

# **Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 6: The Oath Beneath Cold Stone - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 6: The Oath Beneath Cold Stone**

## *Chapter 6: The Oath Beneath Cold Stone*

Blood dried in Soren's nose overnight. He woke to the stink of it, stale penny, edged with something thinner, less alive, before he managed to peel open his eyes.

The air hung heavy, a stew of old sweat and newer fear, thicker than the frost limning every bunk rafter in the barracks.

For a while he stared straight ahead, watching the pink salt of sunrise creep across the blackened stone, and measured the ache in his ribs. Just to check they were all still there. He tried a slow breath.

Pain hummed all the way down, then petered out into the numb, familiar throb he'd worn like a shirt since childhood.

By the time he sat up, the room was already noise. Tavren and another boy, Glen, was it? or Glesk? had picked up the argument from last night, their voices curling together like barbed wire:

"You gave him too much thumb, you idiot. That's why he hooked your wrist—"

"Didn't see you outlasting the farmboy, did I?"

"At least I didn't eat dust on the first move—"

Soren ignored them, instead running a hand over the splintered edge of the wooden cot. His fingers found the notch he'd left when he'd pried the board up, then traced it, slow, as if mapping out escape.

No one had noticed him drag himself in late, or if they had, none bothered to care. He liked it that way.

Dawn meant only one thing: more drills, more bruises, less mercy than the day before. A mottle of crows had already gathered on the eaves outside, arguing over the night's casualties.

Soren counted six. A good omen, in some districts. Here, it just meant the rats would have leftovers.

He dressed methodically, layer by layer, flexing his hands until the memory in his knuckles threatened to resurface. That moment from yesterday, the pivot, the perfect

arc of the wooden sword, the way his body had moved with a fluency that didn't belong to him, still chewed at the back of his mind.

It hadn't happened again, not during the afternoon sparring, not even when the farmhand blue eyed, blank faced, twice Soren's weight had gotten him down and landed three good strikes to the ribs.

He'd waited for the same guiding flash. Nothing. Only the dull, static hum of his own guesswork, slower than the pain.

Outside, the training yard waited. The sand, still crusted from last night's freeze, broke apart in hard clumps beneath their boots.

The instructor, whose name, Soren suspected, had been intentionally omitted from the ledger, loomed at the center like some fossil pulled from an earlier war.

Today, he'd traded the tattered blue tunic for something heavier: a battered coat with a collar that could have served as a noose in a pinch.

The wooden rod glistened with a faint lacquer; yesterday's blood, maybe, or just spit-polished for emphasis.

They lined up. Roll call proceeded in staccato, the list of names thinning further than made sense for so few hours gone.

No one remarked on it. Soren glanced down the row. Rhain, the noble, clutched his practice blade to his chest as if it could reverse the consensus that he was better off in a library. Tavren balanced on his heels, grandstanding misery with every exaggerated limp.

Most of the others wore the same mask of fatigue: red-rimmed eyes, lips split and picked raw, whatever hope or ego they'd arrived with now replaced by the universal language of not-dying.

The instructor barked: "Pairs. Arena drills. No scoring. Win by decision or yield. Move."

Tavren wasted no time. He levered his way to Soren's side, shoulder-checking a smaller boy, and the kid actually squeaked before settling in, all bravado and scar tissue.

"Hope you got some rest, gutter," Tavren said, quick and low. "Would hate to embarrass you in front of nobility."

Soren grunted, more air than wit. He waited for the signal.

When it came, just the instructor's rod cracked twice on his palm, they squared off. Tavren adopted a brawler's crouch, left knee bent deep, right foot planted for a charge. Soren tried to recall the stance that had saved him yesterday.

Feet apart, weight forward, elbows close in. But the trick of it, the grace that had somehow been his for a flicker, wouldn't return. His limbs felt too long, his torso vacuumed of balance. He braced for impact.

Tavren led with volume. The charge was over-telegraphed, but it worked, first because of surprise, next because of sheer weight.

Soren's blade deflected the first two swings, but the third bowled through his guard and landed square on the bruise Soren had nursed awake. The crack was wet and personal. He dropped to one knee, vision stuttering.

"Up," Tavren said. Not mocking. Just matter-of-fact, like a teacher who neither liked nor disliked the student, only the number of lessons left before failure became permanent.

He got up. Second round, much the same, except this time Tavren pushed the tempo, never allowing Soren to settle or even think.

A blade to the ear; another clipped his collarbone, opening a bright, sticky line of blood that felt colder than the rest of him.

Soren retaliated with a desperate jab, missed, and slipped on the crusted sand. This drew a quick laugh from Rhain, who watched every exchange with wide, beggar's eyes, as if memorizing the recipe for pain.

The instructor circled the pairs, pausing now and then to prod or correct. He never lingered on Soren's group; maybe Tavren's violence fulfilled the lesson, or maybe Soren's struggle was too bland to entertain.

"Reset," called the instructor. "New pairs."

Tavren moved off, but not before giving Soren a look that was equal parts pity and hunger, as if torn between wanting a worthy rival and enjoying the taste of an easy kill.

Next opponent was the farmhand, a monster of a kid, all forearm and forehead, his hair bleached out to a colorless straw. Soren didn't bother waiting for the signal: he just tried to keep his feet moving, hoping for that flicker of borrowed instinct.

It didn't come.

The farmhand advanced in a slow, unhedged line, hammering down with the practice blade like he was splitting logs. Soren shimmied left, absorbed a glancing blow on his arm, dodged another.

He fumbled once, caught the ground with his off hand, and heard the instructor shout "Guard up!" as if he hadn't already embarrassed himself enough.

On the next pass, the farmhand feinted, then reverse-swung, knocking Soren's blade free. The pain followed a moment later, white-bright, sharp as mortar slag, a direct hit to the floating rib.

He went down. Not because he chose to, but because there was nothing in his body left to keep him vertical. He heard the cough of Tavren's laughter, low and mean, the small eruption of pride from the farmhand, and above it all the clinical, unconcerned grunt of the instructor.

"Next," said the instructor. "Leave the kid a minute."

Soren lay there, face pressed to the dirt, and felt the world shrink until all that remained was the ache, the hum of blood inside his head, and the dull, rudderless panic that he'd been abandoned by the skill that had once, briefly, saved him.

He got up slowly. Rhain came over, offered an awkward hand, then let it hover and drop.

"You all right?" Rhain asked.

Soren didn't answer, only gritted his teeth and waited for the pain to evolve into something he could use.

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Lunch was a broth so thin it barely fogged the bowl, but Soren lapped it anyway, using each swig to gauge the injury. Not broken, probably. Just pulped.

He tried to imagine what the old crows at the char-pit would say, if they could see him now: outclassed by a bumpkin, bleeding onto House Ashgard's training sand.

Rhain sipped his own soup, then nudged closer on the bench. "You're... not as good as you look," he observed, not brightly but not cruelly either.

Soren half-smiled, then let it fall.

"There are tricks to this," Rhain said. "Stamps and lunges. The farm boys burn themselves out early, I read about it once—"

Soren wondered if all nobles mistook reading for surviving.

Rhain seemed to sense the thought, because his next words came out bashful: "I should have said yesterday. You moved like someone who already knew how. For a moment, anyway."

Soren picked at his bread, silent.

The day's second set of drills was easier, or else Soren had numbed entirely. The instructor changed tactics and split them into teams.

The goal, as explained with only the barest hint of sadism, was to form a shield wall and hold against the opposing charge.

Tavren called dibs on the front line, naturally, and the farmhand squared up next to him. Soren was boxed into the rear, where the only job was to keep upright and try not to get trampled.

"Hold," the instructor barked. "Break on three."

On the signal, everyone exploded forward. Tavren's team overpowered the other side, driving them into the fence.

Soren watched as a clutch of boys tried to peel one of the noble's sons off the pile, only for Tavren to backhand him so hard the boy spun and landed flat in the gutter.

For a moment Soren considered doing nothing, just letting the scrum roll him under. But another part of him, older, meaner, stitched together by years of alley fights and orphan pecking orders, refused to let Tavren get the last word.

He pivoted from the back, ducked low, and swept Tavren's legs out from under him.

Tavren landed, hard, and the wind whooshed from his chest in a way that was immensely satisfying.

Rhain, catching on, slammed the noble's practice sword down across Tavren's back, pinning him to the sand.

A whistle cut through the noise. The instructor waded in, pulled Rhain up by the scruff, then stared at Soren with an expression unreadable as ink.

"Good," the instructor said. "You learn."

He moved on. Soren risked a glance at Rhain, who smiled, a real one this time, though small and careful, as if afraid to waste the entire day's ration of hope.

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Evening bell chased them back to the barracks. Tavren sulked, trailing blood from his elbow. The farmhand massaged a fat-shining welt at his eyebrow.

Rhain recited the day's events in a whisper, replaying each move and countermove as if studying for a test he'd rather not fail.

Soren sat on his cot, back to the stone wall, and waited for quiet. The ache in his ribs had matured, now a slow, sullen fire. He found it almost reassuring. At least it hadn't vanished.

He lay awake after the others surrendered to sleep, and let his mind replay each failing, each moment where the strange, other memory had deserted him. Instinct, he told himself. That's all it had been.

No magic. No haunted blades. Only the trick of a desperate body, trying to borrow someone else's poise when it mattered. But the emptiness that came after, the hollow it left, was worse than the pain.

He fished under the cot, numbed fingers scraping the splintered wood, until he found the shard wrapped in its rag. For a while he just held it, rolling the thing in his palm, letting the warmth bleed into his skin. He didn't know what he expected.

Nothing happened.

He pressed his thumb to the broken edge, willing it to sting, to spark even a fraction of the old sensation.

At first: only cold, same as always. Then, incrementally, a push of warmth, a slow, seductive pulse that travelled up his hand, into the arm, into the dull ache at his ribs.

The barracks faded out. The air grew close, vision tunneling until nothing existed but the pressure of steel and earth. For a moment he thought he'd just fallen asleep, but when he blinked, he was somewhere else.

No, someone else.

The world is a press of velvet darkness, then a slow, dazzling bleed of light. Soren tries to move, and his arms answer, only they are not his arms, too thick at the wrist, moving with the weightless confidence of a body that had never known a sick day or skipped meal.

His hands, clad in the tightest mesh of chainmail, rest perfectly together at the lap, each finger splayed in a formal geometry he'd seen only in the old cathedral iconography downtown.

He tries to speak. Can't. The body has its own momentum and purpose.

He stands in a room lined with banners, each sewn with the emblem of a sword circled by a blue-white corona. A line of young faces kneels in two perfect rows down a carpet the color of dusk.

The stone underfoot gives off a mineral chill; the walls, glimpsed in half-peripheral, as if afraid of being observed too directly, soar high and ribbed, like the bellies of colossal beasts. The air is thick with the smell of burning oil and something sharp, sacred.

He, or she? It's impossible to know, the body is so tightly knitted to its traditions, kneels at the end of the line, in the exact center of a glyph painted into the flagstones.

There is an audience: priests, knights, soldiers, all blurred together like the city's noble houses at market, their features indistinct but their authority a weight in the pressure of silence.

A voice speaks from ahead, reading from a scroll. The sound is crystalline, amplified by agony, or memory, or both. "Valenna of the Ninth Lance, do you come by blood and by will, to serve the Throneless Flame?"

The mouth that is not his says: "I am Valenna of the Azure Oath. I come by both."

There is a rustle in the room, a flutter of attention. The body is rigid, but Soren feels the heat behind the skull, the furnace-madness of nerves ready to fire at the first slight.

A second voice, deeper, responds: "Swear, then, to your end. Swear, and let it be the last lie you ever tell."

There is a sword, bigger than any sword Soren could ever lift, and somehow, he knows the weight of it intimately.

It's notched and battered, the edge gone soft from generations of sharpenings. The blade comes down, taps each shoulder.

His tongue moves, dry and heavy. "I swear by water, blade, and curse. I swear by the all-consuming Flame. I will not falter."

The sword rests an inch from the neck. "Say the other part," says the voice. Its owner is invisible, occluded by memory, but the arm holding the sword shakes once, betraying the human behind the ritual.

The body's throat knots itself, forces out the line: "I swear, though it will ruin me."

The room explodes in applause, but Soren's borrowed ears catch the tremor of reluctance. Hands clap, boots drum on the stone. Someone is weeping, quietly, to his left.

Then, a great hand is thrust forward, wrapped in rings. The new knight, her? him? Valenna? grasps it. The hand that clasps back is slick, wet with sweat, and trembling beneath its steel.

For a blink, the memory superimposes: Soren kneeling in the sand, Tavren's boot across his ribs, the taste of pennies in his mouth.

"Rise, Valenna," says the voice. "For the Empire, for the Flame."

The memory ends. There is an interval of roaring blackness and, in it, a sneer of amusement that is both inside his mind and behind it.

*Soren. Soren, why do you insist on remembering the wrong damn parts.*

The body's ghost drops away. Soren falls, hard, into the present, into the thin, sweat-drenched air of the barracks. His hand is still clamped on the shard. He can feel how tight he's gripping it, thumb sunk in so deep it's left a crescent.

The pain in his ribs has faded to background noise. The memory, the echo, blisters in its place.

He does not sleep that night.