#### **CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT**

# **Chapter 61: The City of Spires**

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| The road crested the final ridge, and Soren's breath caught in his throat.  |
| The City of Spires sprawled beneath them, impossibly vast, a creature of stone and imber that had devoured the valley floor. Massive walls studded with vatchtowers encircled the metropolis, their pale stone catching the midday sun.   |
| Countless banners snapped in the wind, crimson and gold, azure and silver, colors foren couldn't even name, each marking territory, proclaiming allegiance, lemanding recognition. Through the heart of it all, a silver river cut like a blade, spanned by bridges that looked like the stitches of some giant's needle. |
| The shard against Soren's chest stirred, a faint warmth pulsing once, twice. Not Valenna's voice, not exactly, but something deeper, recognition, perhaps. Memory. As if it knew this place.  |
| Impressive, isn't it?" Veyr's voice carried no wonder, only cool assessment as he guided his mount alongside Soren's. "Most visitors waste their first glimpse gawking like children. But you're not here as a tourist, Thorne."  |

Soren forced his expression back to neutrality, though his heart hammered against his ribs. "No, my lord." "Good. Then see it properly." Veyr pointed toward the highest point of the city, where a fortress of white stone crowned the central hill. "The Royal Citadel. From there, the king believes he governs. In truth, he merely presides over carefully cultivated illusions." The young lord's finger shifted, indicating a sprawl of buildings near the river. "The merchant quarter. There, coin speaks louder than bloodlines. New wealth buying what old names can no longer afford." His mouth curled slightly at the corner. "Remember that...sometimes the most powerful man in a room is the one nobody bothers to remember." Soren's gaze followed Veyr's guidance, trying to see beyond the overwhelming scale to the patterns beneath. The shard pulsed again, warmer now, as if encouraging this deeper vision. "And there," Veyr continued, gesturing to distinct sections of the city separated by internal walls, "the noble wards. Each house's colors displayed like peacock feathers...some faded, some fresh, all desperate to be noticed." He turned to Soren, eyes sharp with something that wasn't quite challenge. "Every wall, every tower, every banner, someone paid for it, and someone profits from it. Learn to see those connections, and you'll understand more than most who've lived here their entire lives."

The knights repositioned themselves as they descended toward the city, tightening their formation around Veyr. The road widened, joining with other paths that fed into the main approach.

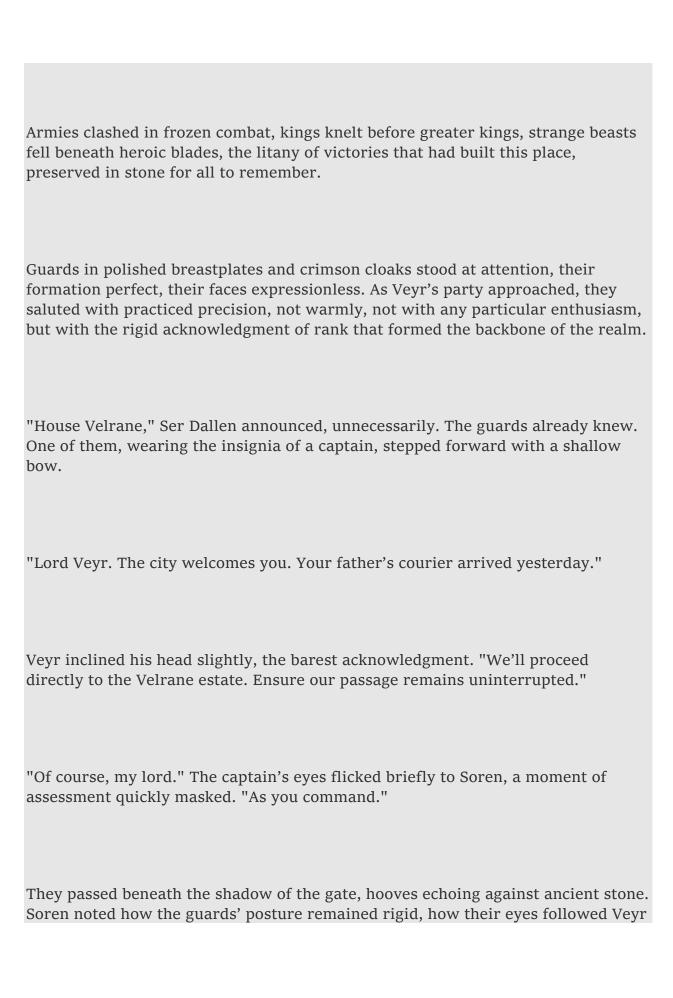
Suddenly they weren't alone, farmers with carts of produce, merchants with wagons of goods, pilgrims walking in dusty clusters, lesser knights in travel-worn armor, all funneling toward the massive gates that gaped like the mouth of some stone beast.

Ser Dallen raised House Velrane's banner higher, its copper-and-slate colors catching the light. Like water parting before a blade, the crowd began to yield, pressing to the roadside. Heads bowed as they passed, some low and reverent, others barely inclining, just enough to avoid offense.

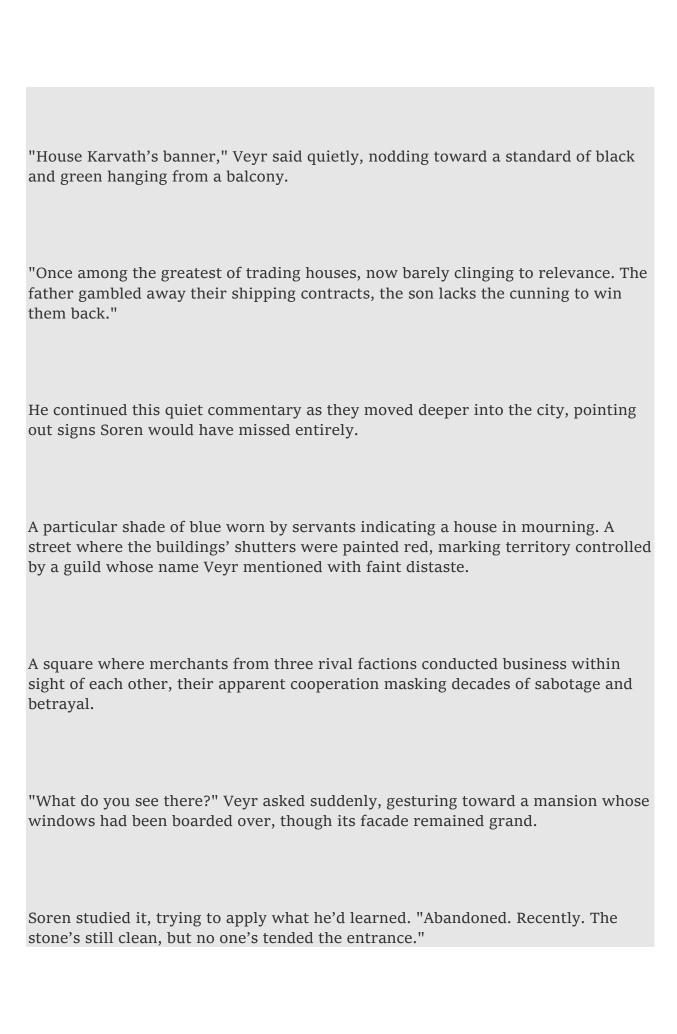
Soren felt the weight of their stares, curiosity from some, naked resentment from others, occasional flashes of awe or envy. None of them familiar.

None of them kind. He kept his back straight, his face impassive, as Kaelor had taught him. 'Let them wonder,' the swordmaster had growled during one particularly brutal lesson. 'Uncertainty is your ally when outnumbered.'

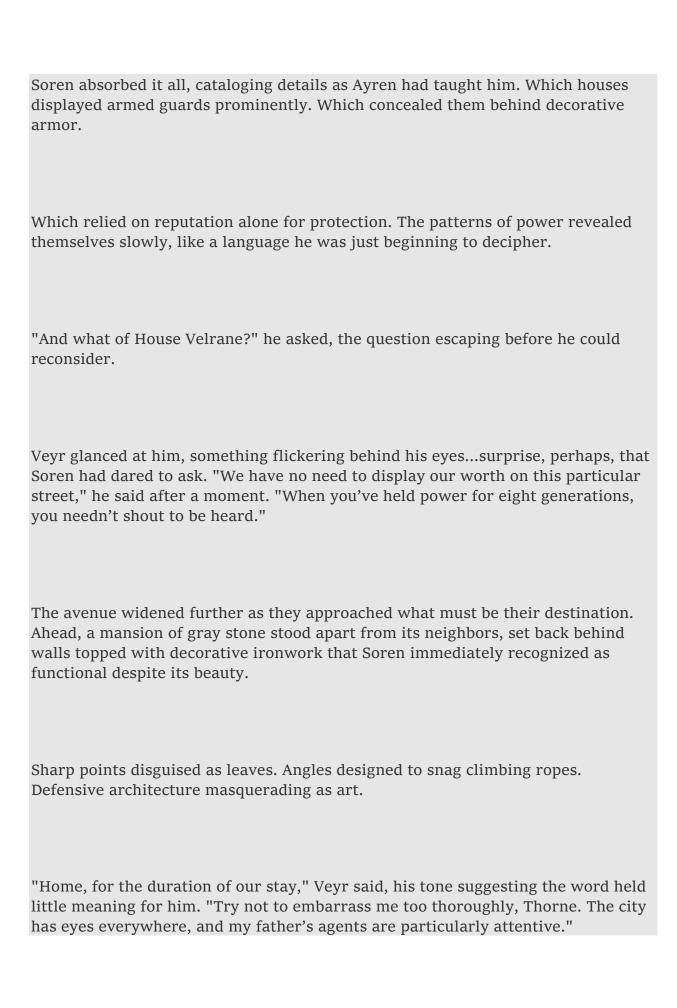
The gates loomed closer, more massive than Soren had imagined possible. Ancient stone rose higher than ten men standing on each other's shoulders, carved with scenes of battles and conquests that predated any history he knew.



| with a mixture of deference and wariness. Not love, not even respect, something closer to fear wrapped in protocol.   |
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| Then they were through, and the city swallowed them whole.  |
| The assault on Soren's senses was immediate and overwhelming. Noise crashed over him in waves, blacksmiths' hammers ringing against anvils, children shrieking as they darted between market stalls, hawkers bellowing the virtues of their wares, priests chanting from street-corner shrines. |
| Smells layered atop each other in dizzying complexity, fresh bread from bakeries, sewage from gutters, incense from temples, sweat from bodies packed too tightly together.   |
| The sheer density of it all made Nordhav's most crowded markets seem like empty plains by comparison. People pressed against each other, moving in currents and eddies like a human river.  |
| Buildings rose on either side of the broad avenue, three and four stories tall, leaning toward each other as if sharing secrets across the gap.   |
| The knights maintained their tight formation, creating a bubble of space around Veyr through sheer intimidation. Soren stayed close, suddenly grateful for their presence as the crowd surged around them.  |
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| "Good. And what does that tell you?"  |
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| He hesitated, aware this was another test. "That whoever owned it fell from<br>power. Quickly. Not a gradual decline or they'd have sold it before abandoning it<br>entirely."  |
| Veyr's mouth curved in what might almost have been approval. "House Marden. The patriarch backed the wrong faction in last month's Council vote. Now he's entertaining guests in his country estate, indefinitely." There was a cold amusement in his voice. "The king's hospitality can be quite prolonged." |
| They turned onto a broader avenue, where the buildings grew taller and more ornate. Here, each structure seemed designed to outdo its neighbors in grandeur Marble facades gleamed in the afternoon sun.  |
| Statues of heroic ancestors gazed sternly down from rooftop perches. Fountains played in private courtyards glimpsed through iron gates.  |
| "The Street of Ambitions," Veyr said, his tone suggesting the name was ironic rather than official. "Where new money comes to play at being old blood."   |
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As they approached the gates, Soren felt the shard warm against his chest one final time, not Valenna's presence, but something deeper and less distinct. A warning, perhaps. Or a welcome.

He couldn't tell which prospect unsettled him more.

#### Chapter 62: Clash on the Road

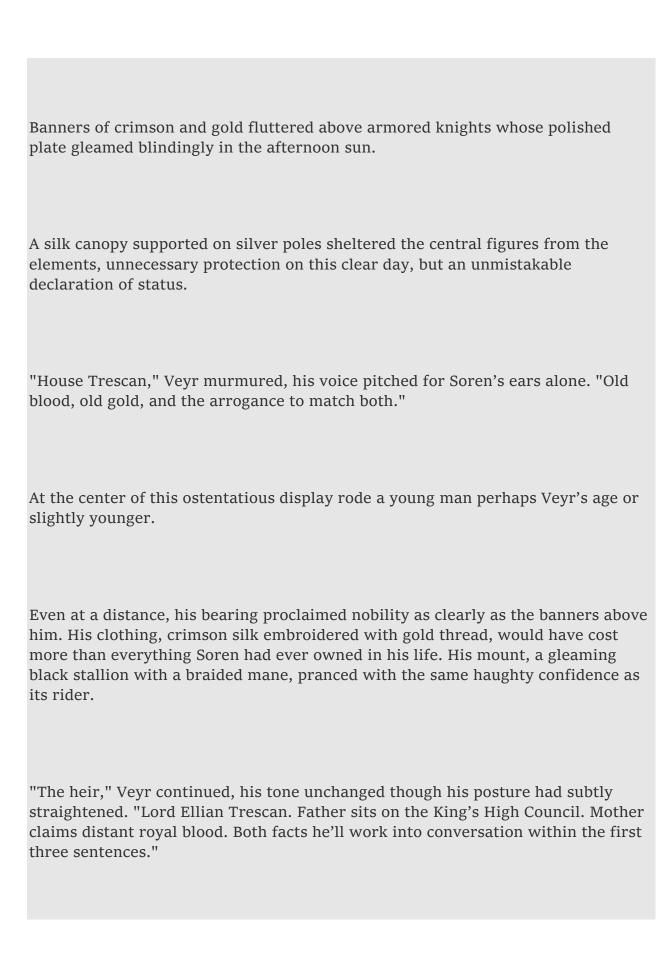
Chapter 62: Clash on the Road

The capital road choked with bodies and beasts as they neared the city proper. Soren had never seen so many people pressed into one stretch of earth, merchants hauling carts piled high with goods, pilgrims trudging with downcast eyes and prayer beads clutched in calloused hands, messengers on lathered horses weaving through gaps with reckless determination.

The very air felt different here, thick with the mingled scents of sweat, perfume, livestock, and desperation.

"Close ranks," Ser Dallen commanded, his voice cutting through the cacophony of shouts and hoofbeats. "Noble territory ahead."

| The knights shifted their formation without hesitation, drawing tighter around Veyr. Soren found himself squeezed closer to the young lord, their knees nearly touching as they navigated the crowded thoroughfare.  |
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| The casual distance Veyr had maintained throughout their journey had vanished, replaced by a careful proximity that spoke volumes about the dangers they now faced.  |
| 'Different kind of wilderness,' Soren thought, watching how Ser Caldre's hand never strayed far from his sword hilt. 'Different predators.'  |
| The shard against his chest remained cool and silent, Valenna's presence withdrawn to that distant place she retreated to when observing rather than guiding. He missed her counsel, though he'd never admit as much aloud.  |
| Ahead, the road narrowed between two stone markers carved with royal insignia. Traffic bottlenecked at this point, forcing travelers to funnel into a more orderly procession. Merchants yielded to nobility with grudging bows, pilgrims pressed themselves against the roadside, and even the messengers slowed their headlong rush when confronted with travelers of higher status. |
| As they approached the bottleneck, Soren spotted trouble.  |
| From the opposite direction came a procession that made Veyr's small company look positively austere by comparison.  |



| The knights exchanged glances, their expressions carefully neutral but their bodies tensing like bowstrings drawn tight. Ser Dallen raised House Velrane's banner higher, ensuring it could not be missed, not a challenge, exactly, but a firm reminder of their own status.            |
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| The narrow passage forced both parties to adjust their formations. Veyr's company pressed toward the right side of the road, while the Trescan procession held the center, yielding less ground than courtesy might demand.  |
| As they drew closer, Soren noted the calculating assessment in Lord Ellian's eyes, measuring Veyr's smaller escort, weighing the political cost of different responses.  |
| What happened next occurred so quickly that Soren nearly missed it. As the groups began to pass each other, Veyr's horse shifted slightly, whether spooked by the proximity of the larger animals or responding to some unconscious tension in its rider's posture, Soren couldn't tell. |
| The movement brought Veyr's mount a handspan closer to Lord Ellian's stallion, their flanks brushing in the briefest of contacts.  |
| The heir's reaction was immediate but contained. His spine stiffened, his chin lifted, and his gaze swept over Veyr with glacial disdain. But he said nothing, apparently deciding the incident beneath his notice.  |
| Not so the squire who rode at his right hand.  |

"Mind your mount, peasant!" the young man snarled, his face flushing red beneath a shock of copper hair. "Or does House Velrane now recruit its nobles from the stables?"

The sudden silence that fell over both companies seemed to swallow all other noise from the road. Traders, pilgrims, and messengers melted away from the confrontation, creating an island of empty space around the two noble parties. Soren felt the air change, pressure building like the moment before a storm breaks.

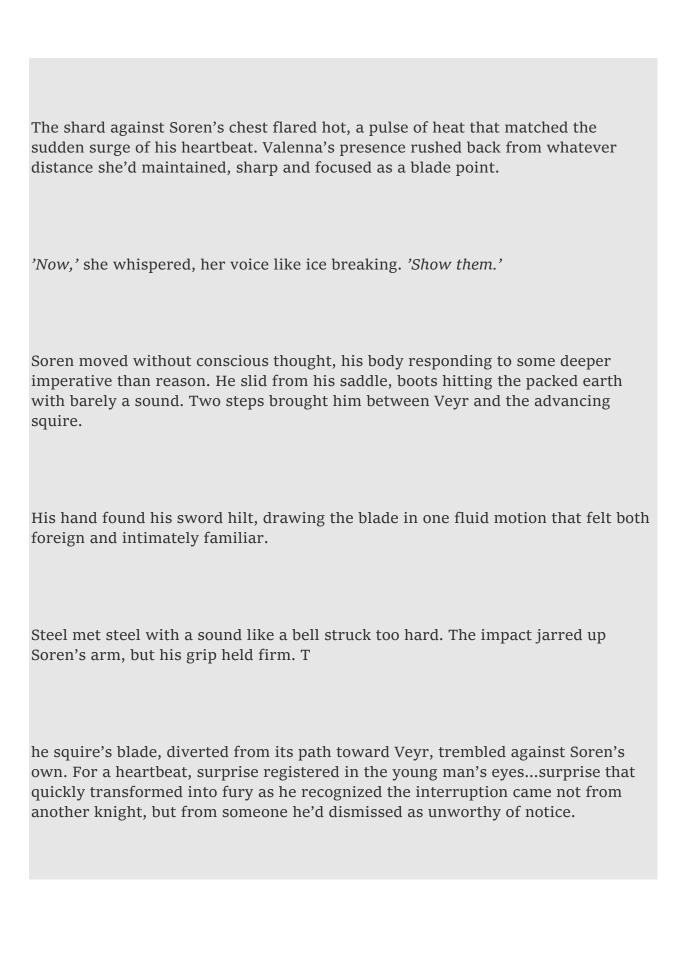
Veyr's expression remained perfectly neutral, though a muscle ticked at the corner of his jaw. "My apologies for the inconvenience, Lord Ellian," he said, deliberately addressing the heir rather than the squire. "The road narrows unexpectedly here."

The squire's flush deepened, anger at being bypassed overriding whatever training might have cautioned restraint. "You address your betters with such familiarity?" he demanded, urging his mount forward until he partially blocked the heir from view. "House Velrane, three generations of coin-counters playing at nobility while real bloodlines trace back centuries."

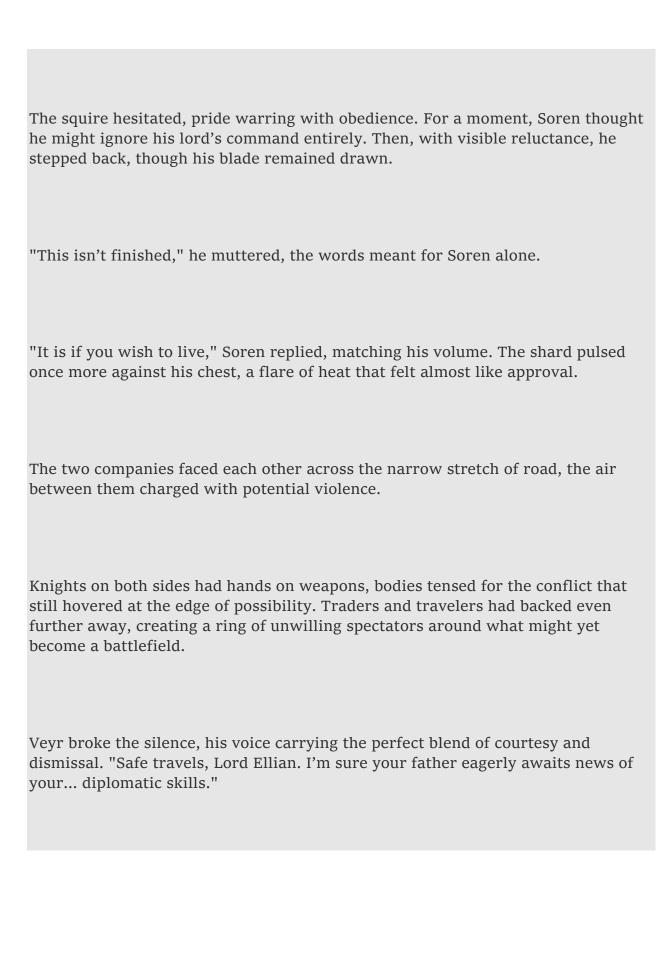
Ser Dallen's hand moved to his sword, the motion checked but visible. The Trescan knights responded in kind, the subtle shift of armor and weaponry creating a metallic whisper that cut through the silence.

Lord Ellian's expression showed nothing beyond mild irritation, though whether at Veyr or his own squire remained unclear. He made no move to intervene, watching

| the confrontation with the detached interest of one observing a mildly diverting entertainment.  |
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| "Stand down, Harrick," he said finally, his voice carrying the bored command that only true nobility seemed able to perfect. "We're expected at the palace."   |
| But the squire, Harrickhad committed too fully to retreat with dignity intact. His hand dropped to his sword hilt, fingers curling around the ornate guard.  |
| "Your father purchased your title with merchant gold," he spat at Veyr, each word a deliberate provocation. "While mine earned his on the battlefield. Perhaps I should teach you the difference between earned steel and bought silk."  |
| The blade cleared its scabbard with a sound that seemed unnaturally loud in the tense silence. Sunlight caught the edge, sending a flash of reflected light across the gathered faces. The Trescan knights tensed but did not intervene, bound by their lord's command to stand down, yet clearly anticipating violence. |
| Soren saw it all unfold with strange clarity, as if time had slowed to accommodate his observation. Ser Dallen and Caldre, moving to intercept but too far from Veyr's side to reach him before the blade.   |
| The heir, Ellian, watching with that same detached interest, making no move to check his squire's recklessness. Veyr himself, expression unchanged though his hands had tightened on his reins.  |



| "You dare?" Harrick hissed, pressing forward with strength born of rage and wounded pride.   |
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| Soren held his ground, the shard burning against his chest. Somewhere deep in his awareness, he felt Valenna's presence shift, not taking control, but offering something like guidance, a whispered knowledge of how to position his feet, how to angle his blade, how to distribute his weight for maximum resistance. |
| "I dare," he replied, his voice emerging lower and colder than he'd intended. "And I promise you thisanother inch toward Lord Veyr, another word from your mouth, and they'll carry you from this road in pieces."   |
| The threat hung in the air between them, stark and unadorned. Not a boast, not a performance for the watching crowd, but a simple statement of fact delivered with the certainty of one who has killed before and will do so again without hesitation.   |
| The squire's eyes widened, something in Soren's tone or expression finally penetrating his anger. He tried to press forward again, but found himself inexplicably yielding ground instead.   |
| Their blades remained locked, but the advantage had shifted, Soren advancing with a steadiness that belied the hammering of his heart.   |
| "Harrick." Lord Ellian's voice cut through the tension, sharper now, command replacing boredom. "Enough."  |
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The heir's expression tightened fractionally, the only sign that the barb had found its mark. He inclined his head a precise degree, acknowledging Veyr's rank while simultaneously diminishing it, then gestured for his company to proceed.

As the Trescan procession moved past, the squire's eyes remained fixed on Soren, promising retribution for the public humiliation. Soren met his gaze steadily, the shard cooling against his chest as the immediate danger receded. Valenna's presence withdrew slightly, though she remained closer to the surface of his awareness than before.

Only when the last of the Trescan knights had passed did Ser Dallen speak, his voice pitched low but carrying an edge that could have cut stone. "Mount up. We move on. Now."

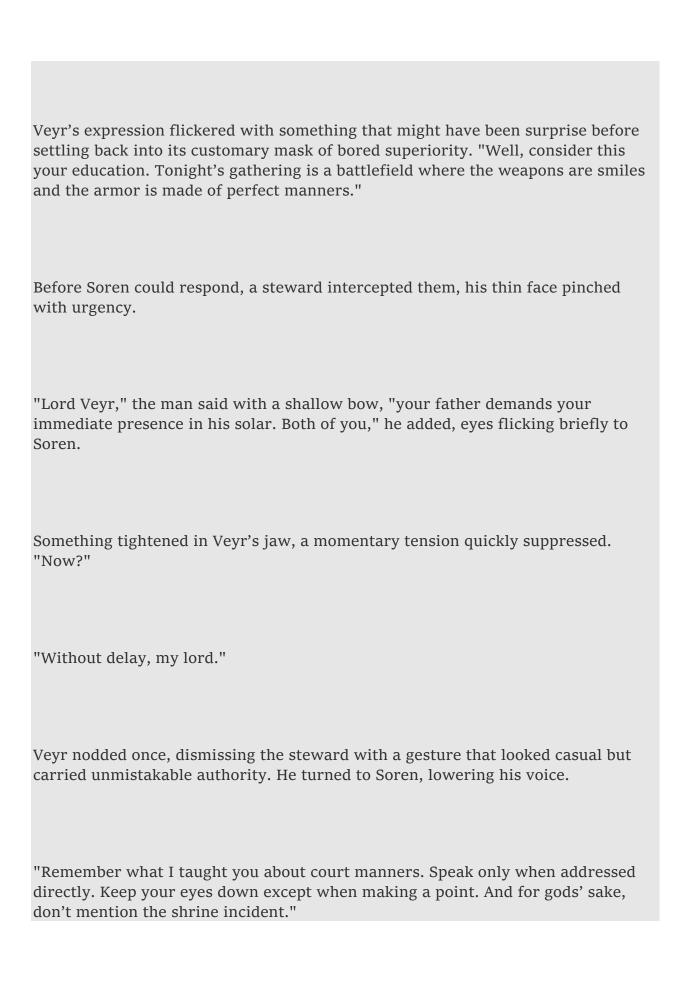
Soren sheathed his blade and returned to his horse, aware of the eyes that followed his movement, not just those of the lingering spectators, but of Veyr's knights as well. Their assessment had changed, he realized.

### Chapter 63: Lord of the House

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The Velrane estate erupted with activity as if someone had kicked over a hive of particularly well-dressed bees. Soren stood in the courtyard, dust from the road still clinging to his boots, watching servants sprint across the grounds with the grim determination of soldiers preparing for war.

| 'What in seven hells is happening?' he thought, stepping aside as two men hurried past with a silver banner longer than a jousting lance.  |
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| The shard pulsed cold against his chest, Valenna's presence sharpening with what felt like amusement. 'Welcome to the true battlefield, little knife. Swords may draw blood, but words leave deeper wounds.'   |
| Everywhere Soren looked, preparations unfolded with practiced urgency. Servants polished armor that would clearly never see combat, its decorative scrollwork too delicate for anything but display.   |
| Others arranged jewels on velvet-lined trays, the stones catching sunlight and fracturing it into dazzling patterns against the stone walls. In one corner of the courtyard, a master-at-arms inspected a line of house guards, adjusting sashes and straightening insignias with meticulous care. |
| Even the air felt different here, charged with an anticipation that made the hair on Soren's arms stand on end. The training yards had been straightforward, brutal in their simplicity. This this was something else entirely.  |
| "Don't gawk," Veyr muttered as he passed, not bothering to slow his stride. "You look like you've never seen preparations for a noble gathering before."   |
| "I haven't," Soren replied, falling into step beside him. The admission slipped out before he could consider how it revealed his ignorance.  |
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The journey to Lord Callen's solar felt longer than their entire road trip from the capital. Servants parted before them like water around stones, their eyes carefully averted but missing nothing. Soren felt their assessment as a physical weight, each glance measuring his worth, each whisper tallying his deficiencies.

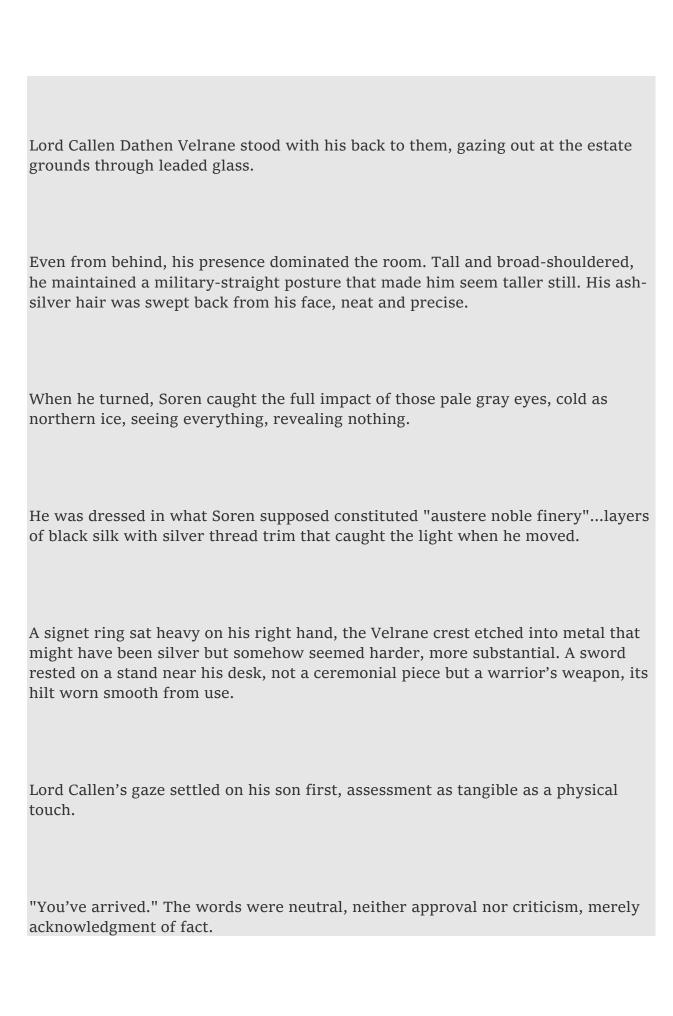
The corridor narrowed as they approached the private wing of the estate. Here, the opulence took on a different quality, less ostentatious, more assured. The wealth displayed wasn't meant to impress visitors but to remind inhabitants of their own status. Portraits of stern-faced Velranes lined the walls, generations of cold eyes following their progress.

The steward who had delivered the summons stood waiting outside a heavy oak door banded with iron. He knocked once, announced them, then stepped aside with the efficiency of someone who had performed this ritual countless times.

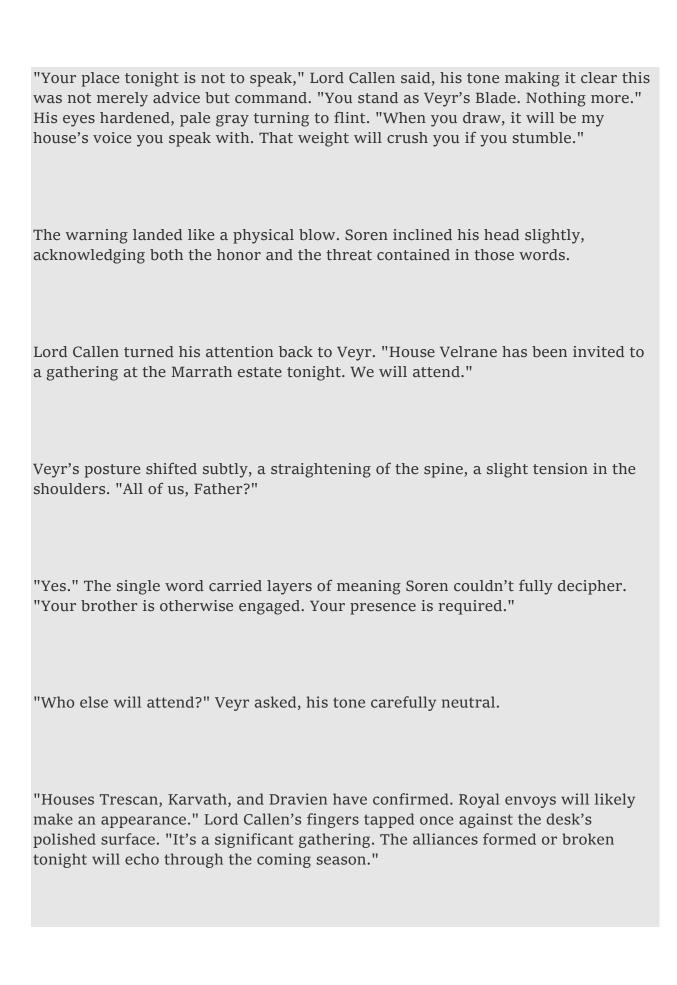
"Enter," called a voice from within, deep, measured, commanding absolute obedience.

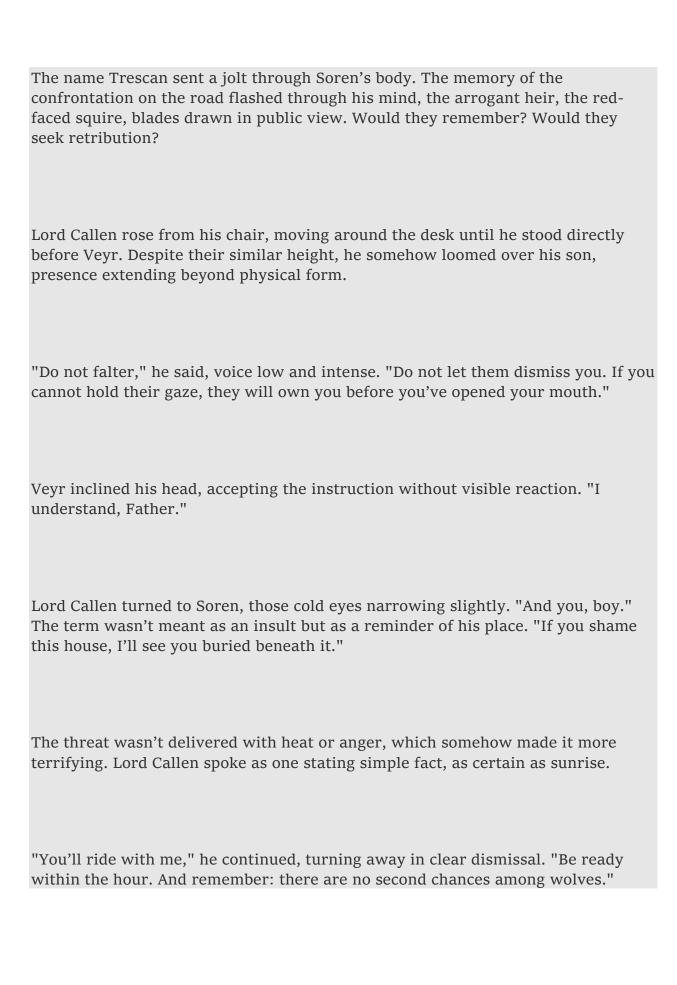
Soren followed Veyr into the solar, the shard cold against his chest. The chamber was larger than he'd expected, its high ceiling crossed with dark wooden beams.

Tall windows admitted the afternoon light, illuminating a space that managed to be both imposing and austere. No unnecessary ornaments cluttered the surfaces, no frivolous decorations softened the hard lines. Everything served a purpose, everything communicated power.



| 'Yes, Father," Veyr replied, his voice carefully modulated.   |
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| Lord Callen nodded once, then shifted his attention to Soren. The weight of that gaze felt like stones piled on his chest, each heartbeat requiring more effort than the last.  |
| 'So," he said after a moment that stretched like heated glass, "you survived the swordmaster's temper. That makes you either stubborn, or useful." His mouth curved slightly, not quite a smile. "I've yet to decide which."  |
| Soren kept his expression neutral, unsure if a response was expected. The shard pulsed once against his chest, neither warning nor encouragement, simply acknowledgment that Valenna was listening.   |
| 'I'm told you acquitted yourself adequately on the road," Lord Callen continued, moving to his desk with deliberate steps. "Kaelor reports your progress is acceptable, given your limitations." He settled into his chair, the movement smooth despite his size. "Ayren says you learn quickly, though you still cling to certain sentimentalities." |
| The casual revelation that all three had been discussing him sent a chill down Soren's spine. He'd known he was being evaluated, of course, but hearing it stated so plainly made the scrutiny feel more invasive somehow.  |
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Soren followed Veyr from the solar, the weight of Lord Callen's words pressing against his chest. The corridor seemed darker now, the portraits more judgmental, the very air heavier with expectation.

'This night will test me as much as any blade,' he thought, the realization settling into his bones like winter cold.

The shard pulsed once in agreement, Valenna's presence close but offering no comfort. 'Indeed, little knife. And unlike the training yard, there will be no one to stop the killing blow.'

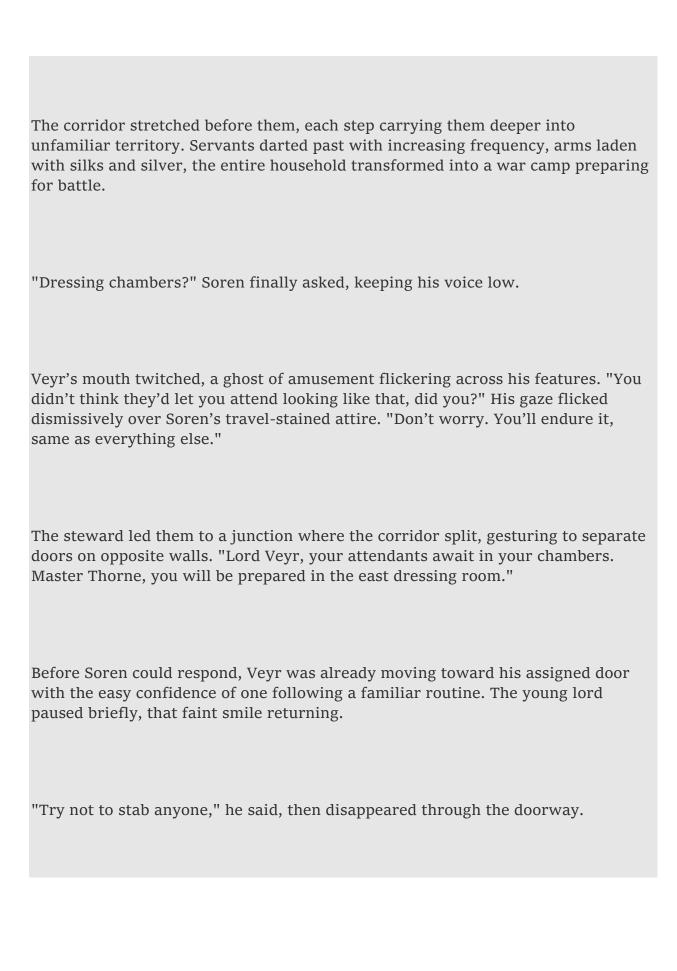
### Chapter 64: The Blade is Dressed

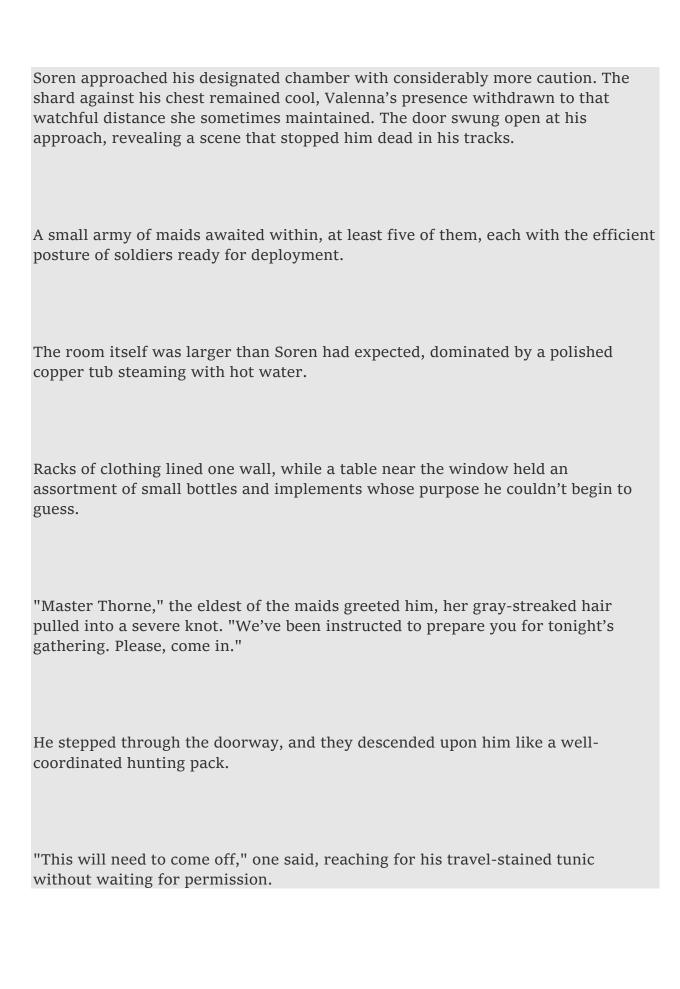
Chapter 64: The Blade is Dressed

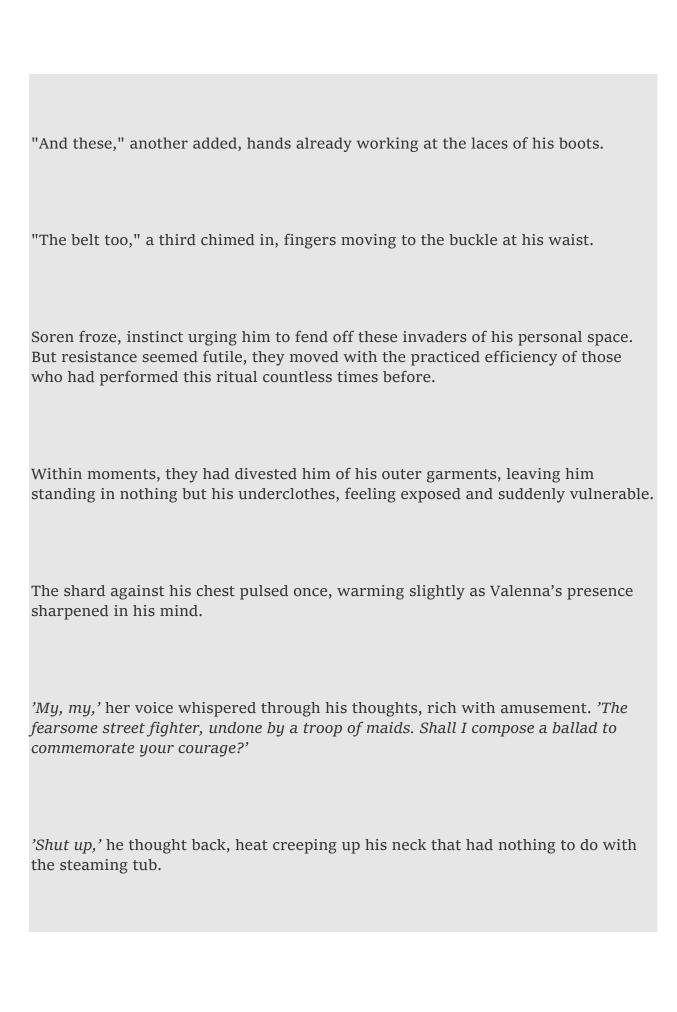
The steward materialized at their side before Soren had fully processed Lord Callen's dismissal, his thin frame appearing as if summoned by the word itself.

"Lord Veyr, Master Thorne," the man intoned with practiced deference, "if you would follow me. The dressing chambers have been prepared for tonight's gathering."

Soren glanced at Veyr, searching for some indication of what this entailed, but the young lord's expression revealed nothing beyond mild boredom.







| "The water will grow cold, Master Thorne," the eldest maid prompted, gesturing toward the bath. "And we have much to accomplish before the carriage departs."  |
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| Soren hesitated, the thought of disrobing completely before these women sending another wave of discomfort through him. The streets of Nordhav had taught him many things, but proper bathing etiquette in noble households wasn't among them.   |
| 'They've seen it all before, little knife,' Valenna murmured, her amusement deepening. 'To them, you're merely another piece of House Velrane that needs polishing.'   |
| With reluctance that bordered on physical pain, Soren removed his remaining garments and stepped into the tub.   |
| The hot water enveloped him, momentarily distracting from his embarrassment with its unexpected pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed a proper hot bath.   |
| His respite was brief. Almost immediately, the maids set upon him with cloths and brushes, scrubbing at his skin as if determined to remove not just dirt but the very memory of it. Scented oils were poured into the water, filling the air with unfamiliar fragrances, something woodsy and sharp, undercut with hints of metal and stone that somehow evoked House Velrane itself. |
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| 'Your hair, Master Thorne," one of the younger maids said, hands already working ather into his scalp. "It's quite resistant."  |
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| The shard pulsed against his chest, Valenna's laughter rippling through his mind. 'Like its owner,' she commented. 'Stubborn to the last strand.'   |
| By the time they allowed him to exit the bath, Soren's skin felt raw but undeniably clean. Towels appeared, patting him dry with brisk efficiency that left no room for modesty. He stood, feeling both polished and stripped bare, as the maids circled him with assessing eyes. |
| 'The bruising is fading," one observed clinically, noting the yellowing marks from Kaelor's training that decorated his ribs. "It shouldn't show beneath the formal attire."  |
| 'His hands need attention," another added, lifting Soren's palm for inspection. The calluses and half-healed blisters from sword practice stood out starkly against his freshly scrubbed skin.  |
| Before he could protest, they were guiding him to a chair, applying salves and oils to his abused hands. The sensation was strange, soothing yet somehow invasive, as if they were erasing parts of him he'd earned through pain and perseverance.                                |
| The shard warmed against his chest, Valenna's presence sharpening further. 'They prepare you for a different kind of battle,' she observed, her amusement fading into   |

| something more contemplative. 'In the training yard, your wounds are badges. In the noble gathering, they would be signs of weakness.'   |
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| The eldest maid approached with what appeared to be undergarments of finer make than anything Soren had ever worn. The fabric was soft against his skin as they helped him into them, followed by a shirt of white linen so fine it seemed to float rather than fall against his body.                   |
| Next came breeches of deep black, fitted close to his legs but allowing freedom of movement. The boots that followed rose to his knees, the leather polished to a shine that reflected the room around him.  |
| Each item was handled with reverence, positioned with precision, adjusted until it sat exactly as required.  |
| "Stand straight, Master Thorne," the eldest maid instructed, her tone brooking no argument. "A blade must appear sharp even in its scabbard."  |
| The final layer was a surcoat of deepest black, its edges and shoulders worked with silver thread that caught the light when he moved. The design wasn't ostentatious, no gaudy patterns or excessive ornamentation, but its very simplicity spoke of confidence, of power that needed no embellishment. |
| A belt completed the ensemble, black leather with a silver buckle shaped like the Velrane crest. One of the maids presented his sword, its hilt polished and blade cleaned, now housed in a formal scabbard that matched his attire.   |
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"The final touch," the eldest maid said, fastening the sword at his hip with practiced hands. "A Blade must wear his purpose openly." Throughout it all, Soren stood rigid, fighting the urge to squirm beneath their ministrations. This wasn't preparation; it was transformation. They weren't dressing him, they were erasing him, replacing the street fighter from Nordhav with something else entirely. 'You resist,' Valenna observed as the maids fussed with his collar, adjusting it to frame his face properly. 'But consider, little knife, clothes are chains, chains meant to bind perception. They see the garb before they see the man. Use that.' One of the younger maids approached with a small pot of some waxy substance, reaching for his hair. Soren stepped back instinctively, earning a disapproving click from the eldest. "It must be properly styled, Master Thorne," she said. "Lord Callen was most specific." Soren submitted with poor grace, standing still as they tamed his unruly black hair into something more befitting a noble household's representative. The shard pulsed against his chest, Valenna's amusement returning in full force.

| 'Poor little wolf,' she whispered. 'So much easier to face a blade than a comb.'  |
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| When they finally stepped back, apparently satisfied with their work, the eldest maid gestured toward a tall mirror in the corner. "See for yourself, Master Thorne. The transformation is complete."                             |
| Soren approached the mirror with the caution of one expecting an ambush. The reflection that greeted him was simultaneously familiar and foreign, his features, yes, but framed and presented in a way he'd never seen before.    |
| The black and silver of House Velrane lent him a severity that transformed his usual wary expression into something more commanding.  |
| His posture, drilled into him by Kaelor's relentless training, now seemed to belong to this formal attire in a way it never had to his recruit's uniform.   |
| He looked noble. Dangerous in a different way than the street fighter from Nordhav. This danger was cold, calculated, sanctioned by power and tradition.  |
| The shard warmed against his chest, Valenna's presence close and watchful. 'There,' she murmured, her voice oddly gentle. 'Now you see what they see, not the recruit, not the gutter rat, but the Blade. The weapon made flesh.' |
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The realization settled over him like the heavy fabric of the surcoat, both burden and armor. This wasn't just clothing, it was a statement, a declaration of his place in the hierarchy. No longer merely a recruit, not yet a true knight, but something in between, a weapon with a specific purpose.

The door opened behind him, breaking his unsettling communion with the stranger in the mirror. Veyr stood framed in the doorway, dressed in finery that complemented Soren's own but spoke more clearly of his status.

Where Soren's attire was elegant but severe, Veyr's incorporated subtle touches that marked him unmistakably as heir...copper thread among the silver, a chain of office hanging at his waist, the Velrane signet gleaming on his finger.

Veyr's eyes swept over Soren, assessing the transformation with the cool gaze of one inspecting a newly forged blade. A slight smirk played at the corner of his mouth.

"Well," he said, "it seems they've managed to make you presentable after all. Good. Wolves need to look sharp before they feed."

The maids bowed and stepped back, their task complete. Soren stood straighter, feeling the weight of the formal clothing, the unfamiliar pressure of the polished boots, the strange lightness of his cleaned and styled hair.

## Chapter 65: The Gathering (1)

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| The great hall of House Marrath swallowed sound like a hungry beast. Vaulted ceilings soared overhead, their dark wooden beams disappearing into shadow despite the blaze of a hundred candles.                                      |
| Banners hung from iron fixtures, proud colors of ancient houses, some faded with age, others bright with new ambition. Braziers cast pools of amber light that failed to chase away the darkness lurking in the corners.             |
| Soren paused at the threshold, the weight of scrutiny settling over him like a physical thing.   |
| 'This is it,' he thought, squaring his shoulders beneath the unfamiliar weight of formal attire. 'The real battlefield.'   |
| The chamber sprawled before him, dominated by long tables arranged in a semi-<br>circle around a central speaking area. Each table bore the crest of a noble house,<br>silver goblets catching firelight like stars fallen to earth. |
| The nobles themselves were already seated, men and women draped in silks and jewels, their faces composed into masks of careful disinterest that failed to hide the hunger in their eyes.  |
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Behind each lord stood at least one knight, sometimes more, armored figures as still as statues in the flickering light. They might have been decorative were it not for the blades at their hips and the watchful tension in their postures.

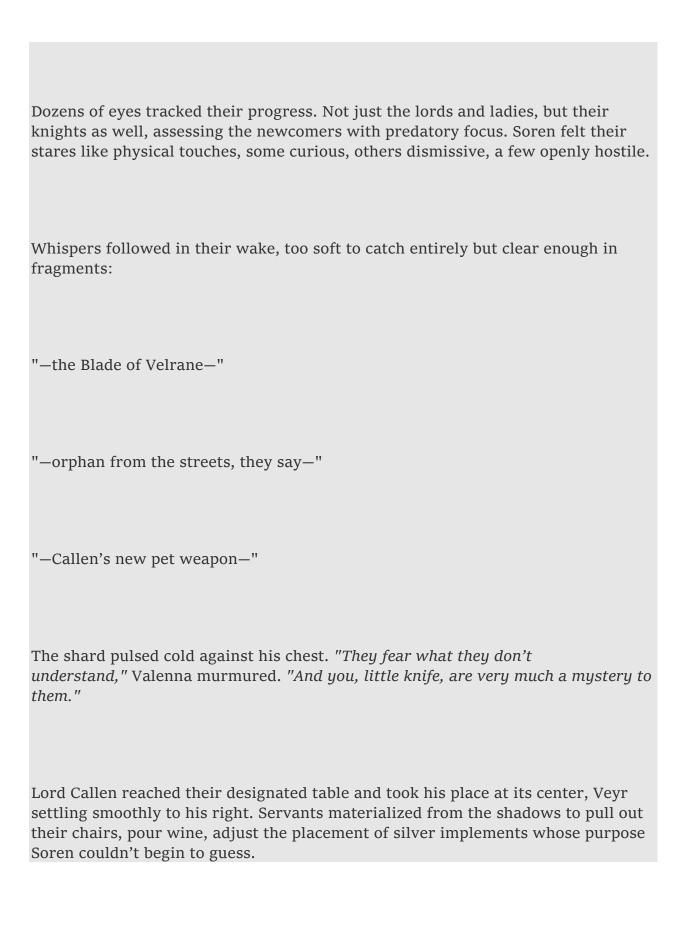
The shard against Soren's chest cooled sharply as he followed Lord Callen and Veyr into the hall. Valenna's presence sharpened in his mind, her voice cutting through his thoughts like winter wind through thin cloth.

"Look at them," she whispered, contempt edging each syllable. "Lord Karvath grips his goblet like it might flee, fear of poison, or the tremors of a secret drinker? And there...Lady Dravien sits too straight, too rigid. Old wound, poorly healed. Pain she won't acknowledge."

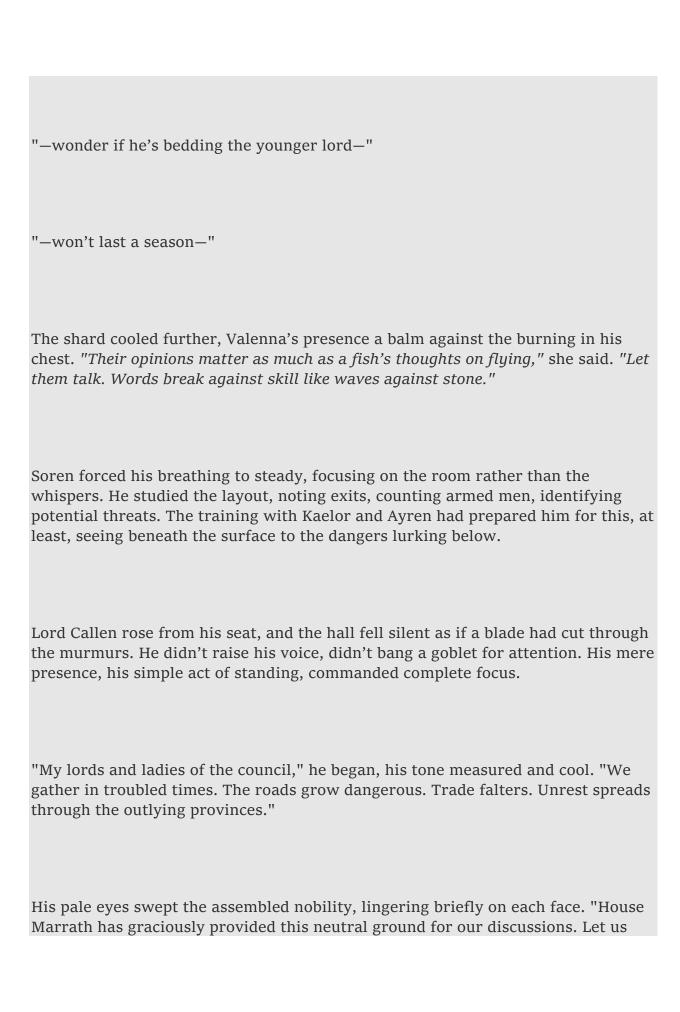
Soren kept his face carefully neutral as they proceeded down the center aisle, though his eyes darted from lord to lord, seeing them now through Valenna's merciless assessment.

"The fat one with the red beard," she continued, "sweats despite the chill. His heart labors beneath all that flesh and finery. And the thin lord to his right...see how his fingers drum against the table? Impatience masking insecurity. They all wear fear like perfume, little knife. You need only learn to smell it."

Lord Callen moved with unhurried confidence, his pace deliberate, his bearing regal without straining for effect. Veyr walked half a step behind, slipping effortlessly into the role of heir apparent, chin lifted, eyes forward, back straight as a blade. Soren followed, mimicking their posture while keeping his hand casually near his sword hilt.



| No chair awaited him. His place was behind them, standing guard as the other knights did for their lords. Soren took his position, feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped behind his back in the stance Kaelor had drilled into him through endless hours of punishment.                             |
|--|
| From this vantage, he had a clearer view of the other houses' knights. They stood like carved figures, their discipline evident in every line of their bodies. Perfect. Immaculate. Born to their positions through blood and breeding.  |
| While he   |
| The contrast couldn't have been more stark. Though dressed in Velrane black and silver, nothing could hide his origins. Not the formal attire, not the polished boots not the carefully styled hair. Something in his stance, in his eyes, in the way he held himself, it all proclaimed him outsider. |
| And they knew it. Every knight in the hall knew it.  |
| A muscle twitched in his jaw as he caught fragments of their whispered assessments.  |
| "-street rat with a noble's sword-"  |



use it wisely." A pause, perfectly timed. "The agenda before us is clear: we must address the threats to stability, the disruptions to trade, and the rogue elements that challenge the established order." The words were diplomatic, even bland, but something in Lord Callen's delivery lent them weight and edge. This wasn't a suggestion or a request. It was a command, delivered with such quiet certainty that it brooked no argument. Soren watched, fascinated despite himself, as the assembled lords and ladies nodded in agreement, some more reluctantly than others. This, then, was how true power worked, not through shouting or threats, but through the absolute confidence that one would be obeyed. A lord from the far table rose, his crimson robes marking him as a member of House Trescan. "If I may, Lord Callen." His voice carried a careful deference that didn't quite mask the challenge beneath. "Before we discuss trade routes and grain taxes, perhaps we should address the more immediate threat to our collective security." Lord Callen inclined his head slightly, granting permission to continue. "I speak of the assassin," the Trescan lord said, his voice rising. "Three nobles dead in two months. Lord Halwick found with his throat cut in his own bedchamber. Baron Tessier ambushed on the north road. And just last week, Count Dravien's cousin, skewered like a festival pig in broad daylight."

| Murmurs rippled through the hall. Lady Dravien's face tightened at the mention of her kinsman, her knuckles whitening around her goblet.                            |
|---|
| "They call him the Noble Killer," someone added from another table. "A man with hair green as summer grass and eyes to match."                                      |
| The murmurs grew louder, more urgent. Soren noted how the atmosphere in the hall had shifted, tension replacing formality, fear cracking the masks of indifference. |
| Chapter 66: The Gathering (2)   |
| Chapter 66: The Gathering (2)   |

"One man," a portly lord scoffed, though his eyes darted nervously. "Surely our

"If he were just a man," countered another, leaning forward. "Some say he's more

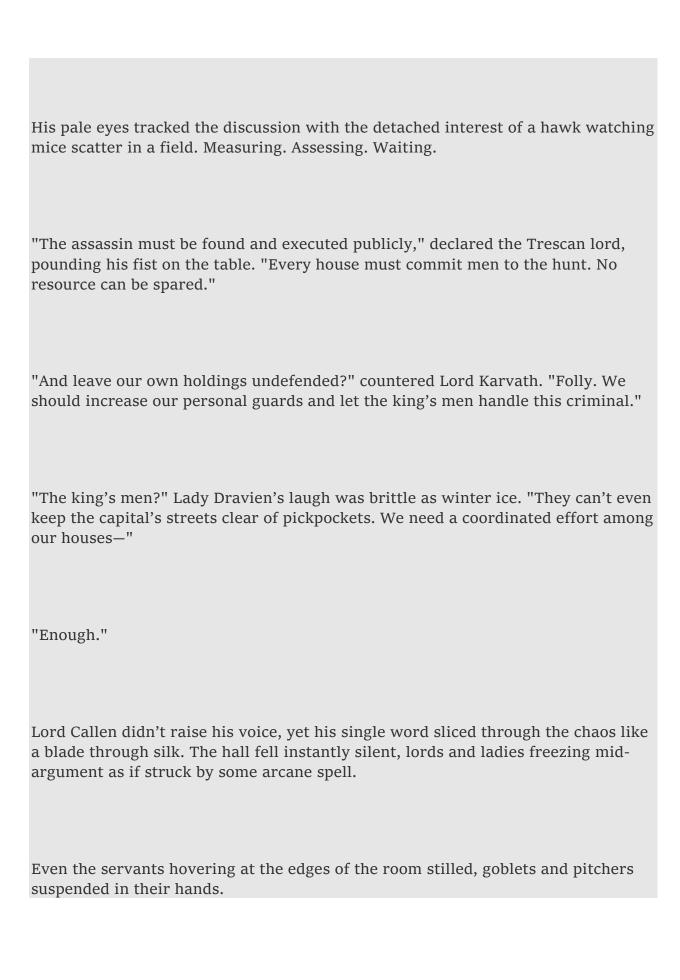
combined forces could hunt down a single assassin."

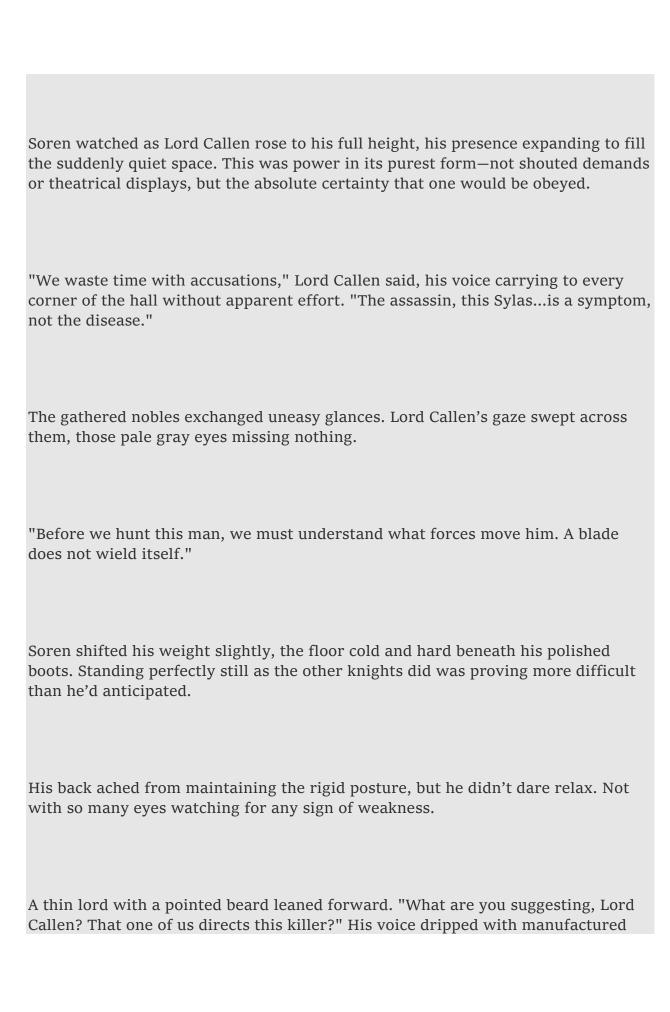
Laughter, strained and hollow, met this suggestion.

myth than flesh. A vengeful spirit sent to punish noble excess."

| "I saw him," Lady Dravien said suddenly, her voice cutting through the noise. The hall fell silent once more. "The day my cousin died. I glimpsed him fleeing the scene."  |
|--|
| Her eyes, dark with memory, swept the assembled lords. "He moves like no man I've ever seen. Faster than thought. And his eyes" She shuddered visibly. "They burn with a hatred that goes beyond the personal. He kills because we exist." |
| The shard against Soren's chest warmed slightly, Valenna's interest piqued by this description.  |
| "Green hair marks him as foreign," Lord Callen observed, his tone unchanged despite the rising alarm around him. "The question becomes: who benefits from these targeted killings?"  |
| And with that simple query, the discussion erupted into barely controlled chaos.   |
| "He's clearly hired by House Karvath," accused a Trescan knight, stepping forward from his position. "The victims all opposed their trade monopoly."   |
| Lord Karvath surged to his feet, face flushing. "How dare you! If anyone stands to gain, it's House Dravien, the deaths have opened shipping routes they've coveted for generations!"  |
|  |

| Lady Dravien's laugh was cold as grave dirt. "My cousin was among the dead, you bloated fool. Or did that detail escape your wine-soaked memory?"  |
|--|
| On and on it went, accusations flying like arrows. Old grievances surfaced, thinly disguised as concern over the assassin. House Trescan blamed House Karvath. House Karvath implicated House Dravien. A minor lord suggested the Church might be behind it all, earning scandalized gasps and hurried signs against evil. |
| Soren watched it all unfold, realization dawning like a cold sun. This wasn't about the assassin, not really. The green-haired killer was merely the excuse, the pretext for settling scores and testing alliances that had been fraying long before the first noble throat was cut.                                       |
| 'This is just another form of combat,' he thought, studying the flushed faces and clenched fists. 'The weapons are different, but  |
| the intent is the same.'   |
| The shard pulsed against his chest, Valenna's voice sharp with disdain. "Look how they tremble at one man with a sword," she whispered. "And yet they would command armies. The weakest link in any chain of power, little knife, is the one who fears death more than dishonor."  |
| As the debate grew more heated, Soren noticed something odd. While most lords were engaged in the argument, some shouting, others whispering urgently to their neighbors, Lord Callen remained utterly still.  |



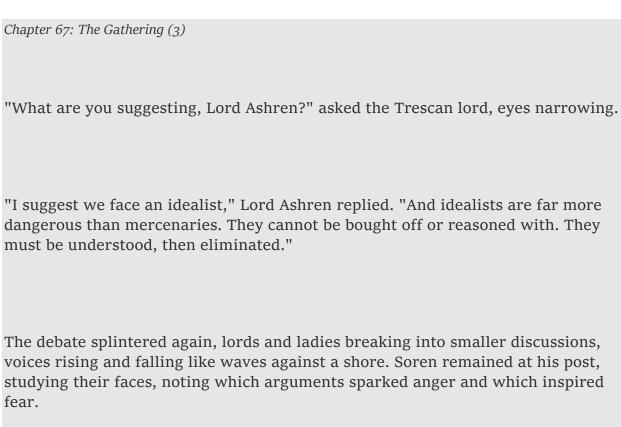


| outrage, though Soren noted how his left hand trembled slightly against the table's edge.   |
|---|
| "Frightened rabbit in fox's clothing," Valenna whispered through Soren's mind. "See how his collar is fastened too tight? Hiding somethinga scar perhaps, or worse. And the way he leans away from the Trescan table there's history there, bloody and unresolved."                               |
| Lord Callen's expression remained impassive. "I suggest nothing. I observe. Three dead nobles in two months. All with connections to the northern trade routes. All opposed to the new tariff proposals." He paused, letting the implications settle. "Coincidence is a luxury we cannot afford." |
| The debate ignited again, though more controlled this time, simmering rather than boiling over. Soren watched as alliances revealed themselves in subtle ways, a nod of agreement here, a shared glance there, the careful positioning of hands near or far from sword hilts.                     |
| "The killer must be found," insisted a heavyset lord whose jeweled rings caught the firelight with each emphatic gesture. "My cousin travels from the eastern provinces next week. I'll not have him slaughtered on the road like common game."   |
| "Your cousin's safety concerns us all, Lord Marrath," said Lady Dravien, though her tone suggested exactly the opposite. "Perhaps he should postpone his journey until this matter is resolved."  |
|   |

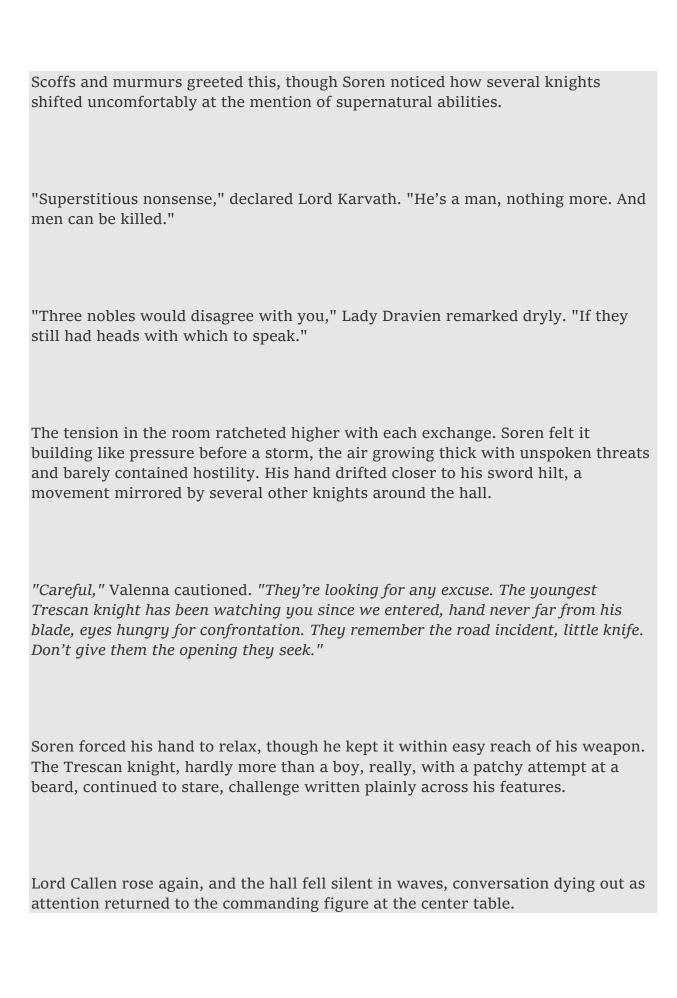
| Lord Marrath's face darkened. "The wedding preparations cannot be delayed. Unless you're suggesting my niece should forfeit her advantageous match?"  |
|---|
| The lady's smile was sharp as a dagger. "I would never presume to advise on family matters. I merely observe that a delayed wedding is preferable to a funeral."  |
| Soren caught the undercurrents flowing beneath the polite exchange. This wasn't about weddings or safety, it was about the alliance the marriage would cement, and how it might shift the balance of power in the council.  |
| "They dance like drunken bears around the real issue," Valenna murmured, her voice cool with disdain. "Trade routes mean tax revenue. Tax revenue means military strength means survival when the inevitable war comes All their pretty words are just masks for the oldest hunger, power."                             |
| A new voice entered the fray, a slender, silver-haired lord whose quiet tone somehow cut through the debate more effectively than a shout.  |
| "Perhaps we should consider what we know of this Sylas," he said, fingers steepled before him. "The descriptions are consistent: a man of unusual height, with green hair and eyes of the same shade. He fights alone, without banner or proclaimed allegiance. His victims die by the sword, not poison or treachery." |
| The hall quieted, attention shifting to this new speaker.   |

"These are not the methods of a hired assassin," the silver-haired lord continued.
"There is... personal intent in his killings. Witnesses speak of how he addresses his victims before striking. How he seems to take no pleasure in the act, yet performs it with ritual precision."

## Chapter 67: The Gathering (3)



"The commoners call him the Emerald Reaper," someone said, voice carrying across the hall. "They say he appears like mist, kills, and vanishes between one heartbeat and the next."



| "Speculation serves no purpose without action," he said, each word precise as a surgeon's cut. "I propose a coordinated effort. Each house will contribute men to a hunting party. Not common soldiers, but your finest blades. We will find this Sylas and determine who, if anyone, directs his hand." |
|--|
| Murmurs of agreement rippled through the assembly, though Soren noted the careful calculations happening behind noble eyes, weighing how many men they could spare, which knights they could afford to risk, what advantages might be gained or lost in the arrangement.                                 |
| "And who would lead this hunting party?" asked the Trescan lord, suspicion evident in his tone. "House Velrane, perhaps?"  |
| Lord Callen's mouth curved in what might have been a smile on a warmer man. "The party requires a leader with experience tracking dangerous prey. I nominate Lord Ashren, whose expertise in such matters is well established."  |
| The silver-haired lord inclined his head in acknowledgment, though his expression revealed nothing of his thoughts on the assignment.  |
| Soren watched the subtle play of politics with growing fascination. Lord Callen had neatly sidestepped the implied accusation while simultaneously placing the responsibility on a neutral party.  |
|  |

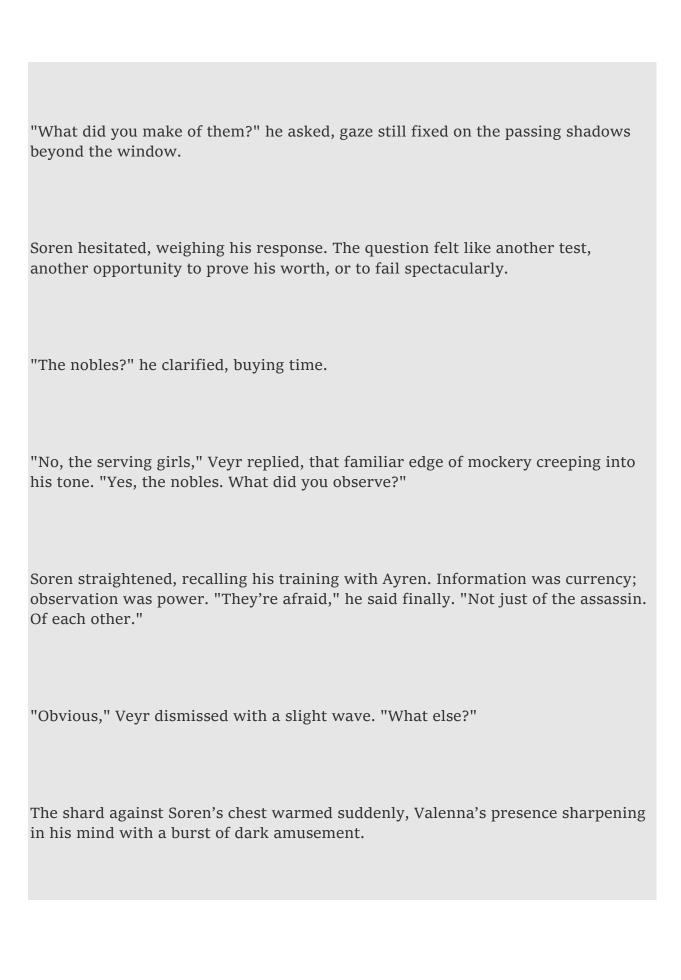
| The other nobles couldn't object without insulting Lord Ashren, whose reputation apparently commanded respect across house lines.   |
|---|
| "A sound proposal," Lord Marrath declared, rising from his seat. "Let each house commit two knights to the effort. They will assemble at dawn two days hence, under Lord Ashren's command."   |
| The assembled nobles nodded in agreement, some more reluctantly than others. Soren noted which houses seemed eager to participate and which appeared to accept the arrangement only under duress.   |
| "We still don't know why he targets nobles specifically," Lady Dravien said, her fingers tracing the rim of her goblet. "What grievance drives such focused hatred?"  |
| "Perhaps he simply recognizes where true power lies," suggested Lord Karvath with a humorless laugh. "Cut off the head, and the body falls."  |
| "Then we must ensure our necks remain intact," Lord Callen replied, his tone making it clear the discussion was concluding. "This council will reconvene in one week to hear Lord Ashren's report. Until then, I suggest we all review our household security." |
| As the formal proceedings wound down, the gathering dissolved into smaller conversations, lords and ladies clustering in familiar patterns of alliance and  |
|   |

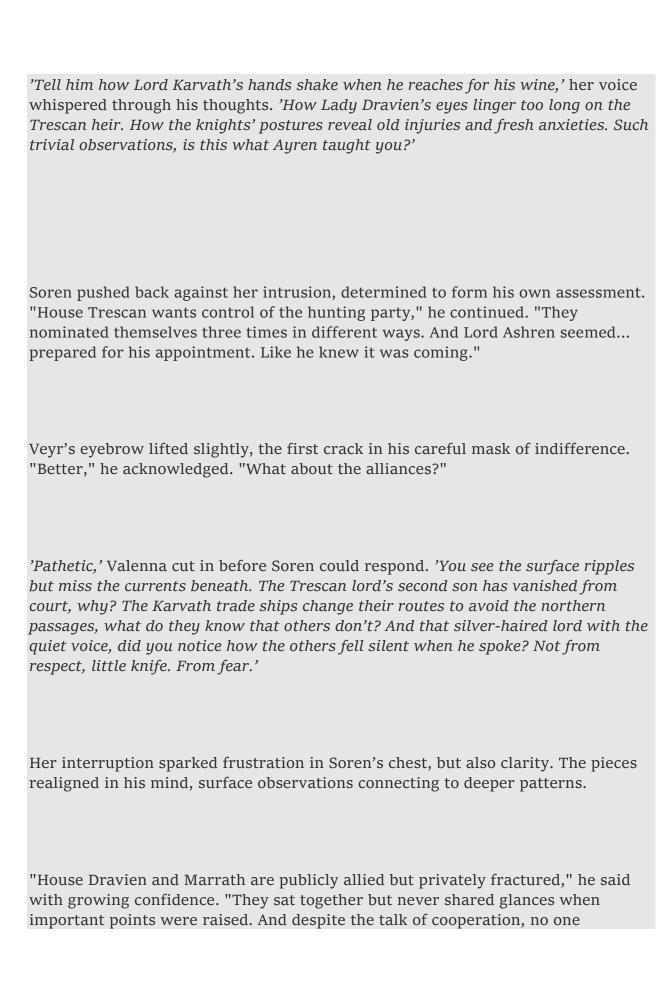
| shared interest. Servants moved more freely now, refilling goblets and offering platters of delicacies.  |
|--|
| Soren remained at his post, watching the room through narrowed eyes. The hunt for Sylas would dominate the coming days, but he sensed the green-haired killer was merely a convenient focus for deeper tensions running through the noble houses.            |
| "Politics and bladecraft," Valenna murmured. "Not so different after all. Both require precision, timing, and the willingness to draw blood when necessary."   |
| Lord Callen rose from his seat, a subtle gesture indicating that Veyr should follow. Soren straightened, preparing to move with them as they made their way toward a cluster of lords gathered near one of the large braziers.                               |
| As they passed the Trescan table, the young knight who had been watching Soren stepped forward, deliberately placing himself in their path.  |
| "Lord Callen," he said, offering a bow that managed to be both technically correct and subtly insolent. "I wonder if your attendant might join our discussion of sword techniques. We're most curious about the unusual methods employed by your household." |
| The emphasis made the insult clear. Soren felt heat rise in his throat but kept his expression carefully neutral, waiting for Lord Callen's response.  |
|  |

The Velrane patriarch regarded the young knight with the same expression one might use when discovering something unpleasant on the sole of one's boot. "When my Blade speaks, it will be with steel, not words," he said, his tone carrying absolute finality. "Pray you never hear his voice, boy." Without waiting for a response, Lord Callen continued on his path, the Trescan knight left standing with color rising in his cheeks and humiliation evident in his rigid posture. Soren followed, keeping his eyes forward despite the fierce satisfaction burning in his chest. In that moment, he glimpsed the true purpose behind his presence at the gathering, not just as a symbol of Velrane strength, but as an extension of Lord Callen's will, a silent threat made manifest. "You see now," Valenna whispered, her voice rich with dark amusement. "In this battlefield, you are both weapon and warning. They fear what they cannot understand, and nothing confuses these nobles more than power that rises from unexpected places." As the evening progressed, Soren stood guard while Lord Callen and Veyr engaged in the intricate dance of noble politics. He observed how alliances shifted with each conversation, how information became currency more valuable than gold, how threats were delivered in compliments and promises made in casual asides.

## **Chapter 68: The Test Named Sylas**

| Chapter 68: The Test Named Sylas   |
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| The carriage wheels groaned beneath them like dying men as the Velrane coach lurched back toward the estate.   |
| Moonlight sliced through the curtained windows, painting silver bars across Veyr's impassive face. The young lord sat with perfect posture despite the vehicle's constant rocking, seemingly untouched by the evening's tensions.  |
| Soren leaned into the leather seat, his formal attire suddenly stifling after hours of standing rigid behind Veyr's chair. The weight of a hundred stares still pressed against his skin, nobles assessing, knights dismissing, servants wondering. His fingers worked unconsciously at the collar that felt too tight against his throat. |
| The silence between them stretched, broken only by the rhythm of hooves and the occasional creak of wood.  |
| Outside, the capital's streets gradually gave way to the wider road leading back to the Velrane estate. The shard against Soren's chest remained cool, Valenna's presence withdrawn to that watchful distance she sometimes maintained when gathering her thoughts.  |
| After what felt like an eternity, Veyr spoke, his voice casual as if continuing a conversation already in progress.  |





| mentioned contributing actual soldiers, only knights. They're keeping their real forces in reserve."  |
|---|
| Veyr's mouth curved in what might almost have been approval. "And what does that tell you?"   |
| "They're preparing for something bigger than one assassin," Soren replied, the realization crystallizing as he spoke. "This hunt is just a distraction. Or a test of loyalty."                |
| "Now you're seeing," Veyr said, settling back against his seat. "The capital runs or currents deeper than most can fathom. Those who drown are those who mistake the surface for the depths." |
| The carriage hit a rut, jostling them both. Veyr adjusted his position with practiced ease, then fixed Soren with a gaze that suddenly felt more calculating than casual.                     |
| "My father will contribute two blades to the hunting party," he said, the statemen landing between them like a thrown gauntlet.   |
| Soren waited, sensing there was more to come. The shard pulsed once against his chest, neither warm nor cold, simply attentive.   |
|   |

| "You," Veyr continued after a deliberate pause, "and the Swordmaster."  |
|---|
| The words hung in the confined space of the carriage, their implications unfolding in Soren's mind like a blade being slowly unsheathed. He fought to keep his expression neutral, aware that Veyr was watching his reaction with predatory focus.  |
| "I see," he managed, though his heart had begun hammering against his ribs. The hunting party. Tracking a killer who had already claimed three noble lives. And Lord Callen was sending him, not a trained knight, not a seasoned warrior, but a recruit barely months into his training.                             |
| "Do you?" Veyr pressed, leaning forward slightly. "Do you truly understand what this means?"  |
| The shard warmed against Soren's chest, but Valenna remained silent, leaving him to navigate these treacherous waters alone.  |
| "It's a test," Soren said finally, meeting Veyr's gaze directly. "Another way to measure my worth."   |
| Veyr's laugh was short and without humor. "A test, yes, but not just of you. My father gains political capital by contributing his heir's personal Blade to the hunt. It demonstrates House Velrane's commitment to the common cause." His eyes hardened. "It also throws you into a crucible to see if you survive." |
|   |

| "And the Swordmaster?" Soren asked, though he already suspected the answer.   |
|---|
| "Insurance," Veyr replied coldly. "Kaelor ensures Velrane's name will not be shamed if you fall. One expendable blade and one proven weapon, my father's strategy in miniature."  |
| The casual cruelty of the calculation hit Soren like a physical blow. Expendable. A pawn to be sacrificed for political advantage. The shard against his chest flared hot, anger pulsing through him in waves that matched his quickening heartbeat.  |
| "So I'm just proof of loyalty?" he said, unable to keep the edge from his voice. "Addingued and the show how seriously House Velrane takes this hunt?"  |
| "You're whatever my father needs you to be," Veyr replied, unmoved by Soren's obvious anger. "Did you think it would be otherwise? That your comfort or survival would factor into his calculations?" He shook his head, a gesture that managed to convey both pity and disdain. "Blades are forged in fire, Thorne. You don't temper steel with kindness." |
| The shard against Soren's chest pulsed with sudden heat, Valenna's laughter rippling through his mind.  |
|   |

| 'Finally,' she whispered, her voice rich with dark amusement, 'someone who speaks my tongue. The boy understands what you still resist, power demands sacrifice, and those who hesitate to pay the price remain forever powerless.'  |
|--|
| Soren's jaw tightened, caught between Veyr's cold pragmatism and Valenna's approving mockery. Both of them viewing him as a weapon to be honed, a tool to be used and discarded when its purpose was served.   |
| "And what if I refuse?" he asked, the question escaping before he could reconsider.  |
| Veyr's expression shifted to something almost like genuine surprise. "Refuse? You might as well refuse to breathe." He leaned back, studying Soren with renewed interest. "This is your moment, Thorne. The opportunity you've been training for. Survive, and even my father will have no choice but to acknowledge you. Fail" He left the end unsaid, the implication hanging between them like a suspended blade. |
| The carriage hit another rut, harder this time, the jolt sending a spike of pain through Soren's still-healing ribs. He gripped the edge of the seat, steadying himself as the vehicle rocked back into rhythm.  |
| The pulse of the shard in his chest throbbed like a war drum, setting a counterpoint to his racing thoughts. A hunting party. A killer who moved like mist and struck like lightning. Knights with years of training and battle experience. And him, street fighter turned reluctant recruit, thrust into a deadly game of noble politics.   |

'This is what you wanted,' Valenna reminded him, her voice cool and insistent. 'To rise. To prove your worth. To be more than the orphan from Nordhav's gutters. Did you think ascension came without cost?'

Veyr watched him, those calculating eyes missing nothing, not the tightening of Soren's jaw, not the whitening of his knuckles against the seat's edge, not the momentary flicker of uncertainty that crossed his face before being banished by stubborn resolve.

The carriage rolled onward through the night, its wheels marking the steady rhythm of approaching fate.

## Chapter 69: Riders of the Hunt

Chapter 69: Riders of the Hunt

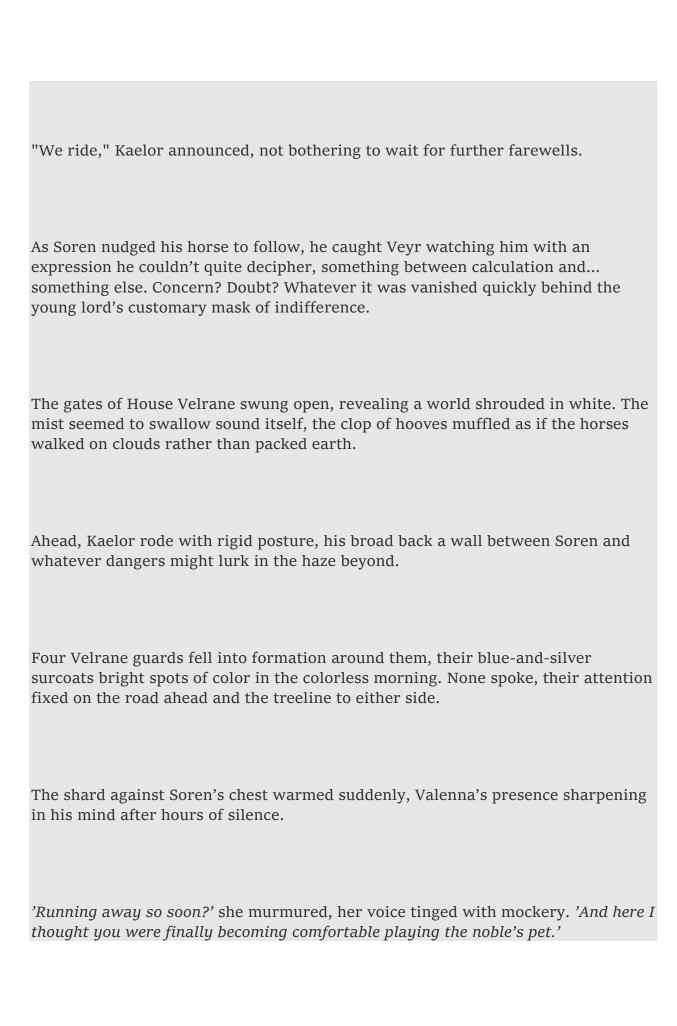
Morning mist swallowed the world beyond arm's reach, turning House Velrane's courtyard into an island of stone floating in a sea of gray.

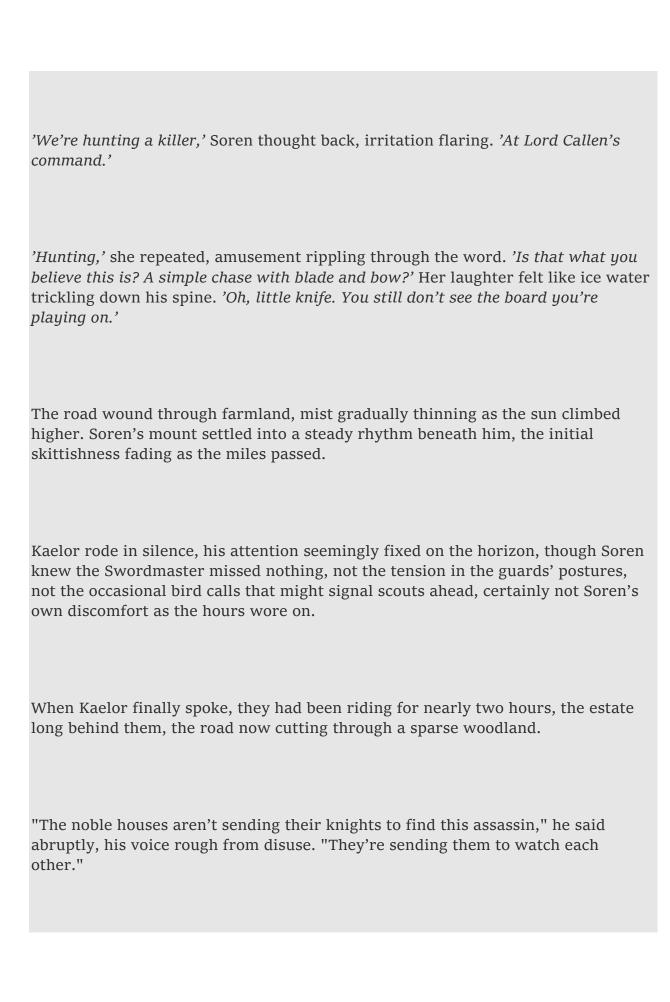
Soren tightened the cinch on his saddle, the leather creaking beneath his hands as he worked. The shard against his chest felt colder than usual, as if responding to the chill that hung in the air.

"You're doing it wrong."

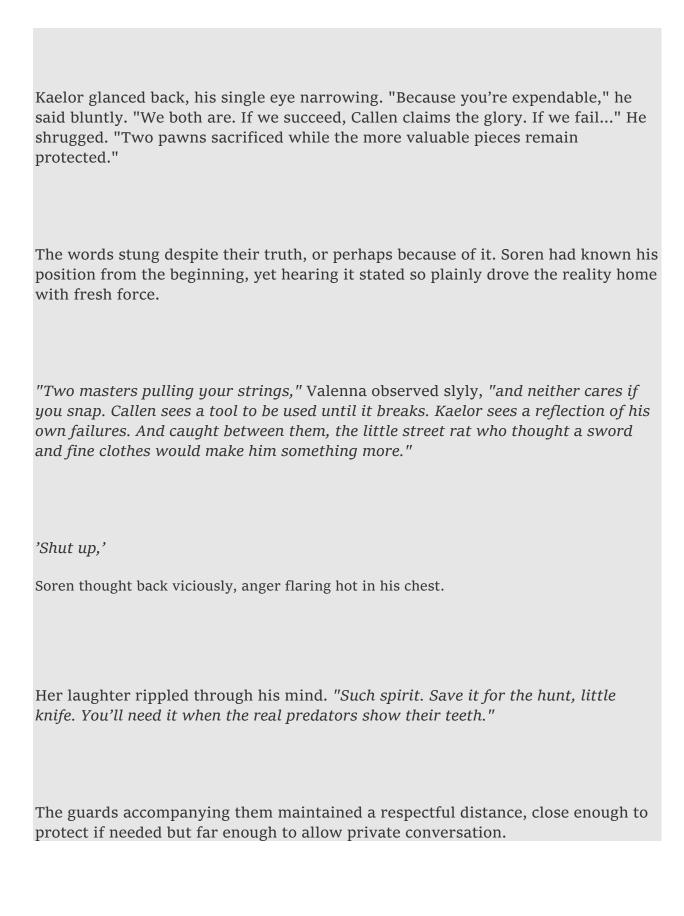
| The Swordmaster's voice cut through the silence like a blade. Kaelor stood beside his own mount, a massive gray destrier that seemed too large for any normal man to control.   |
|---|
| The scarred warrior didn't look at Soren as he spoke, his attention seemingly fixed on adjusting his own tack.  |
| "The buckle needs to be one notch tighter," he continued, still not looking up. "Unless you fancy tumbling from your saddle the first time we encounter rough terrain."   |
| Soren bit back a retort and adjusted the strap as instructed. The horse, a chestnut gelding with more spirit than he would have preferred, snorted and shifted its weight, clearly unhappy with the tighter binding.  |
| "At least one of you has sense," Kaelor muttered, patting his own mount's neck. "Though I suspect it's not the one who walks on two legs."  |
| The courtyard remained oddly empty save for them and the small contingent of Velrane guards who would escort them to the meeting point. No servants bustled about with last-minute provisions. No stable hands hovered nearby to offer assistance. And most notably, no Lord Callen stood at the steps to see them off. |
| 'His absence speaks clearly enough,' Soren thought, running a hand along his horse's flank. 'Success or don't return at all.'   |
|   |

"Expecting a farewell feast?" Kaelor asked, his single eye fixing on Soren with uncomfortable intensity. "Perhaps a blessing from the lord himself?" The swordmaster's mouth twisted into what might have been a smile on a less scarred face. "Noble sentiment is reserved for those whose return is actually desired." Soren mounted his horse without responding, settling into the saddle with the careful precision Kaelor had drilled into him during their limited riding lessons. The gelding danced sideways, eager to be moving. A figure appeared at the top of the manor steps, and for a moment, Soren thought Lord Callen had decided to make an appearance after all. But it was Veyr who emerged from the mist, wrapped in a heavy cloak against the morning chill. The young lord's face remained as unreadable as ever as he descended to the courtyard. "Try not to embarrass us too thoroughly," Veyr said, stopping a few paces from Soren's mount. His eyes flicked between the recruit and the Swordmaster. "The hunting party includes some of the finest blades in the region. It would be... inconvenient if House Velrane's contributions proved lacking." Soren nodded stiffly, uncertain whether the comment was directed more at him or at Kaelor. The Swordmaster merely grunted, already turning his mount toward the gate.

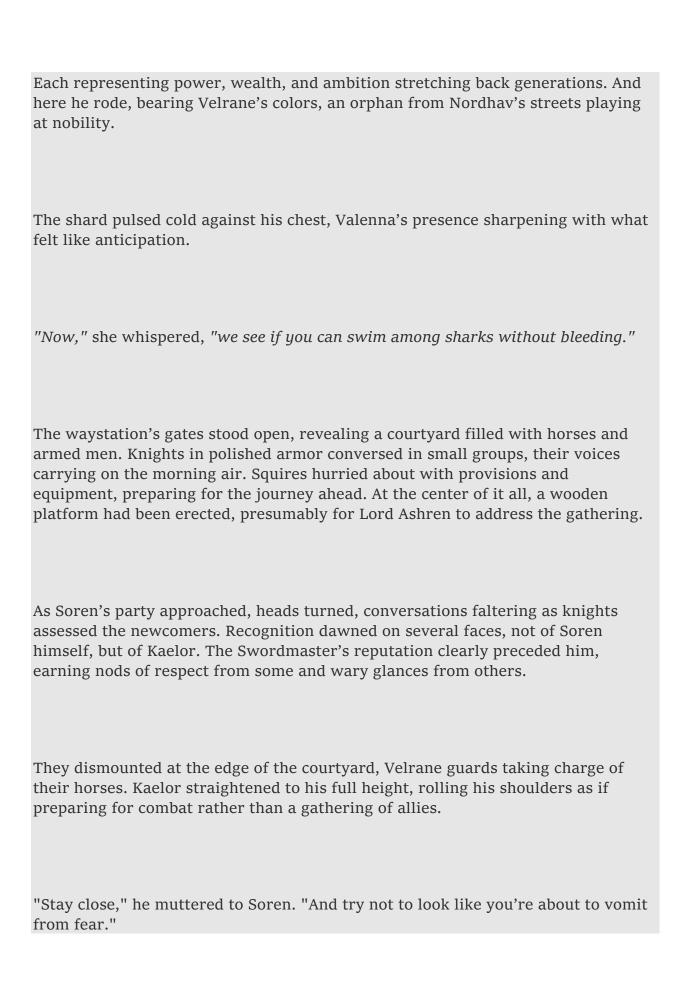


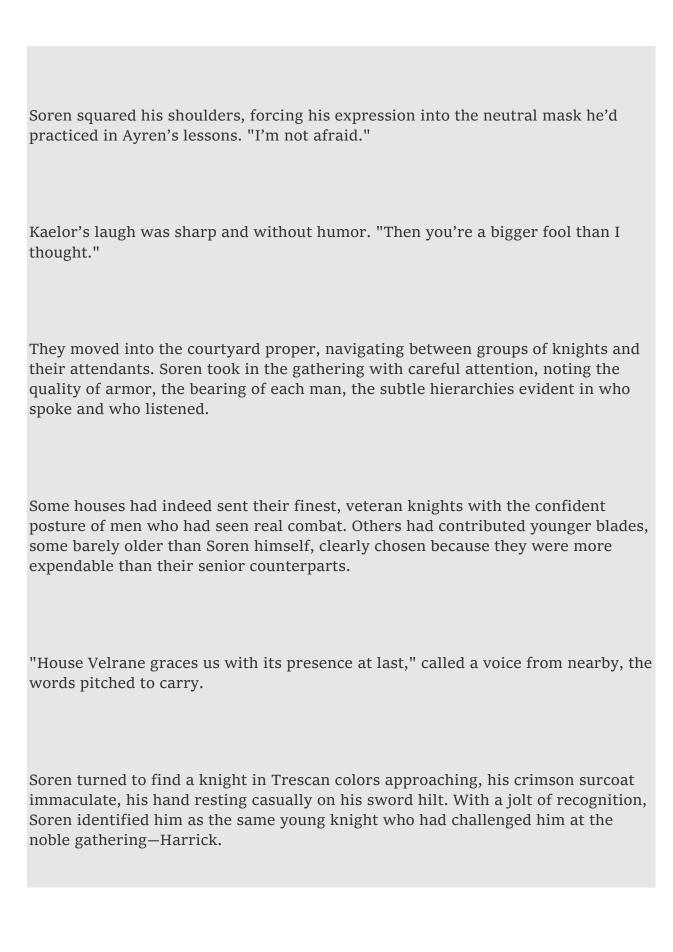


| Soren frowned, adjusting his position to ease the ache building in his thighs. "What do you mean?"  |
|---|
| Kaelor's laugh was a harsh, broken sound. "You think they care about justice? About protecting their precious bloodlines?" He shook his head. "This hunt is a performance. Each house sending their blades to demonstrate appropriate concern while simultaneously positioning themselves for whatever comes next." |
| "Next?" Soren echoed, trying to parse the Swordmaster's meaning.  |
| "War," Kaelor said simply. "Or something close enough to it. The assassin is just the spark. The kindling has been laid for generations."   |
| The casual certainty with which he spoke sent a chill through Soren that had nothing to do with the morning air. The shard against his chest cooled sharply, Valenna's presence drawing closer.   |
| "He's right," she whispered. "For once, the scarred man sees clearly. This hunt is merely the opening move in a game that's been playing out since before you were born."   |
| Soren's hand drifted to the hilt of his sword, the gesture unconscious but telling. "Then why send me? I'm hardly qualified to represent House Velrane in a conflict of this magnitude."  |
|   |



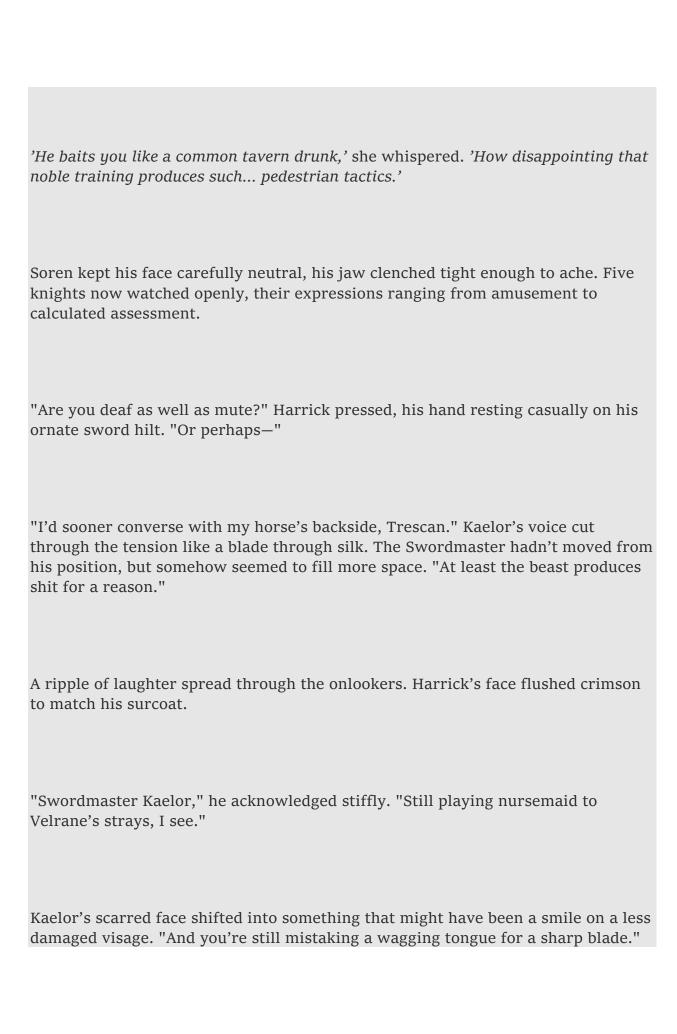
Soren wondered how much they knew of the politics surrounding this hunt, were they also pawns, or simply soldiers following orders without questioning the larger game? "The nobles at this gathering," Kaelor continued after a long silence, "they're deadlier than any assassin. They'll smile while sliding daggers between your ribs. They'll toast your health while poisoning your cup." His voice dropped lower, almost as if speaking to himself. "I've seen what happens when noble houses go to war. It's never the lords who bleed first." The road widened as they approached what appeared to be a crossroads. In the distance, Soren could make out the outline of a fortified waystation, a common sight along major trade routes, offering protection to merchants and travelers. But this one seemed unusually busy, banners of various colors snapping in the breeze above the stone walls. "The gathering point," Kaelor said unnecessarily. "Remember your training. Speak little. Observe much. And keep your hand near your sword at all times." As they drew closer, Soren could distinguish individual banners, the crimson and gold of House Trescan, the forest green of House Karvath, the midnight blue of House Dravien.





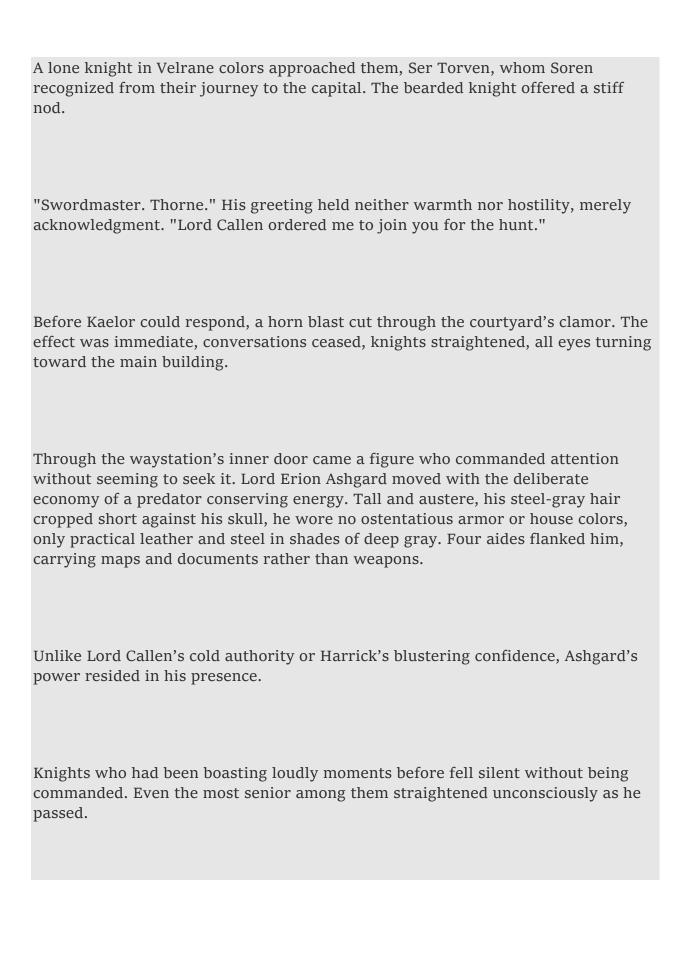
## Chapter 70: Ashes Before the Fire

| Chapter 70: Ashes Before the Fire  |
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| Harrick of Trescan planted himself directly in Soren's path, his lips curling into something too sharp to be called a smile.   |
| "Well, well. The street rat returns, and in knight's clothing no less." His voice carried just enough to draw attention without seeming deliberate. "Tell me, boydoes House Velrane truly have no actual knights to send, or did Lord Callen simply wish to be rid of you?"                      |
| Soren's fingers twitched toward his sword hilt before he caught himself. Kaelor's warning echoed in his mind: 'Speak little. Observe much.' The courtyard suddenly felt smaller, knights from nearby groups turning to watch with predatory interest.  |
| A stocky knight in Karvath green nudged his companion. "This should be entertaining."  |
| Harrick stepped closer, the morning light catching on the gold thread in his crimson surcoat. "Nothing to say? Perhaps they haven't taught you to speak yet." He glanced around at his growing audience. "Velrane's new pet can wear the clothes, but lacks the breeding to fill them properly." |
| The shard against Soren's chest cooled sharply, Valenna's presence surging forward.  |

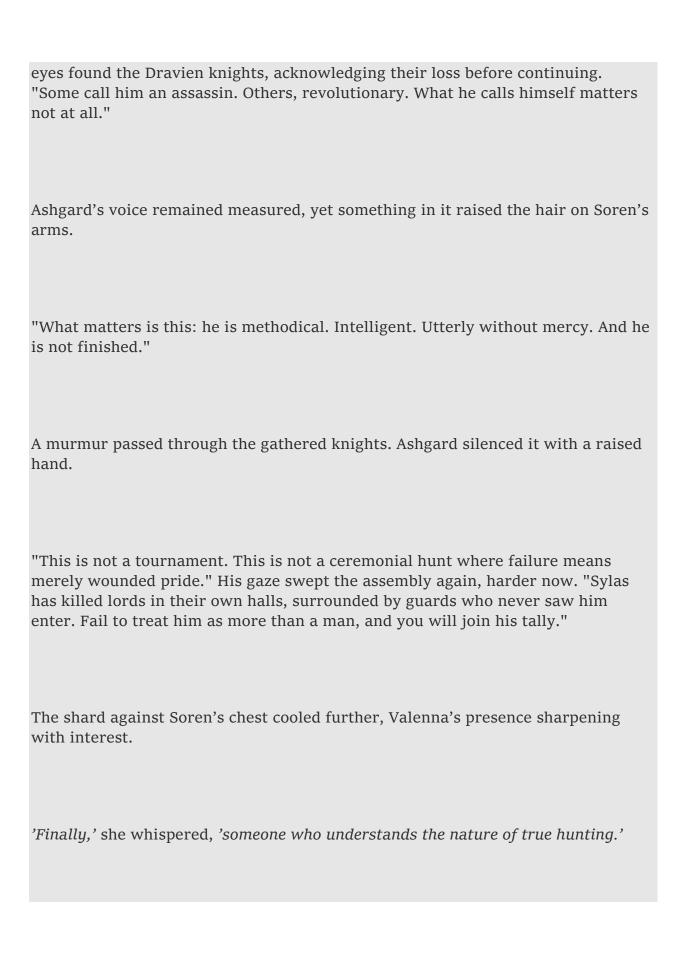


| His single eye flicked dismissively over Harrick. "When you've actually killed something more dangerous than a practice dummy, perhaps I'll bother learning your name."  |
|--|
| The gathered knights' laughter grew louder. Even a Dravien knight, tall and severe in midnight blue, failed to completely suppress a smile. Harrick's hand tightened on his sword, knuckles whitening before he mastered himself.  |
| "We'll see who proves more valuable on this hunt," he said, voice tight with controlled fury.  |
| Kaelor shrugged, already turning away. "We certainly will."  |
| Soren followed the Swordmaster as he moved deeper into the courtyard, feeling Harrick's glare burning into his back. The brief confrontation had drawn attention they didn't need, but had also established boundaries, and revealed alliances.  |
| The waystation's courtyard teemed with knights from across the region, their colors forming distinct clusters. House Dravien's contingent stood apart near the eastern wall, their midnight blue surcoats adorned with silver stars. They maintained rigid posture, speaking little even among themselves. |
| Near the stables, the green-clad knights of House Karvath shared a wineskin, their laughter louder than necessary. Their armor showed signs of actual use, nicks and scratches that suggested experience beyond tournaments.   |
|  |

| 'Look at them,' Valenna murmured, her voice rich with disdain. 'Peacocks sharpening talons, preening while they plot where best to strike.'  |
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| Smaller houses had contributed single knights who hovered at the edges, seeking inclusion with larger contingents. A knight in gray and white, House Lanther, if Soren remembered correctly, received curt nods from the Dravien group but no invitation to join them. |
| "They've been at this for generations," Kaelor said quietly as they found a relatively isolated spot near the northern wall. "The rivalries you see now have roots older than either of us."   |
| Soren nodded, studying how knights positioned themselves, who stood with backs to walls, who maintained clear sightlines to potential rivals, who mingled freely and who remained isolated.  |
| "House Trescan and Karvath are formal allies," he observed, "but their knights<br>barely acknowledge each other."  |
| Kaelor grunted in approval. "Recent trade dispute. Karvath ships were denied preferred docking at Trescan-controlled harbors." The Swordmaster's eye narrowed. "Politics makes for fragile alliances."   |
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| The shard against Soren's chest pulsed once, neither hot nor cold, but somehow alert, like a hound catching an unfamiliar scent.  |
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| Ashgard ascended the wooden platform at the courtyard's center with fluid grace that belied his years. He stood silent for a moment, steel-gray eyes sweeping over the gathered knights. Something in that gaze made Soren feel simultaneously assessed and dismissed, measured against some standard and found neither particularly wanting nor particularly impressive.   |
| "Knights of the noble houses," Ashgard began, his voice carrying effortlessly without seeming raised. "You stand here representing the finest blades in the realm. House Trescan." He nodded toward the crimson-clad contingent. "House Dravien. House Karvath. House Velrane." Each acknowledgment came with a brief glance toward the respective groups. "And the smaller houses whose contributions are no less valued." |
| He paused, allowing the courtesy to settle before his tone hardened.  |
| "You are not here for glory. You are not here for honor. You are here to hunt a killer."  |
| Ashgard gestured, and one of his aides unrolled a map on a table beside the platform.   |
| "Sylas, known to commoners as the Emerald Reaperhas claimed three noble lives in as many months. Lord Halwick, Baron Tessier, Count Dravien's cousin." His  |



| Ashgard pointed to the map, where his aide had marked several locations with redink.  |
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| "We ride north at dawn, following his last known trail. Our purpose is simple: find him, flush him from hiding, and end this threat before more noble blood is spilled."  |
| Soren studied the older man's face, finding neither fear nor bloodlust, only the calm certainty of one who had hunted dangerous prey before.  |
| "Questions will be addressed by my aides. Supplies have been prepared. Each house contingent will receive their specific assignments before nightfall." Ashgard straightened, his posture somehow becoming even more commanding. "Make your preparations. Tomorrow, we hunt." |
| As knights began to disperse, Harrick's voice carried from somewhere to Soren's right.  |
| "Let's hope Velrane's dead weight doesn't slow us down," he muttered, just loud enough to be heard.   |
| Ashgard's eyes flicked in the direction of the comment, though he made no direct acknowledgment. Instead, his voice simply rose slightly, continuing as if there had been no interruption.  |
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| "This endeavor requires discipline, focus, and unity of purpose. Those incapable of setting aside petty rivalries would do better to remain behind."   |
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| The rebuke, delivered without directly addressing Harrick, carried more weight than any direct confrontation. The Trescan knight fell silent, properly chastened without being granted the dignity of direct attention.  |
| "Rest well," Ashgard concluded. "At dawn, the fire is lit."  |
| As the gathering broke apart, knights moving with renewed purpose toward their assigned quarters, Soren remained rooted in place. The reality of what lay ahead settled over him like a physical weight. This wasn't training in Velrane's yard. This wasn't political maneuvering in Callen's shadow. This was war in its earliest form, deadly, purposeful, inescapable. |
| The shard pulsed cold against his chest, Valenna's voice a whisper that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.  |
| "Now the game begins."   |
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