

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 timber that had devoured the valley floor. Massive walls studded with watchtowers encircled the metropolis, their pale stone catching the midday sun.

Countless banners snapped in the wind, crimson and gold, azure and silver, colors Soren couldn't even name, each marking territory, proclaiming allegiance, demanding 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.

Armies clashed in frozen combat, kings knelt before greater kings, strange beasts fell beneath heroic blades, the litany of victories that had built this place, preserved in stone for all to remember.

Guards in polished breastplates and crimson cloaks stood at attention, their formation perfect, their faces expressionless. As Veyr's party approached, they saluted with practiced precision, not warmly, not with any particular enthusiasm, but with the rigid acknowledgment of rank that formed the backbone of the realm.

"House Velrane," Ser Dallen announced, unnecessarily. The guards already knew. One of them, wearing the insignia of a captain, stepped forward with a shallow bow.

"Lord Veyr. The city welcomes you. Your father's courier arrived yesterday."

Veyr inclined his head slightly, the barest acknowledgment. "We'll proceed directly to the Velrane estate. Ensure our passage remains uninterrupted."

"Of course, my lord." The captain's eyes flicked briefly to Soren, a moment of assessment quickly masked. "As you command."

They passed beneath the shadow of the gate, hooves echoing against ancient stone. Soren noted how the guards' posture remained rigid, how their eyes followed Veyr

with a mixture of deference and wariness. Not love, not even respect, something closer to fear wrapped in protocol.

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.

"House Karvath's banner," Veyr said quietly, nodding toward a standard of black and green hanging from a balcony.

"Once among the greatest of trading houses, now barely clinging to relevance. The father gambled away their shipping contracts, the son lacks the cunning to win them back."

He continued this quiet commentary as they moved deeper into the city, pointing out signs Soren would have missed entirely.

A particular shade of blue worn by servants indicating a house in mourning. A street where the buildings' shutters were painted red, marking territory controlled by a guild whose name Veyr mentioned with faint distaste.

A square where merchants from three rival factions conducted business within sight of each other, their apparent cooperation masking decades of sabotage and betrayal.

"What do you see there?" Veyr asked suddenly, gesturing toward a mansion whose windows had been boarded over, though its facade remained grand.

Soren studied it, trying to apply what he'd learned. "Abandoned. Recently. The stone's still clean, but no one's tended the entrance."

"Good. And what does that tell you?"

He hesitated, aware this was another test. "That whoever owned it fell from power. Quickly. Not a gradual decline or they'd have sold it before abandoning it 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."

Soren absorbed it all, cataloging details as Ayren had taught him. Which houses displayed armed guards prominently. Which concealed them behind decorative armor.

Which relied on reputation alone for protection. The patterns of power revealed themselves slowly, like a language he was just beginning to decipher.

"And what of House Velrane?" he asked, the question escaping before he could reconsider.

Veyr glanced at him, something flickering behind his eyes...surprise, perhaps, that Soren had dared to ask. "We have no need to display our worth on this particular street," he said after a moment. "When you've held power for eight generations, you needn't shout to be heard."

The avenue widened further as they approached what must be their destination. Ahead, a mansion of gray stone stood apart from its neighbors, set back behind walls topped with decorative ironwork that Soren immediately recognized as functional despite its beauty.

Sharp points disguised as leaves. Angles designed to snag climbing ropes. Defensive architecture masquerading as art.

"Home, for the duration of our stay," Veyr said, his tone suggesting the word held little meaning for him. "Try not to embarrass me too thoroughly, Thorne. The city has eyes everywhere, and my father's agents are particularly attentive."

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

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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.

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.

Banners of crimson and gold fluttered above armored knights whose polished plate gleamed blindingly in the afternoon sun.

A silk canopy supported on silver poles sheltered the central figures from the elements, unnecessary protection on this clear day, but an unmistakable declaration of status.

"House Trescan," Veyr murmured, his voice pitched for Soren's ears alone. "Old blood, old gold, and the arrogance to match both."

At the center of this ostentatious display rode a young man perhaps Veyr's age or slightly younger.

Even at a distance, his bearing proclaimed nobility as clearly as the banners above him. His clothing, crimson silk embroidered with gold thread, would have cost more than everything Soren had ever owned in his life. His mount, a gleaming black stallion with a braided mane, pranced with the same haughty confidence as its rider.

"The heir," Veyr continued, his tone unchanged though his posture had subtly straightened. "Lord Ellian Trescan. Father sits on the King's High Council. Mother claims distant royal blood. Both facts he'll work into conversation within the first three sentences."

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.

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.

"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, Harrick...had 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.

The shard against Soren's chest flared hot, a pulse of heat that matched the sudden surge of his heartbeat. Valenna's presence rushed back from whatever distance she'd maintained, sharp and focused as a blade point.

'Now,' she whispered, her voice like ice breaking. *'Show them.'*

Soren moved without conscious thought, his body responding to some deeper imperative than reason. He slid from his saddle, boots hitting the packed earth with barely a sound. Two steps brought him between Veyr and the advancing squire.

His hand found his sword hilt, drawing the blade in one fluid motion that felt both foreign and intimately familiar.

Steel met steel with a sound like a bell struck too hard. The impact jarred up Soren's arm, but his grip held firm. T

he squire's blade, diverted from its path toward Veyr, trembled against Soren's own. For a heartbeat, surprise registered in the young man's eyes...surprise that quickly transformed into fury as he recognized the interruption came not from another knight, but from someone he'd dismissed as unworthy of notice.

"You dare?" Harrick hissed, pressing forward with strength born of rage and wounded pride.

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 this...another 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."

The squire hesitated, pride warring with obedience. For a moment, Soren thought he might ignore his lord's command entirely. Then, with visible reluctance, he stepped back, though his blade remained drawn.

"This isn't finished," he muttered, the words meant for Soren alone.

"It is if you wish to live," Soren replied, matching his volume. The shard pulsed once more against his chest, a flare of heat that felt almost like approval.

The two companies faced each other across the narrow stretch of road, the air between them charged with potential violence.

Knights on both sides had hands on weapons, bodies tensed for the conflict that still hovered at the edge of possibility. Traders and travelers had backed even further away, creating a ring of unwilling spectators around what might yet become a battlefield.

Veyr broke the silence, his voice carrying the perfect blend of courtesy and dismissal. "Safe travels, Lord Ellian. I'm sure your father eagerly awaits news of your... diplomatic skills."

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.

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.

Veyr's expression flickered with something that might have been surprise before settling back into its customary mask of bored superiority. "Well, consider this your education. Tonight's gathering is a battlefield where the weapons are smiles and the armor is made of perfect manners."

Before Soren could respond, a steward intercepted them, his thin face pinched with urgency.

"Lord Veyr," the man said with a shallow bow, "your father demands your immediate presence in his solar. Both of you," he added, eyes flicking briefly to Soren.

Something tightened in Veyr's jaw, a momentary tension quickly suppressed. "Now?"

"Without delay, my lord."

Veyr nodded once, dismissing the steward with a gesture that looked casual but carried unmistakable authority. He turned to Soren, lowering his voice.

"Remember what I taught you about court manners. Speak only when addressed directly. Keep your eyes down except when making a point. And for gods' sake, don't mention the shrine incident."

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.

Lord Callen Dathen Velrane stood with his back to them, gazing out at the estate grounds through leaded glass.

Even from behind, his presence dominated the room. Tall and broad-shouldered, he maintained a military-straight posture that made him seem taller still. His ash-silver hair was swept back from his face, neat and precise.

When he turned, Soren caught the full impact of those pale gray eyes, cold as northern ice, seeing everything, revealing nothing.

He was dressed in what Soren supposed constituted "austere noble finery"...layers of black silk with silver thread trim that caught the light when he moved.

A signet ring sat heavy on his right hand, the Velrane crest etched into metal that might have been silver but somehow seemed harder, more substantial. A sword rested on a stand near his desk, not a ceremonial piece but a warrior's weapon, its hilt worn smooth from use.

Lord Callen's gaze settled on his son first, assessment as tangible as a physical touch.

"You've arrived." The words were neutral, neither approval nor criticism, merely acknowledgment of fact.

"Yes, Father," Veyr replied, his voice carefully modulated.

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.

"Your place tonight is not to speak," Lord Callen said, his tone making it clear this was not merely advice but command. "You stand as Veyr's Blade. Nothing more." His eyes hardened, pale gray turning to flint. "When you draw, it will be my house's voice you speak with. That weight will crush you if you stumble."

The warning landed like a physical blow. Soren inclined his head slightly, acknowledging both the honor and the threat contained in those words.

Lord Callen turned his attention back to Veyr. "House Velrane has been invited to a gathering at the Marrath estate tonight. We will attend."

Veyr's posture shifted subtly, a straightening of the spine, a slight tension in the shoulders. "All of us, Father?"

"Yes." The single word carried layers of meaning Soren couldn't fully decipher. "Your brother is otherwise engaged. Your presence is required."

"Who else will attend?" Veyr asked, his tone carefully neutral.

"Houses Trescan, Karvath, and Dravien have confirmed. Royal envoys will likely make an appearance." Lord Callen's fingers tapped once against the desk's polished surface. "It's a significant gathering. The alliances formed or broken tonight will echo through the coming season."

The name Trescan sent a jolt through Soren's body. The memory of the confrontation on the road flashed through his mind, the arrogant heir, the red-faced squire, blades drawn in public view. Would they remember? Would they seek retribution?

Lord Callen rose from his chair, moving around the desk until he stood directly before Veyr. Despite their similar height, he somehow loomed over his son, presence extending beyond physical form.

"Do not falter," he said, voice low and intense. "Do not let them dismiss you. If you cannot hold their gaze, they will own you before you've opened your mouth."

Veyr inclined his head, accepting the instruction without visible reaction. "I understand, Father."

Lord Callen turned to Soren, those cold eyes narrowing slightly. "And you, boy." The term wasn't meant as an insult but as a reminder of his place. "If you shame this house, I'll see you buried beneath it."

The threat wasn't delivered with heat or anger, which somehow made it more terrifying. Lord Callen spoke as one stating simple fact, as certain as sunrise.

"You'll ride with me," he continued, turning away in clear dismissal. "Be ready within the hour. And remember: there are no second chances among wolves."

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

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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 corridor stretched before them, each step carrying them deeper into unfamiliar territory. Servants darted past with increasing frequency, arms laden with silks and silver, the entire household transformed into a war camp preparing for battle.

"Dressing chambers?" Soren finally asked, keeping his voice low.

Veyr's mouth twitched, a ghost of amusement flickering across his features. "You didn't think they'd let you attend looking like that, did you?" His gaze flicked dismissively over Soren's travel-stained attire. "Don't worry. You'll endure it, same as everything else."

The steward led them to a junction where the corridor split, gesturing to separate doors on opposite walls. "Lord Veyr, your attendants await in your chambers. Master Thorne, you will be prepared in the east dressing room."

Before Soren could respond, Veyr was already moving toward his assigned door with the easy confidence of one following a familiar routine. The young lord paused briefly, that faint smile returning.

"Try not to stab anyone," he said, then disappeared through the doorway.

Soren approached his designated chamber with considerably more caution. The shard against his chest remained cool, Valenna's presence withdrawn to that watchful distance she sometimes maintained. The door swung open at his approach, revealing a scene that stopped him dead in his tracks.

A small army of maids awaited within, at least five of them, each with the efficient posture of soldiers ready for deployment.

The room itself was larger than Soren had expected, dominated by a polished copper tub steaming with hot water.

Racks of clothing lined one wall, while a table near the window held an assortment of small bottles and implements whose purpose he couldn't begin to guess.

"Master Thorne," the eldest of the maids greeted him, her gray-streaked hair pulled into a severe knot. "We've been instructed to prepare you for tonight's gathering. Please, come in."

He stepped through the doorway, and they descended upon him like a well-coordinated hunting pack.

"This will need to come off," one said, reaching for his travel-stained tunic without waiting for permission.

"And these," another added, hands already working at the laces of his boots.

"The belt too," a third chimed in, fingers moving to the buckle at his waist.

Soren froze, instinct urging him to fend off these invaders of his personal space. But resistance seemed futile, they moved with the practiced efficiency of those who had performed this ritual countless times before.

Within moments, they had divested him of his outer garments, leaving him standing in nothing but his underclothes, feeling exposed and suddenly vulnerable.

The shard against his chest pulsed once, warming slightly as Valenna's presence sharpened in his mind.

'My, my,' her voice whispered through his thoughts, rich with amusement. 'The fearsome street fighter, undone by a troop of maids. Shall I compose a ballad to commemorate your courage?'

'Shut up,' he thought back, heat creeping up his neck that had nothing to do with the steaming tub.

"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."

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.

"Your hair, Master Thorne," one of the younger maids said, hands already working lather into his scalp. "It's quite... resistant."

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.'*

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.

"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.'

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.'*

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-circle around a central speaking area. Each table bore the crest of a noble house, 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.

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.

Dozens of eyes tracked their progress. Not just the lords and ladies, but their knights as well, assessing the newcomers with predatory focus. Soren felt their stares like physical touches, some curious, others dismissive, a few openly hostile.

Whispers followed in their wake, too soft to catch entirely but clear enough in fragments:

"—the Blade of Velrane—"

"—orphan from the streets, they say—"

"—Callen's new pet weapon—"

The shard pulsed cold against his chest. *"They fear what they don't understand,"* Valenna murmured. *"And you, little knife, are very much a mystery to them."*

Lord Callen reached their designated table and took his place at its center, Veyr settling smoothly to his right. Servants materialized from the shadows to pull out their chairs, pour wine, adjust the placement of silver implements whose purpose Soren couldn't begin to guess.

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—"

"—wonder if he's bedding the younger lord—"

"—won't last a season—"

The shard cooled further, Valenna's presence a balm against the burning in his chest. *"Their opinions matter as much as a fish's thoughts on flying,"* she said. *"Let them talk. Words break against skill like waves against stone."*

Soren forced his breathing to steady, focusing on the room rather than the whispers. He studied the layout, noting exits, counting armed men, identifying potential threats. The training with Kaelor and Ayren had prepared him for this, at least, seeing beneath the surface to the dangers lurking below.

Lord Callen rose from his seat, and the hall fell silent as if a blade had cut through the murmurs. He didn't raise his voice, didn't bang a goblet for attention. His mere presence, his simple act of standing, commanded complete focus.

"My lords and ladies of the council," he began, his tone measured and cool. "We gather in troubled times. The roads grow dangerous. Trade falters. Unrest spreads through the outlying provinces."

His pale eyes swept the assembled nobility, lingering briefly on each face. "House Marrath has graciously provided this neutral ground for our discussions. Let us

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 combined forces could hunt down a single assassin."

"If he were just a man," countered another, leaning forward. "Some say he's more myth than flesh. A vengeful spirit sent to punish noble excess."

Laughter, strained and hollow, met this suggestion.

"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.

His pale eyes tracked the discussion with the detached interest of a hawk watching mice scatter in a field. Measuring. Assessing. Waiting.

"The assassin must be found and executed publicly," declared the Trescan lord, pounding his fist on the table. "Every house must commit men to the hunt. No resource can be spared."

"And leave our own holdings undefended?" countered Lord Karvath. "Folly. We should increase our personal guards and let the king's men handle this criminal."

"The king's men?" Lady Dravien's laugh was brittle as winter ice. "They can't even keep the capital's streets clear of pickpockets. We need a coordinated effort among our houses—"

"Enough."

Lord Callen didn't raise his voice, yet his single word sliced through the chaos like a blade through silk. The hall fell instantly silent, lords and ladies freezing mid-argument as if struck by some arcane spell.

Even the servants hovering at the edges of the room stilled, goblets and pitchers suspended in their hands.

Soren watched as Lord Callen rose to his full height, his presence expanding to fill the suddenly quiet space. This was power in its purest form—not shouted demands or theatrical displays, but the absolute certainty that one would be obeyed.

"We waste time with accusations," Lord Callen said, his voice carrying to every corner of the hall without apparent effort. "The assassin, this Sylas...is a symptom, not the disease."

The gathered nobles exchanged uneasy glances. Lord Callen's gaze swept across them, those pale gray eyes missing nothing.

"Before we hunt this man, we must understand what forces move him. A blade does not wield itself."

Soren shifted his weight slightly, the floor cold and hard beneath his polished boots. Standing perfectly still as the other knights did was proving more difficult than he'd anticipated.

His back ached from maintaining the rigid posture, but he didn't dare relax. Not with so many eyes watching for any sign of weakness.

A thin lord with a pointed beard leaned forward. "What are you suggesting, Lord Callen? That one of us directs this killer?" His voice dripped with manufactured

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 something...a 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. 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 Syllas," 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)

Chapter 67: The Gathering (3)

"What are you suggesting, Lord Ashren?" asked the Trescan lord, eyes narrowing.

"I suggest we face an idealist," Lord Ashren replied. "And idealists are far more dangerous than mercenaries. They cannot be bought off or reasoned with. They must be understood, then eliminated."

The debate splintered again, lords and ladies breaking into smaller discussions, voices rising and falling like waves against a shore. Soren remained at his post, studying their faces, noting which arguments sparked anger and which inspired fear.

"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."

Scoffs and murmurs greeted this, though Soren noticed how several knights shifted uncomfortably at the mention of supernatural abilities.

"Superstitious nonsense," declared Lord Karvath. "He's a man, nothing more. And men can be killed."

"Three nobles would disagree with you," Lady Dravien remarked dryly. "If they still had heads with which to speak."

The tension in the room ratcheted higher with each exchange. Soren felt it building like pressure before a storm, the air growing thick with unspoken threats and barely contained hostility. His hand drifted closer to his sword hilt, a movement mirrored by several other knights around the hall.

"Careful," Valenna cautioned. "They're looking for any excuse. The youngest Trescan knight has been watching you since we entered, hand never far from his blade, eyes hungry for confrontation. They remember the road incident, little knife. Don't give them the opening they seek."

Soren forced his hand to relax, though he kept it within easy reach of his weapon. The Trescan knight, hardly more than a boy, really, with a patchy attempt at a beard, continued to stare, challenge written plainly across his features.

Lord Callen rose again, and the hall fell silent in waves, conversation dying out as attention returned to the commanding figure at the center table.

"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

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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.

"What did you make of them?" he asked, gaze still fixed on the passing shadows beyond the window.

Soren hesitated, weighing his response. The question felt like another test, another opportunity to prove his worth, or to fail spectacularly.

"The nobles?" he clarified, buying time.

"No, the serving girls," Veyr replied, that familiar edge of mockery creeping into his tone. "Yes, the nobles. What did you observe?"

Soren straightened, recalling his training with Ayren. Information was currency; observation was power. "They're afraid," he said finally. "Not just of the assassin. Of each other."

"Obvious," Veyr dismissed with a slight wave. "What else?"

The shard against Soren's chest warmed suddenly, Valenna's presence sharpening in his mind with a burst of dark amusement.

'Tell him how Lord Karvath's hands shake when he reaches for his wine,' her voice whispered through his thoughts. 'How Lady Dravien's eyes linger too long on the Trescan heir. How the knights' postures reveal old injuries and fresh anxieties. Such trivial observations, is this what Ayren taught you?'

Soren pushed back against her intrusion, determined to form his own assessment. "House Trescan wants control of the hunting party," he continued. "They nominated themselves three times in different ways. And Lord Ashren seemed... prepared for his appointment. Like he knew it was coming."

Veyr's eyebrow lifted slightly, the first crack in his careful mask of indifference. "Better," he acknowledged. "What about the alliances?"

'Pathetic,' Valenna cut in before Soren could respond. 'You see the surface ripples but miss the currents beneath. The Trescan lord's second son has vanished from court, why? The Karvath trade ships change their routes to avoid the northern passages, what do they know that others don't? And that silver-haired lord with the quiet voice, did you notice how the others fell silent when he spoke? Not from respect, little knife. From fear.'

Her interruption sparked frustration in Soren's chest, but also clarity. The pieces realigned in his mind, surface observations connecting to deeper patterns.

"House Dravien and Marrath are publicly allied but privately fractured," he said with growing confidence. "They sat together but never shared glances when important points were raised. And despite the talk of cooperation, no one

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 on 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 statement 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. "A disposable token to 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

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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.

"We ride," Kaelor announced, not bothering to wait for further farewells.

As Soren nudged his horse to follow, he caught Veyr watching him with an expression he couldn't quite decipher, something between calculation and... something else. Concern? Doubt? Whatever it was vanished quickly behind the young lord's customary mask of indifference.

The gates of House Velrane swung open, revealing a world shrouded in white. The mist seemed to swallow sound itself, the clop of hooves muffled as if the horses walked on clouds rather than packed earth.

Ahead, Kaelor rode with rigid posture, his broad back a wall between Soren and whatever dangers might lurk in the haze beyond.

Four Velrane guards fell into formation around them, their blue-and-silver surcoats bright spots of color in the colorless morning. None spoke, their attention fixed on the road ahead and the treeline to either side.

The shard against Soren's chest warmed suddenly, Valenna's presence sharpening in his mind after hours of silence.

'Running away so soon?' she murmured, her voice tinged with mockery. 'And here I thought you were finally becoming comfortable playing the noble's pet.'

'We're hunting a killer,' Soren thought back, irritation flaring. 'At Lord Callen's command.'

'Hunting,' she repeated, amusement rippling through the word. 'Is that what you believe this is? A simple chase with blade and bow?' Her laughter felt like ice water trickling down his spine. 'Oh, little knife. You still don't see the board you're playing on.'

The road wound through farmland, mist gradually thinning as the sun climbed higher. Soren's mount settled into a steady rhythm beneath him, the initial skittishness fading as the miles passed.

Kaelor rode in silence, his attention seemingly fixed on the horizon, though Soren knew the Swordmaster missed nothing, not the tension in the guards' postures, not the occasional bird calls that might signal scouts ahead, certainly not Soren's own discomfort as the hours wore on.

When Kaelor finally spoke, they had been riding for nearly two hours, the estate long behind them, the road now cutting through a sparse woodland.

"The noble houses aren't sending their knights to find this assassin," he said abruptly, his voice rough from disuse. "They're sending them to watch each other."

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."

Kaelor glanced back, his single eye narrowing. "Because you're expendable," he said bluntly. "We both are. If we succeed, Callen claims the glory. If we fail..." He shrugged. "Two pawns sacrificed while the more valuable pieces remain protected."

The words stung despite their truth, or perhaps because of it. Soren had known his position from the beginning, yet hearing it stated so plainly drove the reality home with fresh force.

"Two masters pulling your strings," Valenna observed slyly, "and neither cares if you snap. Callen sees a tool to be used until it breaks. Kaelor sees a reflection of his own failures. And caught between them, the little street rat who thought a sword and fine clothes would make him something more."

'Shut up,'

Soren thought back viciously, anger flaring hot in his chest.

Her laughter rippled through his mind. *"Such spirit. Save it for the hunt, little knife. You'll need it when the real predators show their teeth."*

The guards accompanying them maintained a respectful distance, close enough to protect if needed but far enough to allow private conversation.

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.

Each representing power, wealth, and ambition stretching back generations. And here he rode, bearing Velrane's colors, an orphan from Nordhav's streets playing at nobility.

The shard pulsed cold against his chest, Valenna's presence sharpening with what felt like anticipation.

"Now," she whispered, "we see if you can swim among sharks without bleeding."

The waystation's gates stood open, revealing a courtyard filled with horses and armed men. Knights in polished armor conversed in small groups, their voices carrying on the morning air. Squires hurried about with provisions and equipment, preparing for the journey ahead. At the center of it all, a wooden platform had been erected, presumably for Lord Ashren to address the gathering.

As Soren's party approached, heads turned, conversations faltering as knights assessed the newcomers. Recognition dawned on several faces, not of Soren himself, but of Kaelor. The Swordmaster's reputation clearly preceded him, earning nods of respect from some and wary glances from others.

They dismounted at the edge of the courtyard, Velrane guards taking charge of their horses. Kaelor straightened to his full height, rolling his shoulders as if preparing for combat rather than a gathering of allies.

"Stay close," he muttered to Soren. "And try not to look like you're about to vomit from fear."

Soren squared his shoulders, forcing his expression into the neutral mask he'd practiced in Ayren's lessons. "I'm not afraid."

Kaelor's laugh was sharp and without humor. "Then you're a bigger fool than I thought."

They moved into the courtyard proper, navigating between groups of knights and their attendants. Soren took in the gathering with careful attention, noting the quality of armor, the bearing of each man, the subtle hierarchies evident in who spoke and who listened.

Some houses had indeed sent their finest, veteran knights with the confident posture of men who had seen real combat. Others had contributed younger blades, some barely older than Soren himself, clearly chosen because they were more expendable than their senior counterparts.

"House Velrane graces us with its presence at last," called a voice from nearby, the words pitched to carry.

Soren turned to find a knight in Trescan colors approaching, his crimson surcoat immaculate, his hand resting casually on his sword hilt. With a jolt of recognition, Soren identified him as the same young knight who had challenged him at the noble gathering—Harrick.

Chapter 70: Ashes Before the Fire

Chapter 70: Ashes Before the Fire

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, boy...does 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.

'He baits you like a common tavern drunk,' she whispered. 'How disappointing that noble training produces such... pedestrian tactics.'

Soren kept his face carefully neutral, his jaw clenched tight enough to ache. Five knights now watched openly, their expressions ranging from amusement to calculated assessment.

"Are you deaf as well as mute?" Harrick pressed, his hand resting casually on his ornate sword hilt. "Or perhaps—"

"I'd sooner converse with my horse's backside, Trescan." Kaelor's voice cut through the tension like a blade through silk. The Swordmaster hadn't moved from his position, but somehow seemed to fill more space. "At least the beast produces shit for a reason."

A ripple of laughter spread through the onlookers. Harrick's face flushed crimson to match his surcoat.

"Swordmaster Kaelor," he acknowledged stiffly. "Still playing nursemaid to Velrane's strays, I see."

Kaelor's scarred face shifted into something that might have been a smile on a less damaged visage. "And you're still mistaking a wagging tongue for a sharp blade."

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.'

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 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."

A lone knight in Velrane colors approached them, Ser Torven, whom Soren recognized from their journey to the capital. The bearded knight offered a stiff nod.

"Swordmaster. Thorne." His greeting held neither warmth nor hostility, merely acknowledgment. "Lord Callen ordered me to join you for the hunt."

Before Kaelor could respond, a horn blast cut through the courtyard's clamor. The effect was immediate, conversations ceased, knights straightened, all eyes turning toward the main building.

Through the waystation's inner door came a figure who commanded attention without seeming to seek it. Lord Erion Ashgard moved with the deliberate economy of a predator conserving energy. Tall and austere, his steel-gray hair cropped short against his skull, he wore no ostentatious armor or house colors, only practical leather and steel in shades of deep gray. Four aides flanked him, carrying maps and documents rather than weapons.

Unlike Lord Callen's cold authority or Harrick's blustering confidence, Ashgard's power resided in his presence.

Knights who had been boasting loudly moments before fell silent without being commanded. Even the most senior among them straightened unconsciously as he passed.

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed once, neither hot nor cold, but somehow alert, like a hound catching an unfamiliar scent.

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 Reaper...has claimed three noble lives in as many months. Lord Halwick, Baron Tessier, Count Dravien's cousin." His

eyes found the Dravien knights, acknowledging their loss before continuing.
"Some call him an assassin. Others, revolutionary. What he calls himself matters not at all."

Ashgard's voice remained measured, yet something in it raised the hair on Soren's arms.

"What matters is this: he is methodical. Intelligent. Utterly without mercy. And he is not finished."

A murmur passed through the gathered knights. Ashgard silenced it with a raised hand.

"This is not a tournament. This is not a ceremonial hunt where failure means merely wounded pride." His gaze swept the assembly again, harder now. "Sylas has killed lords in their own halls, surrounded by guards who never saw him enter. Fail to treat him as more than a man, and you will join his tally."

The shard against Soren's chest cooled further, Valenna's presence sharpening with interest.

'Finally,' she whispered, 'someone who understands the nature of true hunting.'

Ashgard pointed to the map, where his aide had marked several locations with red ink.

"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.

"This endeavor requires discipline, focus, and unity of purpose. Those incapable of setting aside petty rivalries would do better to remain behind."

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."