

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight

#Chapter 7: You're Not Alone in That Skull - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 7: You're Not Alone in That Skull

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The sword refused to sleep.

Soren stared at it, fingers tense as trapwire, the splinter of frozen starlight nestled in his palm.

The others in the barracks breathed heavy and uneven, their bodies slack with the forgetfulness of hard labor and harder disappointment.

Even Tavren, who'd spent the last hour plotting a future full of petty violence, snored with the fragile ignorance of a dog who didn't know he'd be put down come winter.

The night was all absence, no moon, no fire, just the afterimage of pain in his ribs and the sickly radiance of the thing that called itself a sword.

He'd wrapped it in cloth, then rewrapped it twice, but still the shard's presence gnawed through. It tingled at the nerve, not hot or cold but some bastard hybrid that left him unsure which direction the shivers ran.

Soren pressed it to his sternum, almost daring it to raise the blisters that never appeared. The rag muffled nothing.

He listened, as one listens to an attic crawl at midnight: with part of the mind daring a noise, the other already rehearsing the explanation.

Hours. Nothing. Then a sound, as faint as conversation the floor below: a scrape, a sigh. Not out loud, but inside, no, behind his own mind.

Soren shifted on his bunk, careful not to jostle the nearby forms. His ears found only snoring, but the sense of company grew sharper, the way air will compress before a storm. Closer.

He cleared his throat, soft, so as not to rouse the others. "You there?" he whispered, ashamed. Only lunatics spoke to themselves, and he'd seen what happened to them in the alleys.

The reply came not as a voice but as a faultline opening in the back of his skull, words bleeding up through the fissures.

"Listening," it said. The tone was dry, bored, and, he felt this before he knew it, a hair's breadth from contempt.

Soren sat up straighter, the sheet of cold pulling at his joints. He wanted to drop the shard, fling it across the room. Instead, he cupped it tighter in his bruised fingers, irrationally protective.

"Who are you?" Soren asked. "What are you?"

A laugh, the kind that comes from a throat that has spent a year chained in iron. *"Impatient. Good. Makes for better stories."*

He bristled. "This isn't a story. You nearly got me killed today."

"Nearly?"

the voice queried, and he felt the edge of a smile cut through his ribcage. *"Either Ashgard's gotten soft, or you've clung hard to a survivor's mean little instincts."*

He'd had enough of ghosts, or whatever the hells this was. "If you can hear me, you know I'm not volunteering for your tricks. Get out of my head."

A slow yawn, a sound he sensed, more than heard. *"If only,"* it said. *"But the Convocation's ancient machinery grinds on, even here. I'm as much a prisoner of etiquette as you are, little knife."*

Soren processed that, then shook it off. Words. The sword, no, the shard, was trying to bait him. "You have a name?"

"Names, so many names. Of which yours is one, now. But for courtesy's sake, call me Valenna."

It hit him like a blow, the memory from night resurfacing in a spearhead of clarity.

'Valenna of the Azure Oath.' Soren repeated the phrase internally, and he felt the echo as if it were his own thought wormed back through foreign muscle.

"I saw you," he whispered. "Or... your memory. The swearing. The room with the glyphs. The sword like a bastard's backbone."

A moment of blank quiet. Then: *"You're quicker than the last. Or you lived longer. Hard to tell, really."*

Soren risked a glance around the dormitory. No movement but the slow rise and fall of boys in sleep. He lowered his voice to a bare twitch of air.

"What do you want from me?" he said.

The answer arrived with the casual cruelty of someone bored with immortality. *"Isn't it obvious? I want out."*

"Out of the sword?" Soren asked, incredulous.

A pause. *"Out of the recursion. Out of the cycle where you get beaten, we bond, you die or go mad, and then the next comes along to start the joke over."*

"I didn't ask for this." He hadn't. He'd thought for a moment that stealing the sword would make him special, but mostly it had made him tired.

"No one ever does," Valenna said, with the silk-sick pity of someone who has watched a thousand generations burn through the same mistake.

"That trick. In the ring. That was you, wasn't it?"

A flicker of pride, he recognized it in himself, like tasting a favorite dish in a soup gone bad. *"You could have died. It was a mercy to help. Or do you prefer alternate endings?"*

He felt his cheeks burn, a pulse of embarrassment. "I don't need your help. I can learn it."

"You'll learn it for as long as they let you keep your hands," Valenna said. *"But perhaps you hunger for something larger, hmm? A cause. A history. Power to shape more than a week's worth of your own bruises."*

He started to object, but could not bring his tongue to betray the interest that was already gathering.

"Why me?" he asked, softer now.

"Why any of you? Fate, boredom, the unfortunate lottery of proximity. Shard picks its carrier. Bond forms. Host is improved, sometimes. Sometimes it's just a quick ruin." A hum, close to singing. *"I prefer the ones who question. Less tedious."*

Soren ran his thumb along the edge of the fragment, feeling nothing but the illusion of heat. "The others. The ones before. What happened to them?"

"That depends on your capacity for invention," said Valenna, almost fondly. *"Does the memory of a thing ever matter, once you've replaced it with your own?"*

Soren's head buzzed with the question, but it made its own sense. The city was full of things whose true names had been bleached away.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"You ask, I answer. Or not. You struggle, I advise. Or not. Eventually, you either master the bond or it consumes you. Or not."

She said this with a cadence that was both joke and dare.

Soren breathed in the rotten air of the barracks, tried to name the feeling fermenting in his chest. Not fear. Not exactly hope. The sense that the rules had changed, and he'd not been allowed to read the new script.

He felt himself smile, a thinner version of Tavren's mortal grin. "You said something about etiquette."

"A feeble pretense. If you wish to bargain, the terms are these: you survive, I teach. In exchange, perhaps I learn what it is the world wants with me, now that kingdoms and their banners are dead."

Soren shrugged. "Sounds like a gamble."

"All things worth doing are," she answered, and the words struck in him an arctic nostalgia, grief, perfect, then gone.

He cradled the shard. "Teach me something, then. Something they wouldn't show me at the wall."

A silence, sharp with appraisal. *"Not today. Today, you'll move as I tell you, and in the morning you'll recall none of it with your tongue, but all of it in your bones."*

He braced himself, expected pain, or another vision. Instead, her instructions came as a string of corrections, instant and precise:

Elbow higher.

Turn from the waist, not the shoulder.

Weight forward. Never plead for balance; take it.

Soren tried the motions, slow, then repeating, letting the memory anchor itself in his limbs. The heavy ache from the day's beating faded to a rhythm: stretch, reset, stretch.

Soon his body found the current, a pattern smoother than any old brawling could conjure. The sword felt less like a foreign object, more like a muscle he'd only just discovered.

He realized, halfway through an unfamiliar flourish, that he was standing in the middle of the barracks.

Anyone could have woken to see this lunacy, the gutterboy dancing in his sleep, but all eyes remained shut, and he felt, for an obscene moment, as if the world had emptied itself just to accommodate this midnight lesson.

Valenna spoke, softer than before. *"See what you did? You learned despite yourself."*

He could have asked a thousand questions. Instead, he let the ghost's pride ride through him, and ran the sequence again, letting the pattern burn deeper.

"Again," said the voice.

He obeyed.