small, too direct. Try again."

Soren paused, the shard warming slightly against his chest as Valenna's presence sharpened. Her voice whispered through his mind, cool and measured.

"Why choose between them when both can serve your purpose?"

He drew a breath, reconsidering. "I would approach each separately," he said, drawing new lines on the slate. "Tell each that Kaelor values loyalty above all else, but that he suspects the other of speaking ill of him behind his back. Suggest that reporting such disloyalty would demonstrate their own worthiness."

Ayren's expression remained neutral, but something flickered in his violet eyes, interest, perhaps.

"Continue," he said, gesturing for Soren to elaborate.

"Each would begin watching the other for any hint of disrespect toward Kaelor," Soren explained, the strategy unfolding in his mind as he spoke. "Each would interpret innocent comments as potential disloyalty. Eventually, one or both would report something to Kaelor, who would recognize the falsehood for what it was."

"And then?" Ayren prompted.

"Both recruits lose Kaelor's trust," Soren concluded. "Opening the position for someone else, someone of our choosing, who appears uninvolved in their petty rivalry."



Ayren's mouth curved in that knife-edge smile again. "Better," he acknowledged. "Though still lacking in certain... refinements."

He took the chalk back, adding several lines to Soren's diagram. "Why stop at discrediting them with Kaelor? Their rivalry could be used to isolate them from their existing alliances. To create divisions among their supporters. To test the loyalties of others in their circles." His chalk moved rapidly, expanding the web. "A single stone, properly cast, can create ripples that transform the entire pond."

Soren absorbed this, seeing how his approach, which had seemed clever moments ago, now appeared limited and unimaginative by comparison. The shard pulsed once against his chest, Valenna's voice whispering again.

"He would make monsters of men, and weapons of monsters."

Ayren set the chalk aside, dusting his fingers with fastidious care. "This is the true battlefield, Thorne. Not the training yard with its straightforward contests of strength and skill, but here, in the shadows between what men know, what they fear, and what they desire." He returned to his desk, resuming his seat with fluid grace. "Kaelor teaches you to kill with steel. I teach you to rule with whispers."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with implication. Soren remained silent, processing the lesson and its darker undertones.

Part of him recoiled from the calculated cruelty of Ayren's methods, the casual way he spoke of exploiting fears and weaknesses.

Yet another part recognized the undeniable effectiveness of such approaches. In a world of predators, these were the skills of the apex hunter.

"The hour grows late," Ayren said finally, returning his attention to the parchment on his desk. "You will continue your observations. Next time, I expect not just information, but strategies for its application. Think beyond the obvious.

Look deeper. Find the connections no one else sees."

"As you command, my lord," Soren replied, inclining his head slightly. The formal words felt strange in his mouth after an hour of dissecting human nature like specimens in a scholar's laboratory.

Ayren waved a dismissive hand without looking up from his parchment. The audience was over.

Soren turned toward the door, his mind already churning through the implications of what he'd learned. Each step felt heavier than the last, as if the weight of other men's secrets pressed down on his shoulders.

The shard against his chest remained cool and silent, offering no judgment on the path he was walking.

The corridor outside Ayren's chamber felt warmer by comparison, though the torches burned no brighter.

Soren paused, pressing his back against the stone wall as he processed the lesson. The chalk dust on his fingers felt like ash, the remnants of innocence burned away in the furnace of necessity.

*'This is what they want me to become,' he thought, staring at the shadows dancing on the opposite wall. 'Not just a swordsman. A manipulator. Someone who sees weakness and exploits it without hesitation.'*

The memory of Ayren's spider web diagram lingered in his mind, each line representing a life that could be twisted to serve House Velrane's purposes. Tavren's fear of his father. Marken's desperate love for his sister. Kale's shame about his illiteracy.

Human weaknesses laid out like ingredients for a recipe. This was power in its most distilled form, and it left a sour taste in Soren's mouth.

The shard against his chest pulsed once, warming slightly. *'And what are your weaknesses, little knife?'* Valenna's voice whispered through his mind. *'What levers would Ayren use against you, if he knew them all?'*

Soren pushed away from the wall, unwilling to examine that question too closely. Better to be the hunter than the hunted. Better to learn these lessons than fall victim to them.

## Chapter 58: The Escort

*Chapter 58: The Escort*

Kaelor's training blade cracked across Soren's knuckles, sending pain racing up his arm like lightning seeking ground.

"Pathetic," the swordmaster growled, already circling for another strike. "If this is your best, perhaps we should send you back to whatever gutter spawned you."

Soren readjusted his grip on the practice sword, ignoring the fresh blood welling from split calluses. He'd almost had it that time, the elusive First Petal form that continued to dance just beyond his reach.

The shard against his chest remained cool and silent, Valenna offering neither encouragement nor criticism.

"Again," Kaelor barked, raising his training sword for another punishing lesson.

Before the blow could fall, a figure appeared at the edge of the yard, one of the house stewards, his silver-trimmed uniform immaculate despite the dust that seemed to coat everything else in Velrane's domain.

The man's thin face betrayed nothing as he approached, though his eyes lingered briefly on Soren's bloodied hands.

"Master Thorne," the steward said, his voice as pressed and proper as his clothing. "Lord Veyr requires your immediate presence in the east wing. You are to attend him without delay."

Kaelor's single eye narrowed, but he lowered his weapon. "It seems you've earned a reprieve, boy." The swordmaster's mouth twisted into what might have been a smile on a less scarred face. "Don't mistake it for mercy."

Soren nodded once, returning his practice sword to the rack with hands that trembled from exhaustion rather than fear. What did Veyr want now? Another lesson in courtly manners? More questions about his observations of the other recruits? Or perhaps punishment for some transgression he wasn't yet aware of committing.

'*Whatever it is,*' he thought grimly as he followed the steward through the corridors of House Velrane, '*it can't be worse than another hour with Kaelor.*'

The shard pulsed once against his chest, neither agreement nor contradiction, simply acknowledgment that Valenna was listening to his thoughts.

The steward led him deeper into the east wing than he'd ventured before, past chambers whose purposes he could only guess at. Unlike the austere corridors of Ayren's domain, this section featured rich tapestries depicting hunting scenes and ancient battles.

Beneath Soren's boots, thick carpets muffled his footsteps, a luxury that still felt foreign after years of Nordhav's cobblestones and mud.

They stopped before a polished oak door carved with Velrane's house crest. The steward knocked once, sharp and precise, then stepped aside.

"Enter," Veyr's voice called from within, the single word carrying a note of impatience that made Soren's shoulders tense.

The chamber beyond was larger than he'd expected, dominated by a massive desk strewn with maps and documents. Unlike Ayren's meticulous organization, Veyr's space suggested controlled chaos, the workshop of a mind that moved in multiple directions simultaneously.

A fire crackled in the hearth despite the mild weather, casting dancing shadows across walls lined with bookshelves and mounted weapons.

Veyr himself stood by a window, his back to the door as he gazed out at the estate grounds. The setting sun painted his silhouette in amber and gold, lending him a momentary aura of importance that even his slight frame couldn't diminish.

Soren's steps faltered as he realized Veyr wasn't dressed in his usual finery. Instead, he wore what appeared to be traveling clothes, sturdy boots, dark breeches, and a fitted jacket of deep green that bore only subtle markers of his rank. A cloak hung from his shoulders, clasped with a silver pin that caught the firelight.

"Close the door," Veyr said without turning.

Soren obeyed, his mind racing. Was this some new test? Another of the endless evaluations that seemed to define his existence in House Velrane?

"You'll accompany me to the capital," Veyr announced, finally turning to face him. His expression revealed nothing, no explanation, no room for question or refusal. "We leave within the hour."

Soren blinked, caught off guard by the abrupt command. "The capital?" he repeated, as if the words themselves might make more sense spoken aloud.

Veyr's mouth curved in a slight smile, though his eyes remained cool and assessing. "Yes, Thorne. The capital. Surely you've heard of it? Large city, many buildings, seat of power and all that."

The mocking tone was familiar territory, but the command beneath it left Soren struggling to find his footing. "May I ask why, my lord?"

"You may ask," Veyr replied, moving to his desk where he began gathering papers into a leather satchel. "Though I'm not obligated to answer." He glanced up, that faint smile still playing at the corners of his mouth. "I have business with a priest. Business that requires discretion rather than force. Your presence serves my purposes."

'Which purposes?' Soren wanted to ask, but swallowed the question. The shard against his chest warmed slightly, Valenna's presence sharpening with interest.

"Why you?" she whispered through his mind, the words like cool water over stones. *"A noble traveling to the capital would normally bring guards. Knights. Not a half-trained recruit with bloodied hands."*

The observation crystallized Soren's own suspicions. This wasn't merely an errand, it was another evaluation. Another opportunity for Veyr to measure his usefulness beyond the training yard. Or perhaps a test of loyalty, to see how he functioned away from the watchful eyes of Kaelor and Ayren.



"There are preparations," Veyr continued, closing his satchel with a sharp snap. "Berrick will show you to the stables. You'll find appropriate gear has been arranged."

As if summoned by his name, the steward reappeared at the door. His expression remained impassive, but something in his eyes suggested he found this assignment as unusual as Soren did.

"This way, Master Thorne," he said with a small bow. "Everything has been prepared according to Lord Veyr's instructions."

Soren followed, his mind still processing the abrupt change in circumstances. The corridor seemed longer on the return journey, each step carrying him toward an uncertainty that felt more dangerous than Kaelor's predictable violence.

The stables smelled of hay and horsehair, the familiar scents a strange comfort after the rarified air of Velrane's chambers. Lanterns hung from roof beams, casting warm light over the stalls where horses shifted and snorted in the gathering evening.

A young stablehand approached, leading two horses already saddled and equipped for travel. Soren's eyes narrowed as he assessed the mount apparently intended for him, smaller than Veyr's sleek chestnut, with a gleam in its dark eyes that suggested spirit rather than docility. Another test, perhaps. To see how he handled a challenging mount after weeks of exhausting training.

"Your gear," Berrick said, gesturing to a pile arranged neatly on a nearby bench.

Soren approached cautiously, as if the items might somehow be trapped. The clothing was finer than anything he'd worn before, a traveling cloak of dark wool, lined gloves, sturdy boots that looked suspiciously close to his size.

Beneath these lay something that made his breath catch, a short blade in a simple leather sheath. Not a practice sword, but actual steel. Utilitarian rather than decorative, clearly meant for practical use rather than ceremony.

"I'm permitted to carry this?" he asked, unable to keep the surprise from his voice.

Berrick's expression didn't change, but something flickered in his eyes, amusement, perhaps, or pity. "Lord Veyr's instructions were quite specific. You are to be equipped as befits an escort, not a prisoner."

The distinction felt important somehow, though Soren couldn't articulate exactly why. He changed quickly, the new clothes settling against his skin with unfamiliar weight and texture. The blade he strapped to his hip with hands that remembered the motion despite never having performed it in Velrane's service before.

By the time Veyr appeared in the stable yard, Soren stood ready beside his mount, trying to project a confidence he didn't entirely feel. The smaller horse snorted and shifted beneath his hand, confirming his suspicion that this pairing had been deliberate.

Veyr approached his own mount with the casual ease of someone who'd been riding since before he could walk. He swung into the saddle in a single fluid motion, adjusting his cloak with practiced efficiency.

"Try not to fall off before we reach the city gates," he said, that faint smile returning. "It would reflect poorly on us both."

Soren bit back a retort, focusing instead on mounting his own horse without embarrassing himself.

The animal sensed his tension immediately, sidestepping and tossing its head as if testing his resolve. He tightened his grip on the reins, silently thanking whatever gods might be listening for the riding lessons he'd received as part of his training.

Torches flared along the estate's perimeter as they rode through the main gates, the sunset giving way to true dusk. Behind them, House Velrane's stone edifice loomed against the darkening sky, windows glowing like watchful eyes. Ahead, the road stretched into shadow, leading toward a capital Soren had heard of but never seen.

The shard pulsed against his chest as they left the estate's boundaries, Valenna's voice whispering through his thoughts once more.

*"Be wary, little knife. When nobles travel light, they expect blood to flow."*

Soren adjusted his grip on the reins, the unfamiliar weight of the blade at his hip both reassuring and unsettling. Whatever game Veyr was playing, the rules remained opaque. All he could do was watch, learn, and try to avoid becoming a sacrifice on the board.

They rode in silence for nearly an hour, the steady rhythm of hoofbeats the only sound besides the occasional night bird or rustling leaves.

The road wound through farmland and scattered copses, the full moon providing enough light to navigate without torches. Soren's mount had settled somewhat, though it still occasionally tossed its head or sidestepped as if reminding him that their partnership remained tentative at best.

"Tell me about Tavren," Veyr said suddenly, his voice cutting through the quiet night. "His weaknesses. His allies. What you've observed."

The question came without preamble, sharp as a blade thrust. Soren gathered his thoughts quickly, recognizing the test for what it was.

"Tavren Morwell. Third son of a minor noble house. Skilled swordsman but prone to overconfidence. Maintains a circle of five followers, mostly younger sons of allied families. His greatest weakness is his fear of disappointing his father, who threatened disinheritance after a gambling incident last year."

Veyr made a noncommittal sound, neither approval nor criticism. "And how would you manipulate him, if necessary?"

Soren hesitated, Ayren's lessons warring with his own instincts. "I would approach through his pride," he said finally. "Offer recognition his father withholds, creating a debt of gratitude. Or..." he paused, choosing his words carefully, "threaten to expose his gambling to his father if more direct leverage was required."

"Crude but effective," Veyr assessed, his tone suggesting he'd expected nothing more.

## Chapter 59: The Road

*Chapter 59: The Road*

The boundary marker between Velrane lands and the wilderness beyond wasn't much to look at, just a weathered stone post carved with the family crest, half-hidden by encroaching weeds. Yet as their party rode past it, Soren felt a shift in the air as tangible as stepping from sunlight into shadow.

He adjusted his seat in the saddle, wincing as his mount tossed its head in response. The horse, a dappled gray the stablemaster had called "manageable", had proven to be anything but during their first day's journey.

Now, as they left the relative safety of Velrane territory, the animal seemed to sense the change as well, its ears flicking nervously at every rustle from the surrounding woods.

Ahead of him, the four knights who had joined their party at dawn rode in perfect formation, two before Veyr and two behind.

Their blue-and-silver surcoats bore House Velrane's crest, but unlike the ceremonial guards at the estate, these men wore their armor with the ease of those accustomed to using it. Chainmail clinked softly beneath sturdy breastplates, and their helmets remained strapped to saddlebags, ready to be donned at a moment's notice.

Soren studied their movements, noting how their gazes constantly swept the tree line, how their hands never strayed far from sword hilts. These weren't mere escorts, they were predators, alert to the faintest scent of threat.

"Keep your mount in line, boy," the knight to his left said, voice clipped with barely concealed disdain. "We ride in formation for a reason."

Soren swallowed the immediate retort that rose to his lips. The knight, Ser Dallen, he recalled from the terse introductions that morning, had been watching him since they'd departed. Testing him.

"Yes, ser," he replied instead, nudging his horse back into position. The blade at his hip felt heavier suddenly, a reminder of how little he belonged among these men.

*'Watch them,' Valenna's voice whispered through his mind, cool as mountain water. 'Note how Dallen's shield arm hangs lower than his sword arm, old injury, poorly healed. The one with the beard keeps turning his head fully right, blind spot on his left side. Weaknesses, even here.'*

Soren kept his expression neutral as he absorbed her observations. The shard against his chest remained cool, but her presence felt sharper somehow, more focused now that they'd left Velrane lands behind.

The road narrowed as they continued, tall pines pressing close on either side. Shadows dappled the packed earth, and the air carried the sharp scent of resin and something less pleasant, decay, perhaps, or stagnant water from unseen bogs.

Soren found himself matching the knights' vigilance, scanning the dense undergrowth for movement.

"First time beyond the border, boy?" The question came from the bearded knight, Ser Torven, if he remembered correctly. The man's tone wasn't friendly, but it lacked Dallen's open hostility.

"Yes," Soren answered simply, seeing no advantage in elaboration.

Torven exchanged glances with the knight beside him, something unspoken passing between them. "Strange company Lord Veyr keeps these days," he muttered, just loud enough for Soren to hear. "Time was, a noble traveled with proper guards, not half-trained gutter trash."

The words were meant to sting, to provoke a reaction. Soren kept his eyes forward, his hands steady on the reins. He'd endured worse in Nordhav's streets. Much worse under Kaelor's tutelage.

*'He tests your control,' Valenna murmured. 'Curious, that. They fear what they don't understand, little knife. And you are very much a mystery to them.'*

Ahead, Veyr rode in silence, seemingly oblivious to the undercurrents flowing through their small company. His attention remained fixed on the road ahead, occasionally consulting a small map he kept tucked in his sleeve. Whatever business called him to the capital, it occupied his thoughts completely.

They rode until dusk painted the western sky in shades of flame. The knights selected their campsite with the same precision they'd shown all day, a small clearing with good visibility, a stream nearby, and only one obvious approach. They dismounted in unison, each moving to assigned tasks with practiced efficiency.

Soren slid from his saddle, legs stiff from the long day's ride. Before he could reach for his horse's bridle, Dallen stepped into his path.



"See to Lord Veyr's mount first," he ordered, eyes cold beneath his helm. "Then gather firewood. The horses can wait."

Another test. Soren inclined his head slightly, moving to where Veyr was already dismounting. The young lord handed over his reins without comment, though something in his eyes suggested he'd noted the exchange.

By the time Soren returned from gathering firewood, the camp had taken shape. The knights had established a perimeter, their bedrolls arranged to provide coverage from all angles. Veyr's tent, small but clearly of finer make than anything the others carried, stood at the center of the clearing.

Soren dropped his armload of branches near the fire pit one of the knights had dug. His own bedroll remained strapped to his saddle, his place in this arrangement unclear. As if sensing his uncertainty, Dallen pointed to a spot near the edge of the clearing.

"You'll take first watch," he said, the order carrying an edge that dared Soren to object.

The fire crackled to life as darkness settled fully around them. The knights ate quickly, passing a skin of wine between them, their earlier vigilance easing somewhat within the circle of firelight. Veyr sat apart, a small oil lamp illuminating the book he'd produced from his saddlebag. He hadn't spoken more than a few words since they'd made camp, his focus elsewhere.

Soren chewed the hard bread and dried meat he'd been given, listening to the knights' low conversation. They spoke of familiar things, past campaigns, women in villages they'd passed through, the merits of various sword techniques. Ordinary talk that nonetheless excluded him by its very nature.

"So, boy," Torven said suddenly, his voice carrying across the fire. "What exactly does Lord Veyr see in you that warrants this special treatment? You're no squire, that's plain enough. No noble blood, either, from the look of you."

The other knights fell silent, watching with undisguised interest. Even Veyr glanced up from his book, though his expression revealed nothing.

Soren took another bite of bread, buying time to consider his response. The shard pulsed once against his chest, neither warm nor cold, simply present.

"I'm useful," he said finally, the words deliberate and unadorned. "Lord Veyr doesn't waste resources."

Dallen snorted. "Useful? With a blade? I've seen the way you sit a horse. Whatever use you serve, it isn't as a fighter."

The implication hung in the air, crude and meant to provoke. Soren felt heat rise in his throat, anger flaring bright and hot. The shard cooled sharply against his skin, Valenna's presence a sudden warning in his mind.

*'Careful,' she cautioned. 'Anger reveals. Remember Ayren's lessons.'*

The memory of Ayren's cold chamber surfaced, the slate board with its web of connections, the lessons in leverage and control. Information was power. Reaction was weakness.

Soren met Dallen's gaze across the fire, his own expression carefully blank. "Perhaps you should ask Lord Veyr about my usefulness," he suggested mildly. "I'm sure he values your concern for his choices."

Dallen's face darkened, but before he could respond, Veyr closed his book with a sharp snap.

"Enough," he said, his voice carrying that peculiar tone of bored command that only nobility seemed able to perfect. "Dallen, check the horses again. Torven, I want a wider perimeter before full dark."

The knights moved to obey without hesitation, though Dallen cast one final glare in Soren's direction. Veyr returned to his reading without acknowledging either of them further.

The night passed slowly for Soren, his watch stretching into what felt like endless hours of darkness and unfamiliar forest sounds.

The shard remained cool against his chest, Valenna's presence withdrawn to that distant place she sometimes retreated to when observing rather than guiding.

When he finally woke Torven for the second watch, the bearded knight merely grunted in acknowledgment, his earlier antagonism subsumed beneath the practical necessities of the road. Soren rolled into his blankets, sleep claiming him almost immediately despite the hard ground and lingering tension.

Dawn came too soon, gray light filtering through the trees as the camp stirred to life. The knights resumed their disciplined routine, breaking camp with the same efficiency they'd shown in establishing it. Veyr emerged from his tent looking as if he'd slept in a proper bed rather than on forest floor, his clothes somehow unmarked by travel dust.

They rode out as the sun cleared the eastern horizon, falling into the same formation as the previous day. The road narrowed further as it wound deeper into the wilderness, tall trees giving way to gnarled, twisted shapes that seemed to lean inward, reaching with branch-fingers toward unwary travelers.

By midday, the landscape had changed completely. Gone were the managed forests and occasional meadows of Velrane territory. This was older land, untamed and seemingly untouched by human hands for generations. The path they followed showed signs of disuse, weeds sprouting between wheel ruts, branches hanging low enough to catch at cloaks and hair.

They passed an abandoned village shortly after noon, its handful of cottages slowly being reclaimed by the surrounding forest. Roofs had collapsed, walls leaned at dangerous angles, and weeds grew waist-high in what might once have been gardens or animal pens.

"What happened here?" Soren asked before he could stop himself, the desolation striking a chord that resonated with something deep within him.

Veyr glanced back, his expression unreadable. "The war," he said simply, as if that explained everything. Perhaps it did.

The knights exchanged looks but said nothing. Their earlier banter had faded entirely, replaced by a tense alertness that set Soren's own nerves on edge. Hands rested more openly on sword hilts now, and their eyes never stopped moving, scanning the encroaching wilderness for threats unseen.

A mile beyond the abandoned village, they passed a shrine so ancient that Soren couldn't identify which god it had once honored. Stone pillars leaned drunkenly around a central altar, which had been split down the middle as if struck by lightning. Dark stains marred the weathered surface, old blood, perhaps, or simply the marks of time and neglect.

Carrion birds circled overhead, their lazy spirals tracing patterns against the pale sky. Their cries echoed strangely in the still air, too loud in the surrounding silence.

The shard against Soren's chest warmed suddenly, pulsing with an urgency he hadn't felt since those first days after finding it. Something about this place called to it, to her. Valenna's presence sharpened in his mind, no longer the cool observer but something more alert, more wary.

*'Old power here,'* she whispered, her voice carrying an edge he rarely heard.

## Chapter 60: The Shrine's Shadow

*Chapter 60: The Shrine's Shadow*

The shard in Soren's chest pulled like a hook buried deep in flesh.

"Stop," he called out, his voice sounding strange even to his own ears. "There's something about this place."

The knights halted their horses, exchanging glances that spoke volumes without words. Veyr turned in his saddle, fixing Soren with a calculating stare.

"Something?" he prompted, his tone neutral but his eyes sharp.

Soren struggled to articulate what he felt. The shard against his skin had grown hot, its pulse quickening like a second heartbeat. "The shrine. It's... important."

Ser Dallen scoffed, but Veyr raised a hand, silencing him before he could speak. With a fluid motion, the young lord dismounted, his boots landing softly on the overgrown path.

"Investigate," he commanded the knights. "Thoroughly."

The men dismounted with practiced efficiency, hands moving to sword hilts as they approached the ancient shrine. They moved like wolves circling uncertain prey, their eyes scanning for traps or hidden dangers. Ser Torven knelt beside one of the leaning pillars, running a gloved finger over strange markings half-hidden by lichen.

"Old," he muttered. "Older than the war, my lord. Maybe older than the village."

Soren slid from his saddle, legs unsteady beneath him. The shard's pull was physical now, dragging him toward the cracked altar at the center of the stone circle. Each step felt both inevitable and dangerous, like walking toward the edge of a cliff in darkness.

'Careful,'

Valenna's voice whispered in his mind, but it sounded different, distracted, almost fearful. *'This place remembers things. This stone has drunk deep.'*

"Drunk what?" Soren murmured, too quietly for the others to hear.

No answer came, but the shard pulsed harder, sending waves of heat through his chest. The altar drew closer with each step, its cracked surface bearing dark stains that time had failed to erase. Carrion birds circled lower overhead, their shadows flickering across the ancient stones like omens.

"Stay back from there," Ser Dallen called, his voice sharp with command. "We haven't secured—"

Too late. Soren's hand reached out, seemingly of its own accord, and pressed against the cold stone of the altar.

The world shattered.

He was still standing in the shrine, but not alone. Warriors in armor he didn't recognize circled the altar, their faces grim beneath helms that gleamed with an



inner light. Their weapons, long, curved blades unlike anything in Kaelor's armory, flashed in torchlight though the sun still shone in the sky above.

Two figures stepped forward from the circle, removing their helms. One wore azure armor that seemed to shift and flow like water. The other was clad in gold, the metal catching the impossible torchlight and throwing it back a hundredfold. They faced each other across the altar, their expressions solemn.

Words were spoken in a language Soren couldn't understand, yet somehow knew was ancient even when this memory was made. The warriors in the circle responded in kind, a chant that seemed to make the very air vibrate with power.

Then, without warning, the golden knight lunged across the altar, blade flashing. The warrior in azure parried, but too slowly. Blood splashed across the stone, bright crimson against gray. More blood followed as the duel intensified, both combatants moving with inhuman speed and grace.

A mistake. The azure knight faltered, left flank exposed for just a heartbeat. The golden blade found its mark, sliding between armor plates with terrible precision. The azure knight fell to one knee, blood pouring from the wound to pool on the altar stone.

Lips moved, final words gasped out as life faded. Though Soren couldn't understand the language, the meaning burned into his mind with perfect clarity:

"You broke the oath."

The golden knight stepped back, blade dripping red. Something like regret crossed the face beneath the helm, quickly replaced by resolve. A hand reached up, removing a shard of gleaming metal from the hilt of the golden sword. It flashed once in the torchlight, then descended toward the dying knight's chest.

"Soren!"

The vision shattered. Soren blinked, finding himself still standing at the altar, hand pressed against cold stone. Veyr stood beside him, eyes narrowed with concern or calculation, impossible to tell which.

"What did you see?" the young lord demanded, his voice low and urgent.

Before Soren could answer, the air filled with the panicked beating of wings. The carrion birds that had circled so lazily overhead suddenly scattered, their harsh cries cutting through the silence. In the same instant, the forest around them went deathly quiet, no insects buzzing, no leaves rustling, as if every living thing had collectively held its breath.

"My lord!" Ser Torven called, his hand moving to his sword. "Something approaches."

The knights abandoned their investigation of the shrine, forming a protective circle around Veyr with practiced precision. Ser Dallen grabbed Soren's arm, yanking him roughly back toward the horses.

"Fall in, boy," he hissed. "And keep your hand off that cursed stone."

Soren stumbled into position, the vision still burning behind his eyes. The shard against his chest pulsed frantically, neither hot nor cold now but somehow both at once. Valenna's presence pressed against his consciousness, urgent but wordless.

At the edge of the clearing, shadows moved between the trees. Not animal shapes, something taller, more deliberate in its movements. Figures that seemed to shift and fade when looked at directly, visible only from the corner of the eye.

"Hold formation," Ser Dallen commanded, his voice steady despite the tension evident in his stance. "Protect Lord Veyr at all costs."

The knights drew their swords in unison, the sound of steel clearing leather unnaturally loud in the silence. Soren's hand moved to his own blade, the unfamiliar weight suddenly comforting against his palm.

"They're watching us," Veyr murmured, his eyes fixed on the treeline. "Assessing."

The presence, for Soren could think of no better word, pressed against them like a physical weight. The air felt thicker, harder to breathe, as if they stood at the bottom of a deep lake rather than in an open clearing. The figures at the edge of the trees neither advanced nor retreated, maintaining their maddening almost-visibility.

Ser Torven muttered something that might have been a prayer. Beside him, another knight, Ser Caldre, the oldest of their group, shifted his stance, blade angled to catch the fading light.

"We should leave this place, my lord," Caldre said, his voice low but carrying. "There's no honor in dying for a ruined shrine."

Veyr made no response, his attention fixed on the treeline. Soren followed his gaze, trying to focus on the shifting figures, but they seemed to slide away from direct observation, like trying to look at stars that vanished when stared at directly.

The shard against his chest gave one final, sharp pulse, so intense it nearly drove him to his knees...then abruptly quieted. The pressure in the air eased slightly, though the unnatural silence remained.

"They're withdrawing," Veyr said suddenly, certainty in his voice though Soren could see no change in the indistinct shapes.

As if in answer, a breeze stirred the leaves overhead. A bird called in the distance, then another closer by. The weight that had pressed against them lifted, leaving only the ordinary tension of men who had faced something they didn't understand.

"Mount up," Ser Dallen ordered, his voice rougher than before. "We ride until full dark."

The knights obeyed, though their eyes never left the treeline as they backed toward their horses. Soren moved to his mount, legs unsteady beneath him. The shard had gone completely silent, neither hot nor cold against his skin, as if exhausted by whatever had just transpired.

As they rode away from the shrine, the knights maintained a tense silence broken only by occasional murmurs between them. Soren caught fragments..."old battleground" and "ambush site" and "cursed place"...but no mention of the vision he'd experienced at the altar. None of them had seen what he had seen. None of them knew what the shard had shown him.

The road wound deeper into the wilderness, shadows lengthening as afternoon gave way to evening. Soren's mind raced, trying to make sense of the vision. The azure knight, the golden betrayer, the broken oath, what did it mean? And why had the shard shown it to him now, in this place?

'Valenna?' he thought, reaching for her presence in his mind. But she remained distant, withdrawn into whatever place she retreated to when not speaking directly to him.

They had ridden perhaps a mile from the shrine when Veyr suddenly reined his horse alongside Soren's. The young lord's face revealed nothing of his thoughts, his expression as carefully composed as ever.

"Next time," he said quietly, his voice pitched for Soren's ears alone, "tell me before you feel something."

The words weren't angry, that would have been easier to bear. Instead, they carried the cool authority of command, as if Soren had just confirmed something Veyr had long suspected.

"Yes, my lord," Soren replied, unsure what else to say.

Veyr studied him a moment longer, those calculating eyes taking his measure. Then, with a slight nod, he urged his mount forward, returning to his position at the head of their small column.

The road before them grew darker as twilight settled over the land. Soren rode in silence, the weight of the vision heavy in his mind, the shard cool and quiet against his skin. Whatever had happened at the shrine, whatever they had narrowly avoided, had left them all unsettled.

But more unsettling still was the realization that dawned on Soren as they rode deeper into the gathering darkness: Veyr hadn't seemed surprised. Not by the shrine, not by the presence in the trees, not by Soren's reaction to it all.

As if, perhaps, this detour had been planned all along.