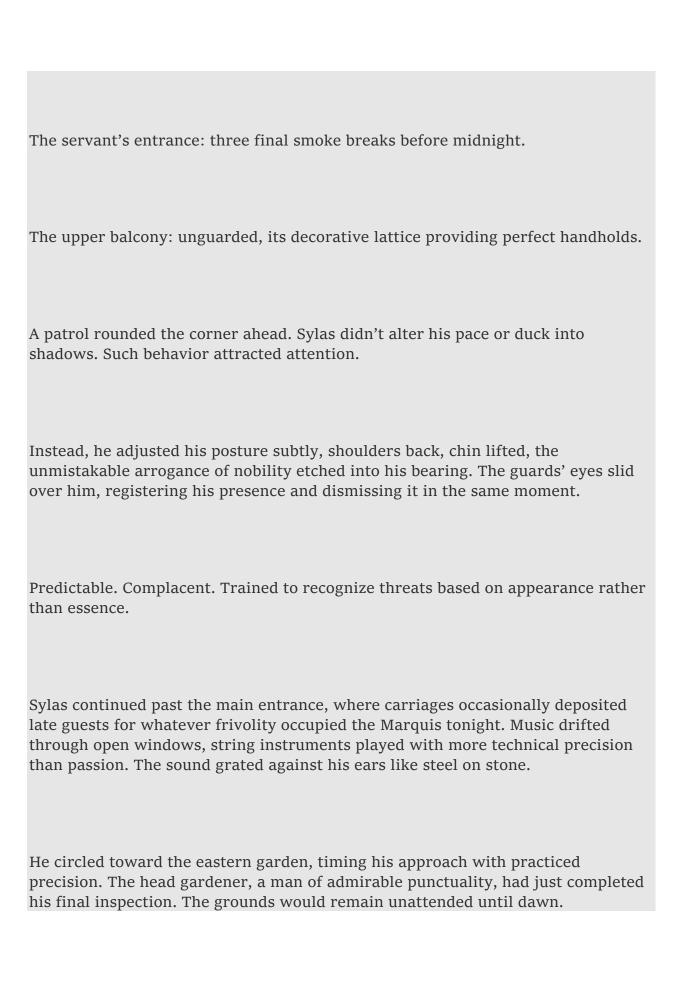
CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT

Chapter 71: The Emerald Reaper

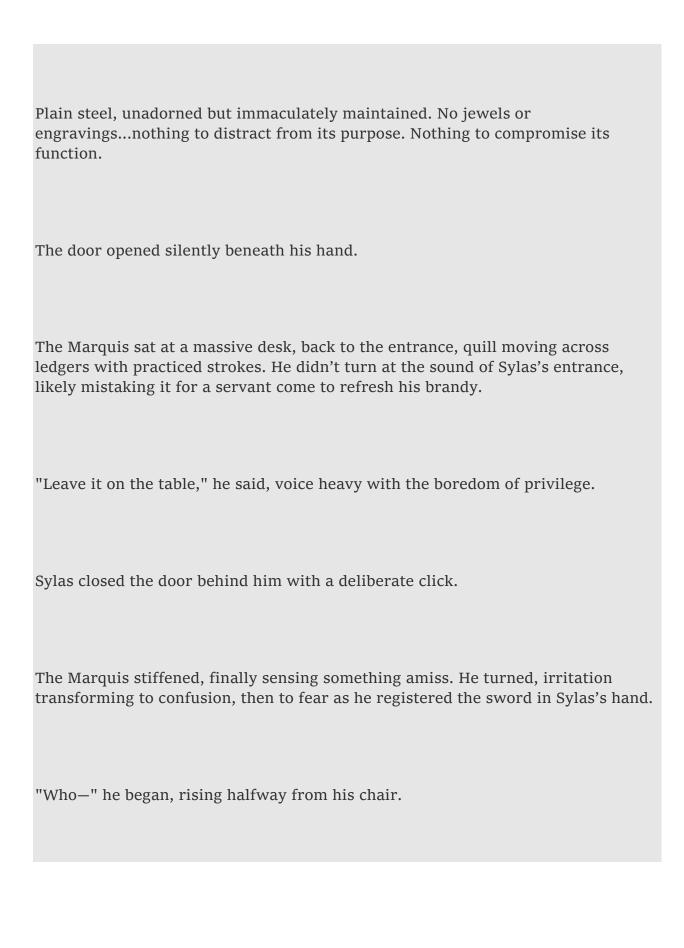
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Chapter 71: The Emerald Reaper
The noble district bled gold into the night sky. Sylas walked its outskirts with unhurried steps, moving beneath pools of torchlight without hurry or hesitation. The sword at his hip, disguised with common wrappings, rested against his thigh with familiar weight. A gentleman returning from an evening's entertainment, nothing more.
Noblemen's guards rarely troubled gentlemen.
He adjusted his hood, ensuring his green hair remained concealed. Not from shame, Sylas had long since abandoned such useless sentimentsbut from practicality. Green hair made for memorable witnesses, and tonight's work required discretion until the proper moment.
The Marquis of Everton's estate rose before him, a bloated monument to excess. Three stories of imported stone, windows gleaming with interior light, gardens sprawling in cultivated chaos. Sylas had studied it for seven nights now, learning its rhythms as intimately as a butcher knows a carcass before the first cut.
The western wall: patrolled every twenty-seven minutes.

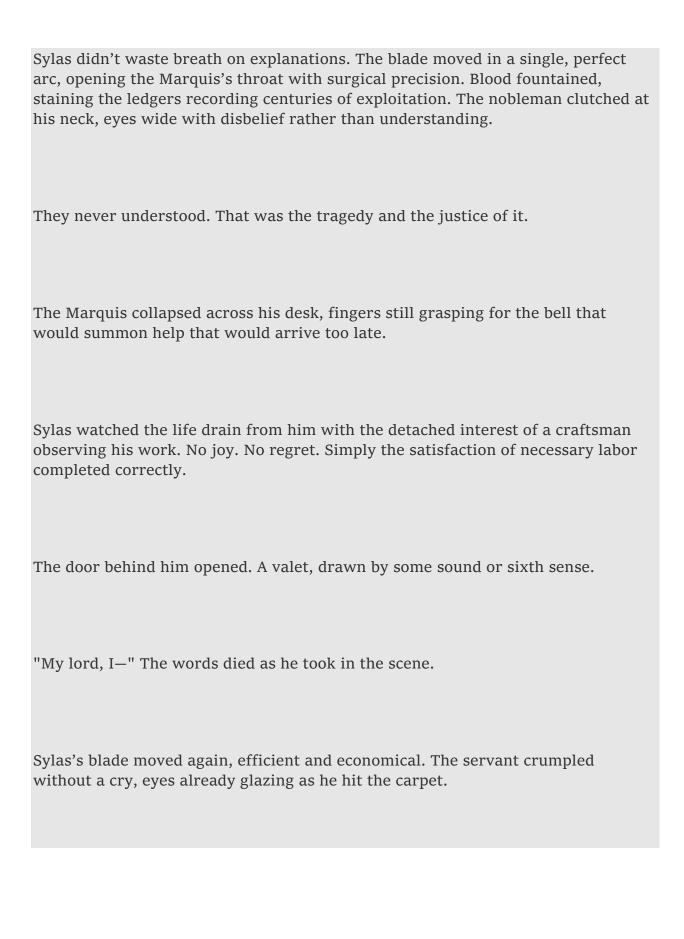


The wall before him stood twelve feet high, smooth stone interrupted only by decorative flourishes near the top. To most, an effective barrier. To Sylas, a mild inconvenience.
He removed his outer cloak, folded it with methodical care, and secreted it beneath a hedge. The formal attire beneath would serve him better inside.
With three quick movements, he scaled the wall, fingers finding purchase in crevices invisible to casual observation. He paused at the top, surveying the gardens below.
Two guards, moving predictably along their assigned route.
A servant girl, slipping between hedgerows, meeting a lover, perhaps.
A single window on the second floor, curtains drawn but light burning.
The Marquis worked late this evening. How convenient.



So simple, to move among them. They saw only what they expected to see.
The east wing corridor stretched before him, carpeted in rich crimson that swallowed his footsteps. Portraits lined the walls, generations of Evertons gazing down with painted arrogance. Sylas noted their features with clinical detachment Strong jawlines. Narrow noses. Eyes that had never known true hunger or fear.
Until tonight.
Light spilled from beneath the study door, a thin golden line in the darkened hallway. From within came the scratching of a quill on parchment. The Marquis, perhaps reviewing his accounts. Counting wealth extracted from others' labor.
Sylas paused, listening. The household had settled into its nighttime rhythm. Guards patrolled the perimeter, not the interior. Servants completed final tasks before seeking their beds. Guests had departed or retired to assigned chambers.
The moment had arrived.
He drew his sword with practiced economy, the blade sliding from its sheath without sound.





Regrettable, but unavoidable. The innocent sometimes bled alongside the guilty. The difference was that Sylas acknowledged their sacrifice, while nobles never even counted the cost.
He worked quickly now, arranging the bodies with methodical care. The Marquis he positioned in his chair, hands folded over the ledger as if in final contemplation of his accounts. The ceremonial sword that had hung on the wall, never blooded, merely displayed, Sylas placed across the nobleman's lap.
'A lord should die with steel in his hands, even if he had never truly earned the right to bear it.'
From his belt, Sylas removed a small objecta carved wooden token bearing the symbol of scales, unbalanced. This he placed on the desk where it would be immediately visible. His signature. His purpose. His judgment.
The house remained quiet around him as he moved to the balcony, stepping out into the cool night air. Below, the gardens stretched in manicured perfection, oblivious to the blood spilled within their boundaries. Above, stars punctured the darkness, cold and distant as divine judgment.
Sylas descended the way he had come, each movement precise and controlled. No wasted energy. No theatrical flourishes. Just the clean efficiency of a predator returning from a successful hunt.

He retrieved his cloak from its hiding place, donned it with careful attention to its drape and fall. Within moments, he had transformed again, from killer to gentleman, from justice to respectability.
He scaled the wall and dropped to the street beyond, falling into an unhurried walk that would draw no attention from the night watch.
Behind him, the Marquis's estate continued its peaceful slumber, unaware that death had visited and departed.
By morning, the bodies would be discovered. By midday, nobles across the district would be increasing their guards. By nightfall, they would be whispering his name in fear.
Sylas felt no triumph, no elation at the thought. Only the cool certainty that rot had been excised, one small piece of a disease that infected the entire system. One noble, removed from a world that produced them in abundance.
The night embraced him as he walked toward the city gates. His work here was finished. Other cities waited, other nobles whose blood would water the soil of coming change.
He paused at a crossroads, looking back at the golden glow of the noble district. They would be hunting him now with renewed vigor. Lord Ashgard's knights, the noble houses' finest blades, all seeking his head.

The thought brought the closest thing to a smile he had felt in years.

"Come then," he whispered to the night, to the distant stars, to the hunters who did not yet realize they were also prey. "Let us see who truly deserves the sword."

Chapter 72: The Muster of Houses

Chapter 72: The Muster of Houses

Dawn painted the waystation's courtyard in shades of blood and rust. Soren stood at the edge of the assembly, his back pressed against the cold stone wall as he watched the gathering forces through narrowed eyes.

The expedition was coming to life beneath crimson-streaked skies, and something in the air felt sharp, dangerous, like the moment before steel meets flesh.

Banners snapped in the morning wind, each house's colors a declaration of power and lineage.

Trescan's crimson and gold caught the sunrise like flames. Dravien's midnight blue rippled with silver stars that seemed to mock the fading night sky. Karvath green stood out against the gray stone walls, bold as new growth in spring.



Valenna's laughter rippled through his mind, cold and cutting. 'Allies? Is that what you see? I see predators circling the same prey, each waiting for the others to weaken first.'
She wasn't wrong. Beneath the veneer of cooperation, tensions coiled like serpents. The knights might wear their lords' colors proudly, but their eyes betrayed deeper truths, calculation, suspicion, ambition barely contained behind masks of noble purpose.
A commotion near the main gate drew Soren's attention. Lord Ashgard had emerged from the waystation's main building, his austere figure commanding immediate respect without apparent effort.
Unlike yesterday, he now wore light armor of burnished gray steel, unadorned save for his house crest etched into the breastplate. No ceremonial flourishes, no decorative engravings, just functional protection designed for a man who expected actual combat.
His aides flanked him, carrying maps and ledgers rather than weapons. Behind them came the Ashgard contingent, six knights in matching gray, their faces weathered by actual combat rather than merely tournament glory.
"Form up!" Ashgard's voice carried across the courtyard without seeming raised. "By house and rank. We ride within the hour."

The response was immediate, knights moving to their designated areas, banners raised higher, final preparations accelerating. Soren pushed away from the wall, seeking Kaelor and Ser Torven among the shifting bodies.
He found them near the Velrane standard, Kaelor checking his saddle straps with methodical precision while Torven secured their provisions. The Swordmaster glanced up as Soren approached, his single eye narrowing in assessment.
"You look like shit," Kaelor observed flatly. "Did you sleep at all?"
Soren shrugged, unwilling to admit how the night had passed in restless anticipation. "Enough."
"Liar." Kaelor returned to his inspection. "Keep your wits sharp even if your body isn't. We're surrounded by allies who'd celebrate our failures more eagerly than our successes."
Before Soren could respond, a ripple of movement spread through the gathered knights. House Lanther had arrived, fashionably late, their silver and white banners gleaming in the strengthening sunlight.
Their contingent was smaller than the major houses, just four knights led by a man whose ornate armor seemed designed more for display than protection.

"Lord Casimir Lanther," Torven muttered, following Soren's gaze. "Third son of the old baron. More coin than sense, but desperate to prove himself."
The Lanther knights positioned themselves with deliberate care, their banner placed just far enough from House Karvath to avoid seeming subordinate, yet close enough to suggest alliance. Politics, Soren realized, continued even in the arrangement of horses and men.
As the final preparations neared completion, Soren became aware of eyes tracking his movements. Not just the occasional curious glance he'd grown accustomed to, but deliberate observation.
He turned, catching Harrick of Trescan watching him with undisguised contempt from across the courtyard.
The young knight stood among his crimson-clad brethren, his hand resting casually on his sword hilt, his posture radiating the easy confidence of one born to privilege.
When their eyes met, Harrick's mouth curved in a smile that held nothing of humor.
"Velrane's pet still hasn't run home," he remarked, voice pitched to carry. "Brave of Lord Callen to risk his investment on such a questionable blade."

Several knights nearby chuckled, the sound carrying across the suddenly quieter courtyard. Soren felt heat rise in his throat, his fingers twitching toward his sword before he mastered the impulse.

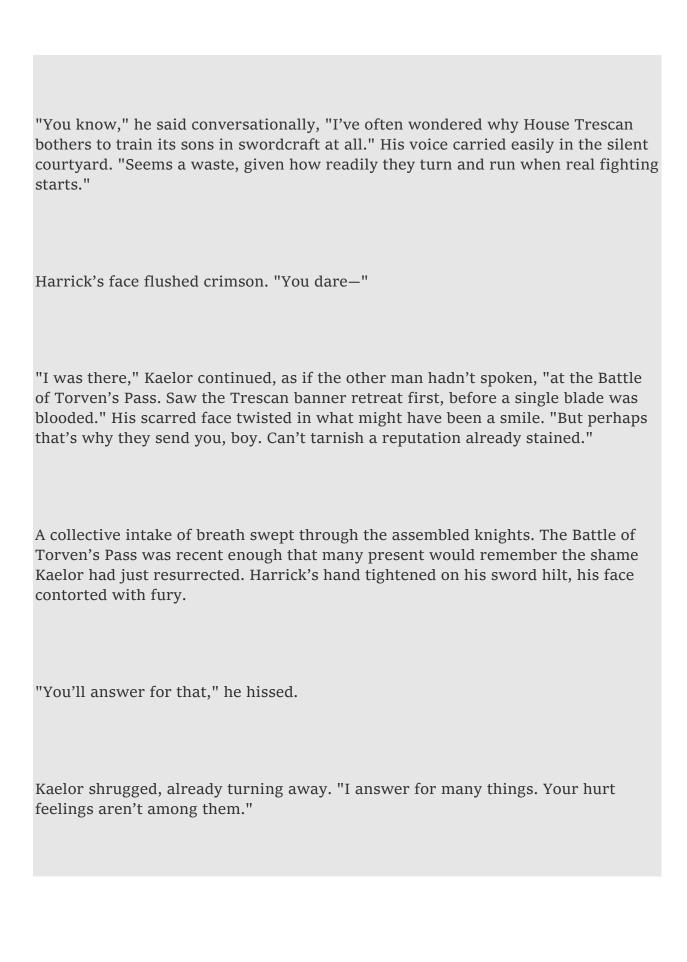
'He wants you to react,' Valenna cautioned, her voice cool against his anger. 'That's the game... provoke the street rat, prove you don't belong among your betters.'

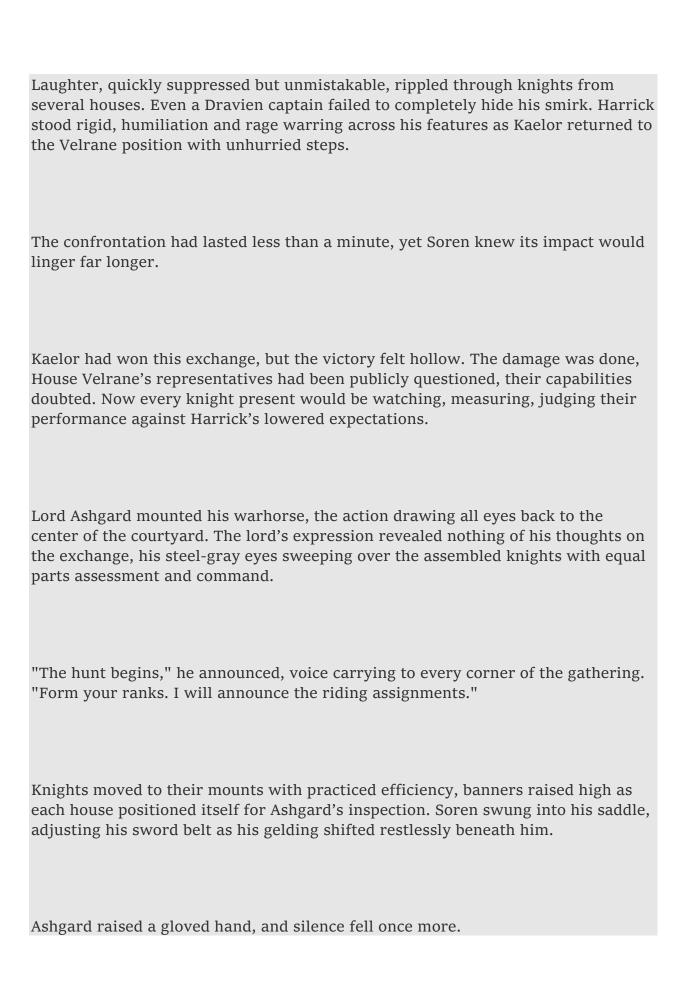
Kaelor straightened from his inspection, his scarred face turning toward the source of the disturbance. "Ignore him," he muttered, just loud enough for Soren to hear. "He's not worth the blood it would take to silence him."

But Harrick wasn't finished. He stepped forward, eyes still fixed on Soren. "Tell me, does House Velrane truly believe this hunt requires a cripple and a gutter rat?" He gestured toward Kaelor's eyepatch, then to Soren. "Or have they simply sent their most expendable blades?"

The courtyard fell silent, knights from all houses watching with predatory interest. Even Lord Ashgard paused in his preparations, though he made no move to intervene. This, Soren realized with sudden clarity, was a test, not just of him, but of House Velrane's standing.

Kaelor moved with deceptive casualness, his bulk belying the fluid grace of a lifetime spent in combat. He approached Harrick, stopping just beyond arm's reach, his single eye measuring the younger man with clinical detachment.





'This expedition travels in paired contingents," he declared. "Each major house riding alongside another for mutual support and accountability."
Something in his tone suggested the pairings were as much about watching each other as supporting against external threats. Soren's gelding sensed his tension, sidestepping nervously until he tightened his grip on the reins.
'House Dravien will ride with House Trescan," Ashgard continued, indicating the midnight blue and crimson banners with a gesture. Murmurs rippled through both contingents, the houses had been rivals for generations, their trading interests frequently at odds.
'House Karvath will ride alongside House Lanther." More murmurs, though less pronounced. The smaller house clearly saw advantage in the pairing, while Karvath's knights maintained carefully neutral expressions.
Ashgard's eyes found the Velrane contingent. "House Velrane will ride with my own house."
Soren felt the weight of dozens of gazes shift to them. Ashgard had just elevated their status by claiming them as his own companions, or placed them under his direct supervision, depending on one's interpretation. Either way, the assignment carried significance that wasn't lost on anyone present.

"Each pairing will maintain formation throughout our journey," Ashgard continued. "You will camp together, patrol together, hunt together." His gaze hardened. "And should one of your number stray from discipline, both houses will bear the consequence." The message couldn't have been clearer. This wasn't just about finding Sylas, it was about testing the noble houses' ability to function as a unified force despite their rivalries. Ashgard was using the hunt to expose weaknesses, to see which alliances held under pressure and which fractured at the first sign of strain. As the horses formed into their assigned groupings, Soren found himself riding beside one of Ashgard's knights, a weathered woman with close-cropped gray hair and a network of scars across her left cheek. She nodded once in acknowledgment but offered no conversation as they maneuvered into position. The shard against Soren's chest cooled sharply, Valenna's presence surging forward with sudden intensity. 'Clever wolf,' she murmured.

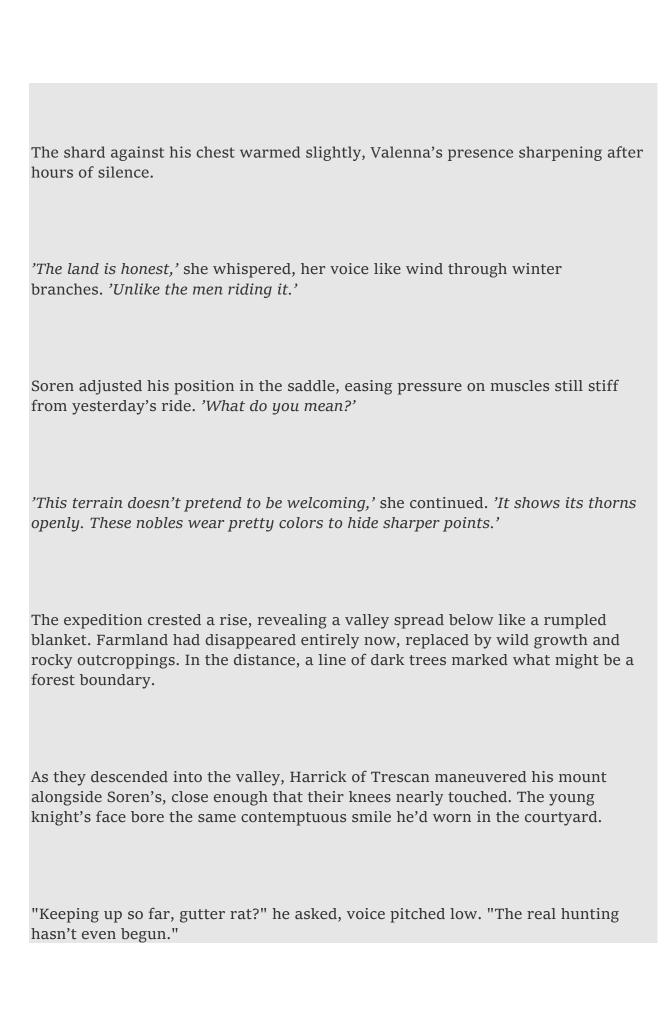
Chapter 73: Into the Thorns

Chapter 73: Into the Thorns

The iron-banded gates of the waystation groaned open, and the expedition spilled onto the road like blood from a fresh wound.

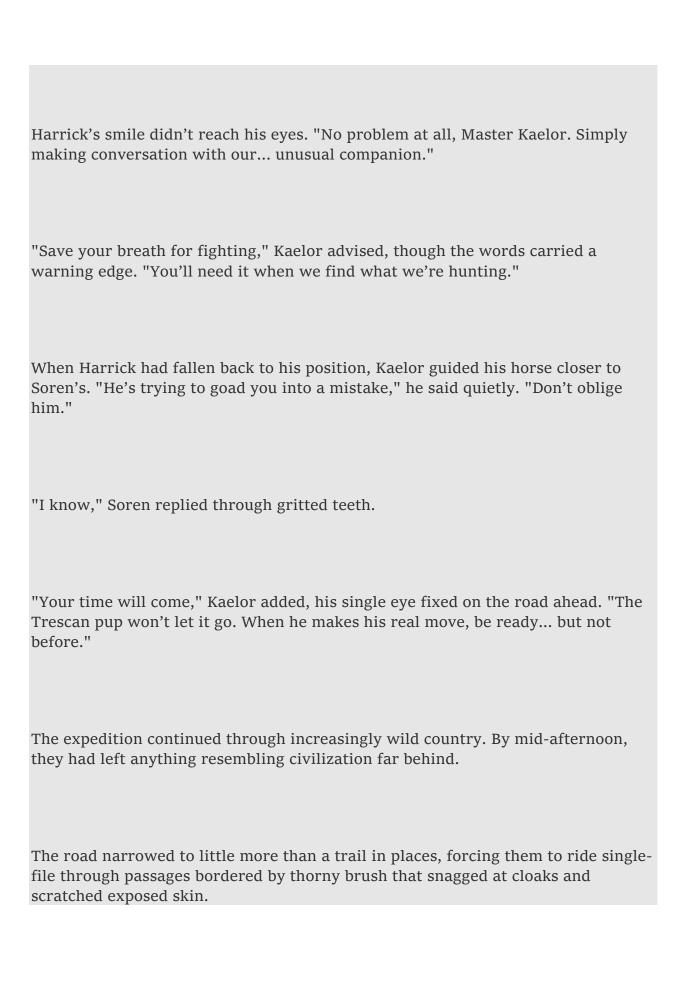
Soren's gelding shifted beneath him, sensing his unease as they filed into formation behind Ashgard's lead riders. The shard pulsed cold against his chest, a constant reminder of secrets carried into danger.
Ahead, the noble contingents arranged themselves in their paired formations. House Dravien's midnight blue banners fluttered alongside Trescan crimson, the knights of both houses riding with spines rigid as sword blades, gazes fixed forward to avoid acknowledging their unwanted companions. Their mutual disdain hung almost visible in the morning air.
"Look at those two," Kaelor muttered, nodding toward the Dravien and Trescan leaders. "Sitting so straight they must have swords up their asses."
The Karvath and Lanther pairing fared little better. Their green and silver banners tangled in the breeze as knights bickered over proper spacing.
"Three horse-lengths between contingents!" a Karvath captain barked.
Lord Lanther's son responded with exaggerated politeness: "Perhaps House Karvath requires such distance to hide its inadequacies."
Soren's gelding fell into step beside the scarred female knight he'd noticed earlier. Her gray armor bore dents that had been maintained rather than removed, badges

of survival rather than failures of care. She rode with the easy confidence of someone who had faced death often enough to be on familiar terms with it.
The contrast between Ashgard's contingent and the Velrane representatives couldn't have been more stark. Ashgard's knights moved like a single organism, their formation adjusting to the terrain without visible signals. Soren, Kaelor, and Torven felt like children playing at war games alongside veterans of a dozen campaigns.
"Don't let it bother you," Kaelor said, reading Soren's thoughts from his expression. "They've buried more men than you've met. That's all."
The road curved northward, and the landscape began to change. Cultivated fields gave way to rougher country, rolling hills dotted with scrub, gnarled trees twisted by prevailing winds, thornbushes that encroached on the road's edges. The air itself seemed to grow sharper, carrying hints of wild herbs and damp earth.
Behind them, a Lanther knight's voice rose in complaint. "This route is unnecessarily difficult. The western road would have—"
"The western road would have announced our approach to every village and waystation," cut in Lord Ashgard without turning. "We hunt a killer, not parade for peasants."
The rebuke silenced further complaints, though Soren caught the resentful glances exchanged among the younger nobles. They had expected glory, not discomfort.



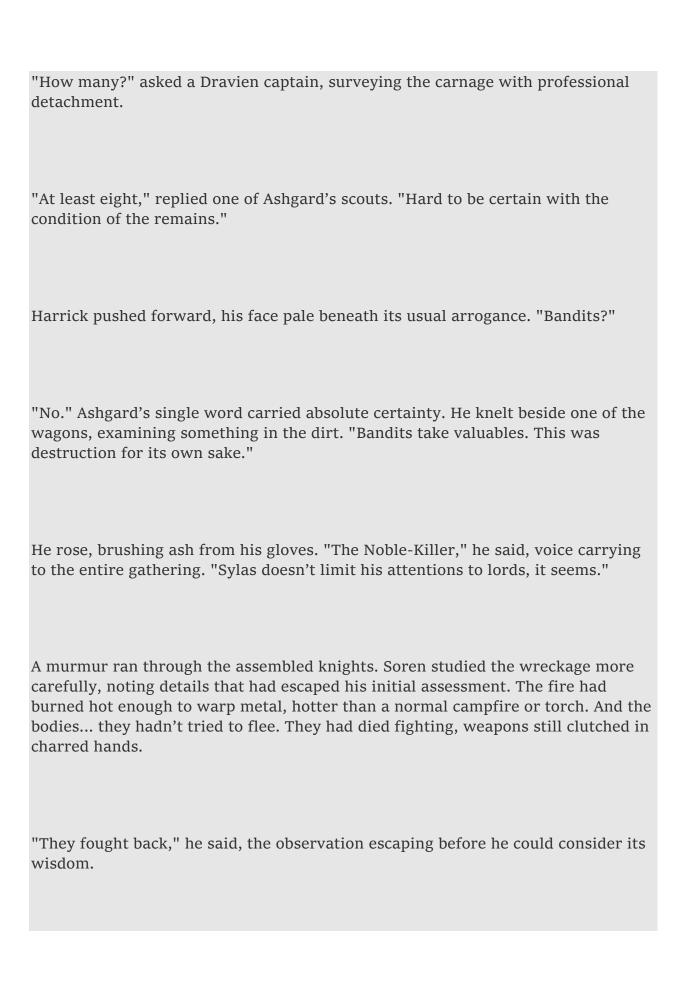
Soren kept his eyes forward, jaw tight against the retort that rose in his throat. The shard pulsed cold, Valenna's presence a restraining hand on his anger. Harrick, unsatisfied with Soren's lack of response, guided his horse directly into the gelding's path. Soren was forced to pull sharply on the reins, his mount nickering in protest as it sidled to avoid collision. "Careful there," Harrick called, loud enough for others to hear. "Seems Velrane's recruits can't control their mounts on simple terrain." Several Trescan knights chuckled, the sound carrying across the formation. Soren's fingers tightened on the reins until his knuckles whitened. The gelding, sensing his tension, danced sideways, nearly bumping into Kaelor's mount. "Easy," the Swordmaster muttered. "He wants you to react. Don't give him the satisfaction." They rode in silence for another mile before Harrick found a new approach. As they forded a shallow stream, he positioned himself upstream of Soren, then leaned over to spit into the water directly in front of the gelding's path. The gesture was childish but deliberate, an insult just subtle enough to avoid direct confrontation while making its intent perfectly clear.





Soren found himself watching Lord Ashgard with growing curiosity. The grayhaired lord rode at the vanguard, his posture betraying neither fatigue nor impatience despite the hours in the saddle. Occasionally he would confer with his aides, consulting maps or listening to reports from scouts who materialized from the surrounding wilderness, but mostly he rode in silence, his gaze constantly moving. As they navigated a particularly treacherous stretch where the path cut between two rocky outcroppings, Soren realized something odd. Ashgard wasn't studying the terrain ahead, at least, not exclusively. His attention regularly swept back across the expedition itself, steel-gray eyes lingering on each contingent in turn, measuring, assessing. When that penetrating gaze fell on Soren, he felt stripped bare, as if Ashgard could see through flesh to the shard nestled against his heart. The lord's expression revealed nothing of his thoughts, but something in those eyes suggested calculation rather than casual observation. Kaelor noticed it too. "He's not watching the path," the Swordmaster muttered as they cleared the narrows. "He's watching us."

The sun had begun its descent toward the western horizon when they came upon the wreckage. At first, Soren mistook it for natural debris, perhaps trees felled by a storm. Then the smell reached him: charred wood, burned cloth, and beneath it all, the unmistakable stench of death.
Ashgard raised a closed fist, and the entire expedition halted with military precision. He dismounted, gesturing for his captains to join him as he approached what Soren could now identify as the remains of wagons, a merchant caravan reduced to blackened timber and melted metal.
The shard against his chest grew cold, Valenna's presence sharpening with sudden interest.
Soren slid from his saddle, legs stiff from hours of riding. Kaelor joined him, the Swordmaster's hand resting casually on his sword hilt as they approached the outer edge of the destruction.
The scene told its story clearly enough. Three wagons had been arranged in a defensive triangle, suggesting the merchants had seen trouble coming and tried to prepare. It hadn't saved them.
Bodies lay scattered among the wreckage, blackened beyond recognition. Goods, or what remained of them, littered the ground: shattered crates, melted glass, charred cloth that might once have been valuable silks.



Ashgard's gaze shifted to him, those steel-gray eyes revealing nothing. "Yes," he agreed after a moment. "They did." He turned to his captains. "Clear it. No ceremony. We camp two miles ahead, near the stream junction." The casual dismissal of the dead sent a ripple of discomfort through some of the younger knights. Even Harrick looked troubled, though he masked it quickly. "Should we not bury them, my lord?" asked a Lanther knight. "Or at least..." "We ride now," Ashgard finished, turning his back on the charred remains. "Daylight fades, and we have ground to cover." Soren watched as knights from House Ashgard moved efficiently to clear the wreckage, their faces betraying no emotion as they dragged blackened corpses to the roadside. The contrast with some of the younger nobles couldn't have been starker, several Lanther knights looked visibly ill, while even Harrick seemed

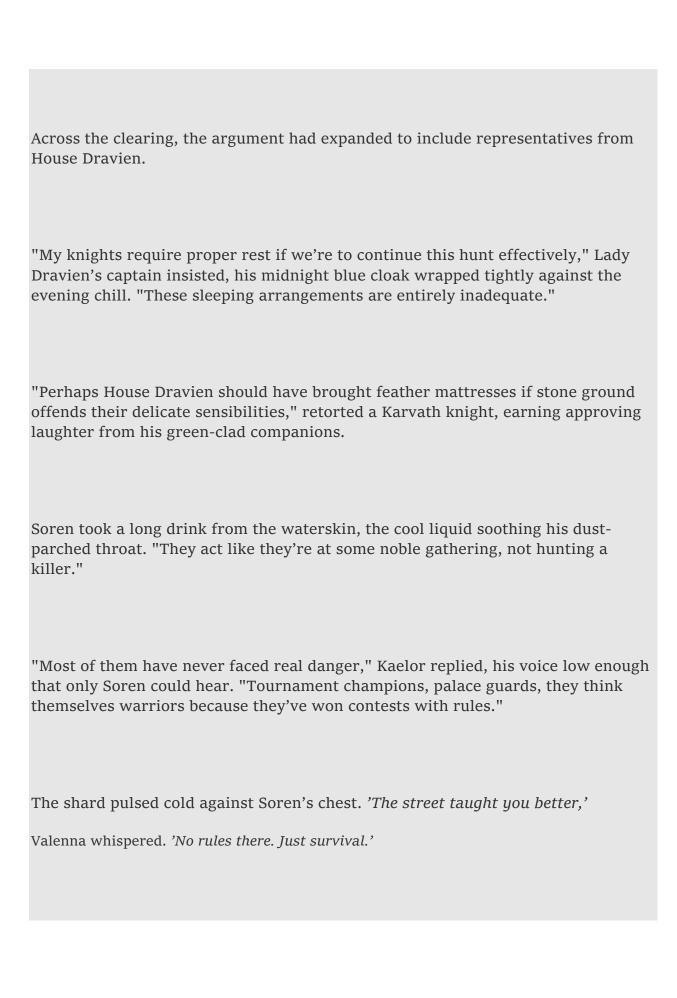
Chapter 74: Sylas Appears

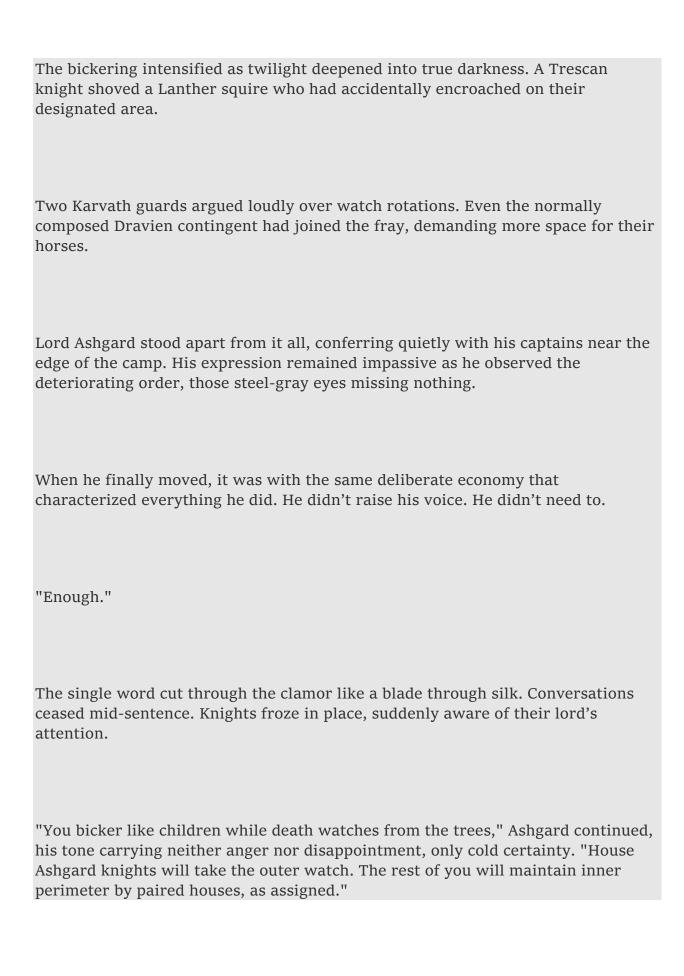
Chapter 74: Sylas Appears

subdued by the carnage.

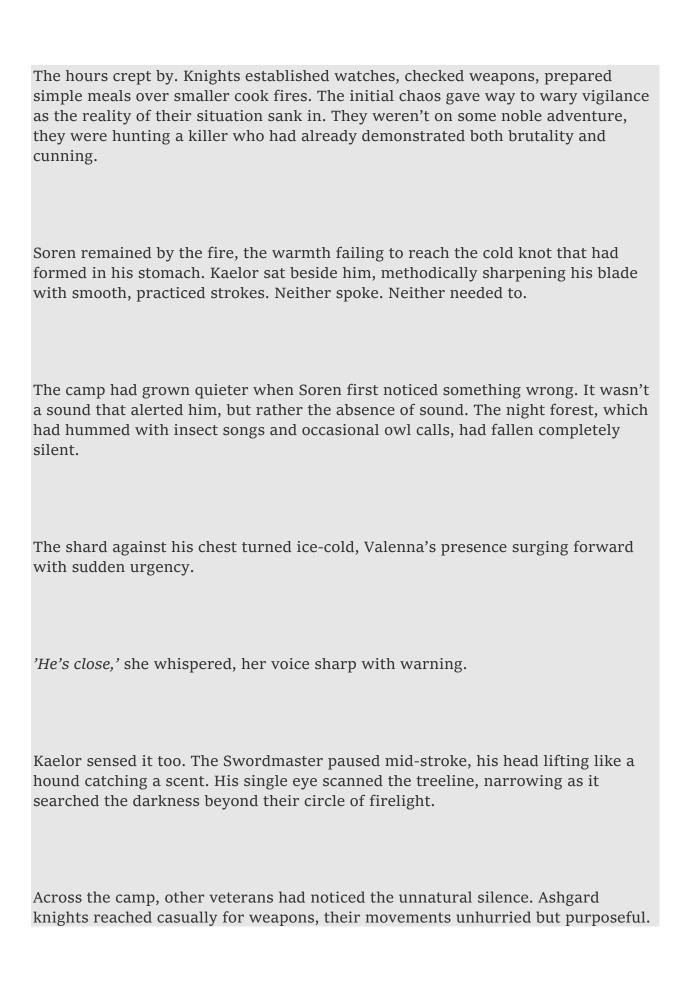
Shadows lengthened across the hastily established camp as the last bloodred rays of sunlight retreated behind the treeline. Soren sat on a fallen log, watching nobles bicker like children over matters that wouldn't have concerned street rats in Nordhav.

"This position is entirely exposed!" Lord Lanther's voice carried across the clearing, his silver-and-white surcoat now stained with travel dust. "We should have continued to the ridge for defensible high ground." Lord Casimir Trescan gestured dismissively, rings glinting on his fingers. "And arrived well after dark? Perhaps you'd prefer stumbling off a cliff to making camp, Lanther." The shard against Soren's chest cooled as Valenna's presence sharpened in his mind. 'Like dogs fighting over scraps while wolves circle,' she whispered. 'None of them understand what hunts them.' The camp had formed in chaotic clusters, noble houses keeping to themselves despite Ashgard's paired riding arrangements. The burned caravan had left its mark on all of them, not just the stench of charred flesh that clung to their clothing, but something deeper. Fear, poorly disguised beneath bluster and bravado Kaelor dropped onto the log beside Soren, passing him a waterskin without comment. The Swordmaster's scarred face revealed nothing, but tension radiated from his body like heat from coals. "The fire's too large," Kaelor muttered, nodding toward the central blaze where several Lanther knights were adding more wood. "Might as well send up signal flags announcing our position."

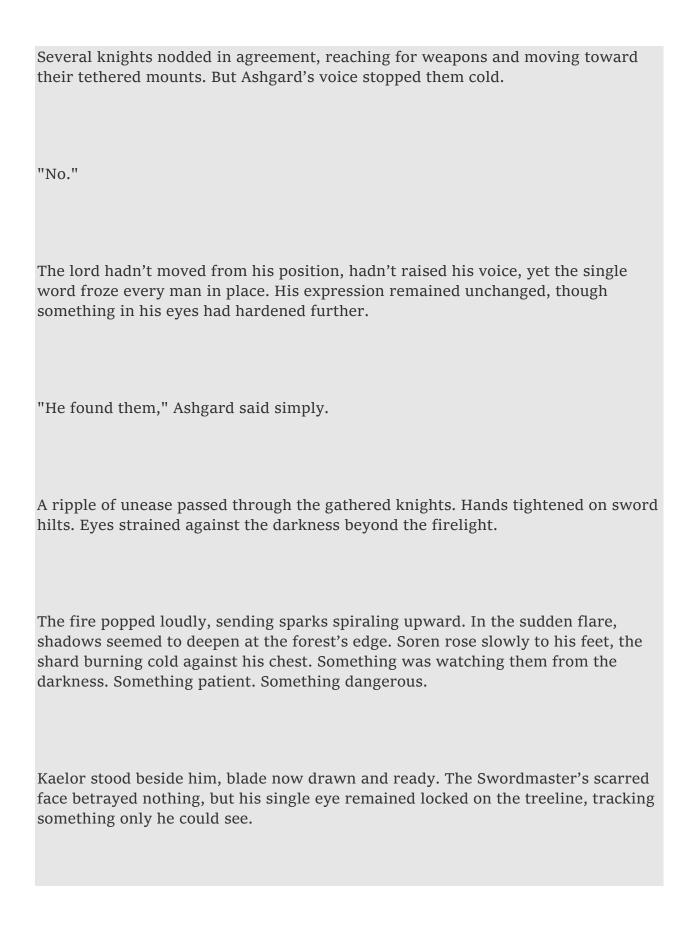




He pointed to the oversized fire. "Reduce that. Now."
The Lanther knights scrambled to obey, suddenly eager to demonstrate compliance. Ashgard's gaze swept the camp, lingering briefly on each noble contingent.
"The fire size is set. The watch is set. The sleeping arrangements are set." His voice remained level, yet somehow carried to every corner of the camp. "Any man who continues these petty squabbles will ride back to his lord in shame. Am I understood?"
Murmurs of assent rippled through the gathered knights. Within moments, the camp reorganized itself with the efficiency that had been lacking all evening. House rivalries didn't disappear, but they retreated beneath the surface, contained by Ashgard's will.
As the camp settled, Soren noticed two riders departing the perimeter, Ashgard scouts, moving with the fluid grace of men accustomed to traveling unseen. They melted into the darkness beyond the firelight without fanfare or announcement.
Kaelor followed his gaze. "Last patrol of the night," he said quietly. "Checking our backtrail."



Even Lord Ashgard himself had gone still, those steel-gray eyes fixed on the northern perimeter.
Then came the sound, hoofbeats, irregular and panicked, approaching from the direction the scouts had departed hours earlier.
Knights rose to their feet, hands dropping to sword hilts. The hoofbeats grew louder, accompanied now by the wild neighing of terrified animals.
Two horses burst into the clearing, riderless, their flanks heaving with exertion. Reins torn and trailing, saddles empty. One mount staggered, its left flank laid open by what could only have been a sword stroke, blood black in the firelight.
The wounded horse collapsed at the edge of camp, legs folding beneath it as strength finally failed. The other circled frantically, eyes rolling white with fear.
"The scouts," someone murmured, breaking the stunned silence that had fallen over the camp.
Harrick pushed forward, his usual arrogance replaced by something closer to panic. "We must ride out! Find them!"



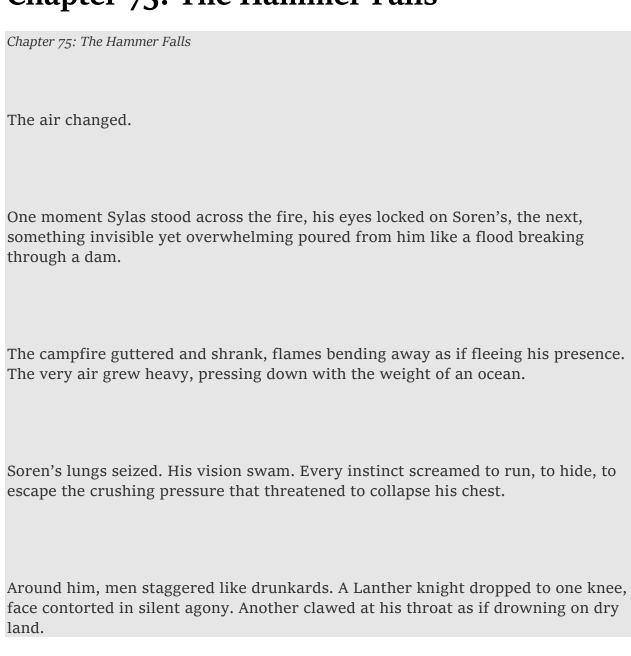
Even Harrick, usually so quick with mockery, had fallen silent. His face had gone pale beneath its usual arrogance, hand white-knuckled around his sword hilt.
'The moment comes,' Valenna whispered through Soren's mind, her voice like steel sliding from a scabbard. 'At last, the storm.'
The shadows at the edge of the clearing parted.
A man stepped into their circle of firelight with the casual confidence of one entering his own home. Tall and lean, he moved with predatory grace, each step precisely placed.
His green hair, the shade of summer leaves, hung disheveled around a face of striking, cold beauty. Eyes of the same impossible green surveyed the gathered knights with detached interest.
His sword, already wet with blood, hung casually from his right hand.
With his left, he dragged something behind him, a body, limp and unresisting, still clad in Ashgard gray. The scout's throat had been opened with surgical precision, his life emptied onto forest soil.

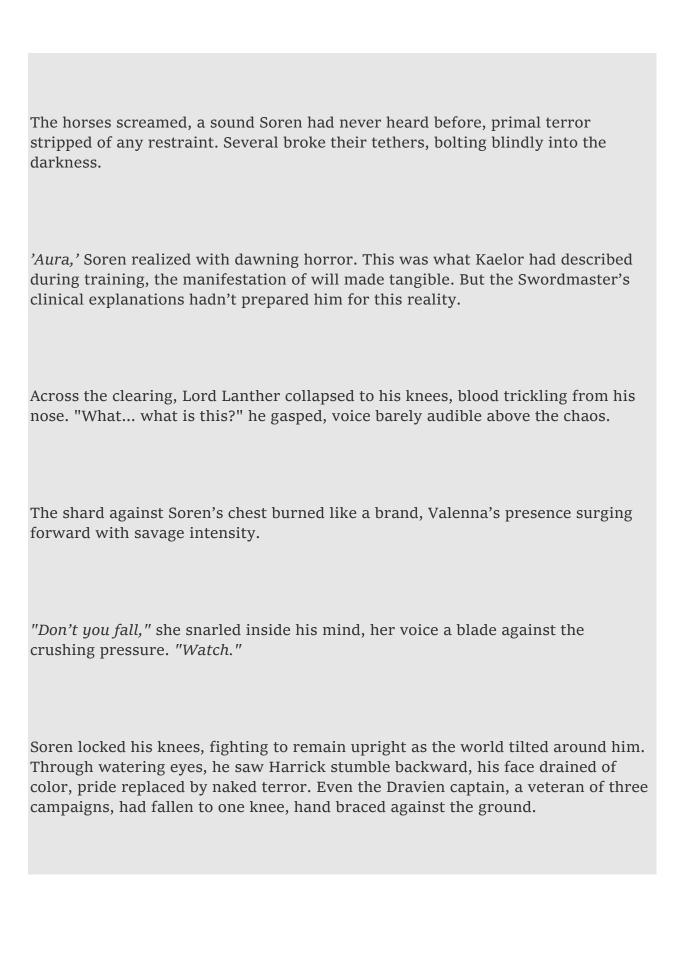
Sylas, for it could be no one else, stopped at the edge of the firelight. Without ceremony, he released his grip, allowing the corpse to fall at the nobles' feet.
"Now it begins," he said, his voice soft yet carrying to every corner of the suddenly silent camp.
For one heartbeat, no one moved. Shock held them immobile, knights and nobles alike frozen by the killer's audacity. He had walked directly into their midst, outnumbered thirty to one, yet carried himself with absolute certainty.
Then everything happened at once.
Sylas moved, his blade flashing in the firelight faster than thought. A Lanther knight standing nearest, his mouth still open in surprise, toppled backward as his head parted company with his shoulders.
The body remained upright for a moment, blood fountaining from the severed neck, before collapsing in a clatter of armor.
Chaos erupted. Knights scrambled for weapons. Nobles shouted contradictory orders. Ashgard's voice rose above the din, commanding formation, but few heard him through their panic.

Sylas was already moving again, flowing through their midst like water through cupped hands. His blade whispered once more, and a second knight, Karvath green now stained crimson, fell to his knees, clutching uselessly at the wound that had opened him from collarbone to navel.
Soren found himself rooted in place, unable to move as the killer carved his way through the camp's defenders. The shard against his chest burned like a coal, Valenna's presence sharp as a blade point.
"Form ranks!" Ashgard roared, his voice finally cutting through the panic. "Hold him!"
Knights began to rally, moving to surround the intruder. Steel rasped from scabbards as training finally overcame shock. But Sylas seemed unconcerned by the closing circle, his movements unhurried yet impossible to track completely.
Across the fire, Soren found himself locked in the killer's gaze. Those green eyes, inhuman in their intensity, fixed on him with sudden, focused interest. Something like recognition flickered in their depths, though Soren was certain they had never met.
The shard against his chest seared hot enough to burn, Valenna's voice cutting through his paralysis.
"At last," she whispered. "The storm."

Sylas stepped toward the fire, sword dripping red onto the ground, a trail of dark droplets marking his path. The nearest knights scrambled backward, their courage faltering in the face of his unhurried confidence. His green eyes never left Soren's.

Chapter 75: The Hammer Falls



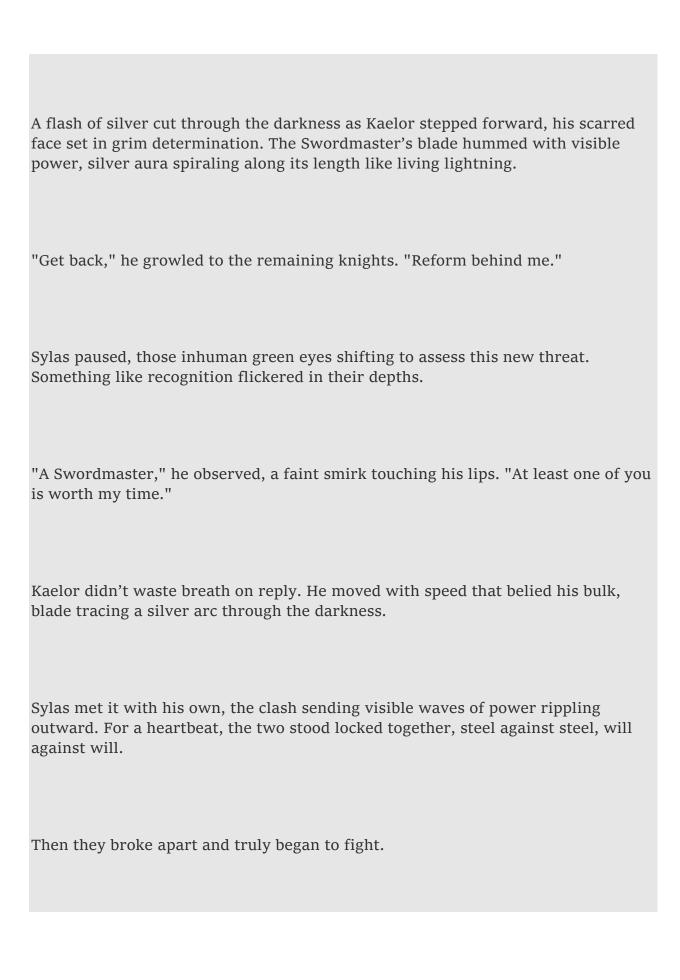


Only Ashgard and Kaelor remained fully upright, though strain showed in the tight lines around their eyes.
"Form ranks!" Ashgard bellowed, his voice somehow cutting through the pressure "Shields forward!"
Sylas smiled, a cold, empty expression that never reached those inhuman green eyes. His sword hung casually at his side, blood still dripping from its edge.
"Is this what the noble houses send against me?" he asked, voice soft yet carrying to every corner of the camp. "Children playing at war?"
Something in his words sparked desperate courage. Three knights from House Lanther surged forward, swords raised, faces contorted with determination that couldn't quite mask their fear. Behind them, two Karvath blades moved to flank, their green surcoats dark in the dimmed firelight.
"For Lanther!" the lead knight cried, blade descending in what should have been a killing stroke.
Sylas moved.

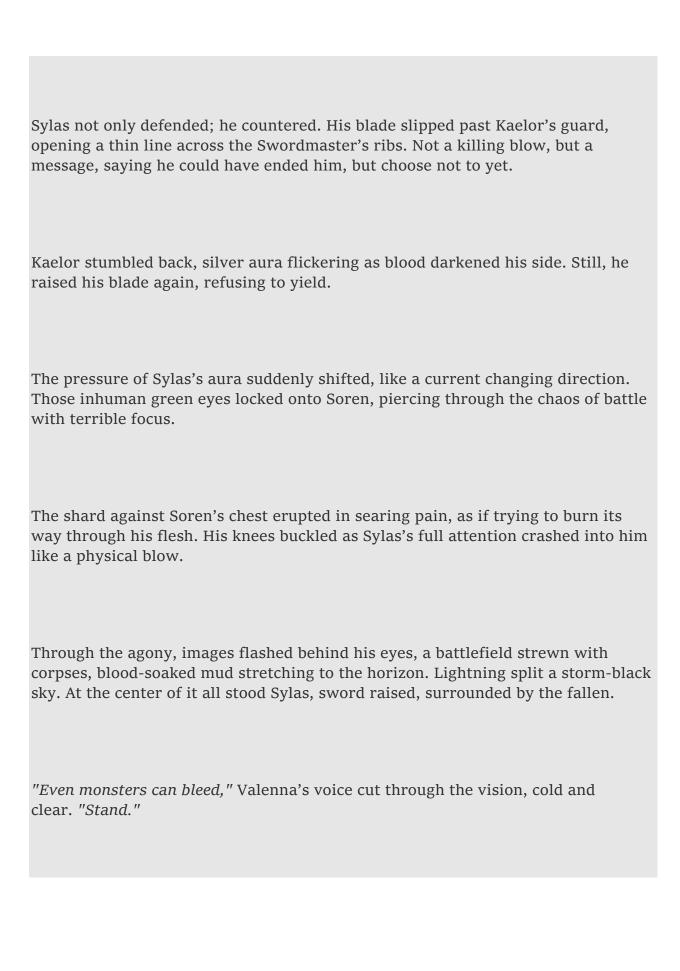
Later, Soren would struggle to describe what he saw. The green-haired killer didn't seem to dodge, he simply wasn't where the blade fell. His own sword flashed once, twice, three times, each stroke flowing into the next like water over stone.
The lead Lanther knight stumbled, confusion replacing battle-rage. He looked down at the thin red line that had appeared across his throat, hand rising to touch it in bewilderment. Blood poured between his fingers. He collapsed without another sound.
The second knight managed to raise his blade in defense, aura flaring blue around the steel, a shield that should have turned any normal weapon. Sylas's sword passed through it as if it were mist, opening the man from shoulder to hip. He didn't even have time to scream.
The third fell in mid-lunge, his timing suddenly, inexplicably wrong. It was as if Sylas had somehow bent the rhythm of combat itself, the knight's perfect form transformed into awkward vulnerability by some subtle distortion of space or time.
The Karvath blades fared no better. One swung at empty air as Sylas stepped inside his guard.
The other managed to block a strike that should have taken his head, only to find his blade shattered, steel fragments glittering in the firelight before Sylas's return stroke opened his chest.

Five knights in as many heartbeats. Not a single wasted movement. Not a hint of effort on the killer's face.
"Ashgard! To me!" Lord Ashgard's voice cut through the chaos, carrying the unmistakable command of one accustomed to being obeyed even in death's shadow.
His knights responded with discipline that bordered on miraculous under the crushing weight of Sylas's aura. They moved as one, shields locking together, forming a wall of steel between the killer and the rest of the camp.
Ashgard himself stood at their center, sword drawn but held low, those steel-gray eyes betraying nothing as he faced the green-haired demon who had decimated the first wave of defenders.
"Hold," he commanded, and his men braced themselves, shoulders pressing against shields, feet digging into the earth.
Sylas tilted his head slightly, regarding the formation with something like mild interest. "Discipline," he remarked. "How refreshing."
He moved toward them, each step deliberate, unhurried. The pressure of his aura intensified, forcing Soren to lock every muscle to remain standing. The shard against his chest burned hotter, Valenna's presence a counterweight to the crushing force.

Sylas reached the shield wall and struck, a single, economical blow that should have been easily turned by the interlocked defenses.
Instead, the knight who received it staggered backward as if hit by a battering ram. The formation wavered but held, shields shifting to cover the momentary weakness.
Ashgard barked another command, and his line surged forward, driving Sylas back a single step. For the first time, something like surprise flickered across the killer's perfect features.
"Interesting," he murmured, adjusting his grip on his bloodied sword.
The next exchange came too fast for Soren to follow completely, blade meeting shield, shield reinforced by shoulder, shoulder supported by stance.
Ashgard's men moved with the synchronized precision of those who had trained together for years, each covering the other's vulnerabilities, none fighting as individuals.
For a brief, fragile moment, they held him.



Soren had seen Kaelor train, had felt the Swordmaster's skill firsthand during brutal practice sessions. But this, this was different.
Every movement carried deadly purpose. Every strike contained enough force to shatter stone. Their blades met with impacts that sent tremors through the ground beneath Soren's feet.
Silver aura flared around Kaelor's sword as he pressed forward, driving Sylas back toward the treeline. For a moment, hope flickered in Soren's chest. The Swordmaster was holding his own, matching the killer's impossible speed with decades of hard-earned skill.
Then Soren saw it, the subtle signs of strain in Kaelor's movements. Each exchange cost the Swordmaster more than it cost his opponent. Each strike pushed him closer to his limits while Sylas remained fluid, untroubled.
"You've trained well," Sylas remarked as their blades locked once more. "But training only carries one so far."
Kaelor's single eye narrowed, his scarred face tight with effort. "Talk less," he grunted. "Die more."
The Swordmaster disengaged and struck again, his blade moving in the complex pattern Soren recognized from countless demonstrations, the Severing Wind, a technique few could master and fewer could defend against.



Soren fought to remain conscious as the pressure threatened to crush him completely. His lungs refused to fill. His heart hammered against his ribs like a caged animal. Every instinct screamed to submit, to collapse, to escape the overwhelming presence that pressed against his very soul.

But something within him, pride or stubbornness or simple fear of Valenna's disappointment, refused to yield. He locked his knees, forced air into his lungs, and met those terrible green eyes without flinching.

Around him, the camp had descended into complete chaos. The shield wall had collapsed entirely. Knights fled in all directions, all pretense of courage abandoned.

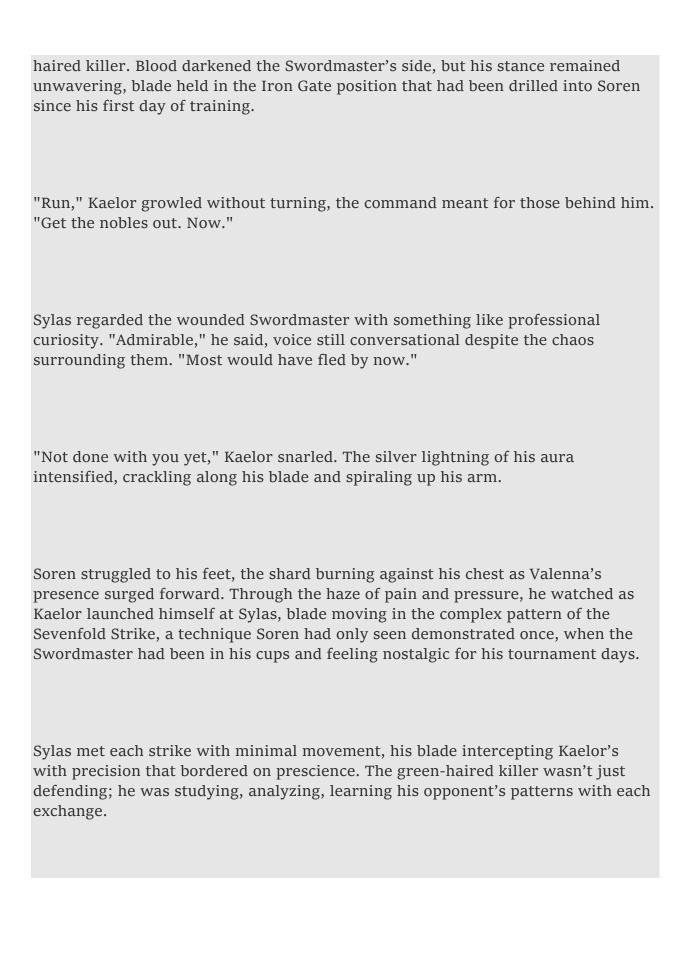
A Trescan noble screamed for retreat, only to be cut down mid-flight. Harrick was nowhere to be seen, having apparently abandoned his house's banner at the first opportunity.

Only Ashgard maintained any semblance of order, gathering his remaining knights into a fighting retreat toward the horses. Kaelor stood between them and Sylas, blood now soaking his side, but sword still raised in defiance.

Chapter 76: Not Yet Worthy

Chapter 76: Not Yet Worthy

Silver lightning tore through the air. Kaelor's aura erupted from him like a dying star, arcs of power whipping outward as he planted his feet and faced the green-



Behind them, Lord Ashgard's voice cut through the chaos like a blade through flesh. "Form ranks! House Dravien, secure the eastern retreat! Trescan, cover our flank!" Nobles and knights scrambled to obey, some from courage, most from terror. Soren saw Harrick reappear from wherever he'd hidden, face pale as milk as he grabbed the reins of the nearest horse. The Lanther lord was shouting something about abandonment and treachery as his remaining knights formed a ragged line. Kaelor's silver aura flared brighter as he drove Sylas back three steps with a barrage of strikes that blurred in the darkness. For a heartbeat, hope flickered in Soren's chest. Then Sylas sidestepped the final blow and countered with a single, economical stroke that opened a fresh wound across Kaelor's shoulder. "Predictable," Sylas remarked. "You telegraph your intentions." Kaelor staggered but didn't fall. Blood now soaked his left side and right shoulder, yet he raised his blade again, silver lightning dancing along its edge. "Still standing," he grunted. The pressure of Sylas's aura intensified, forcing Soren back to his knees. Around him, the camp dissolved into fragmented images of desperate retreat. A Dravien knight dragged his lord toward the horses, abandoning dignity for survival. Two Trescan nobles fought over a single mount, their earlier camaraderie forgotten. A	
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Karvath captain stood his ground, covering the retreat of his house, only to fall as a thrown dagger found his throat.
Through it all, Kaelor fought on. His movements grew slower, his strikes less precise, but his stubborn refusal to yield bought precious seconds for the retreat. Silver lightning arced from his blade with each parry, momentarily illuminating the scene in harsh, strobing flashes.
Sylas moved like water flowing downhill, each strike leading inevitably to the next. He opened a cut along Kaelor's thigh, then another across his forearm. Not killing blows, deliberate, measured strokes designed to weaken rather than finish.
"You have heart," Sylas acknowledged as their blades locked once more. "More than these cowering nobles deserve."
Kaelor's response was a headbutt that caught Sylas by surprise, connecting with the bridge of his nose. The green-haired killer stepped back, a trickle of blood marring his perfect features. For the first time, something like genuine emotion flashed across his face, not anger, but mild surprise.
"Interesting choice," he said, wiping the blood with the back of his hand.
Kaelor pressed the momentary advantage, his silver aura coalescing into a final, desperate attack. His blade became a whirlwind of light, the ancient pattern of the Tempest Guard unfolding in the darkness between them.

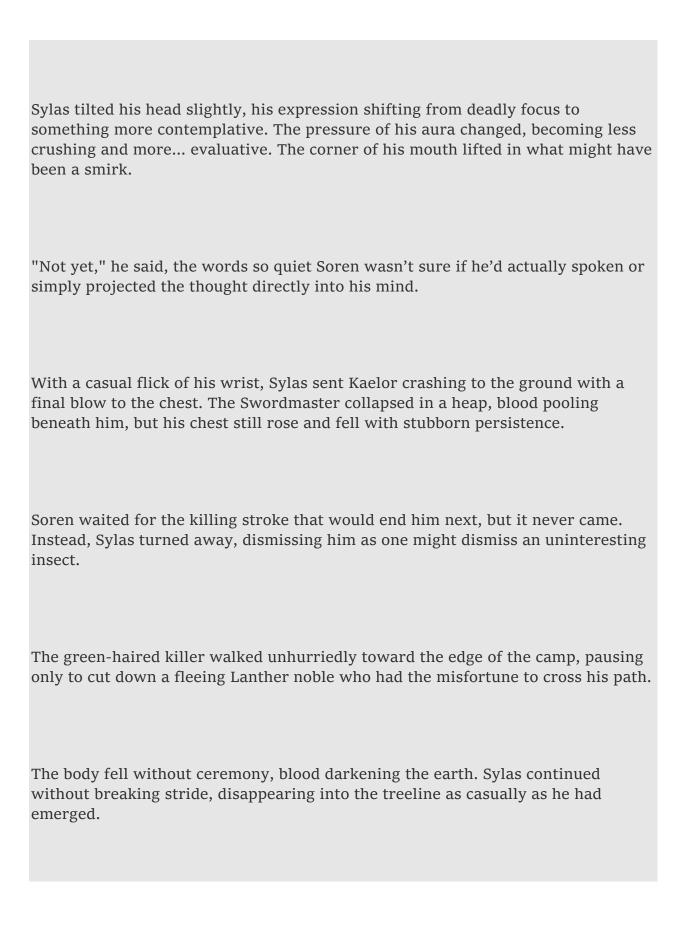
For a breathless moment, Sylas gave ground, parrying strikes that came from impossible angles. Then his expression shifted from surprise to cold calculation. He stopped retreating. His own blade moved with surgical precision, finding the pattern within the chaos, the vulnerability within the strength. Steel met steel with a sound like a death knell. Kaelor's blade shattered mid-strike, the silver aura dissipating like mist in morning sun. The Swordmaster stared at the broken hilt in his hand with something like disbelief. "A worthy attempt," Sylas said, blade poised for the killing stroke. But the broken sword had served its purpose. Behind them, Ashgard had managed to organize a fighting retreat. Horses galloped into the darkness, carrying nobles and knights away from the slaughter. Those without mounts ran, terror lending speed to their flight. Sylas paused, his attention shifting from Kaelor to the retreating figures. Then, inexplicably, his gaze found Soren still kneeling at the edge of the ruined camp. Those inhuman green eyes locked onto him with terrible focus.

The shard against Soren's chest went from burning hot to deathly cold in an

something alien, probing, curious. It felt like fingers sifting through sand,

searching for something buried beneath the surface.

instant. Something brushed against his mind, not Valenna's familiar presence, but



Silence descended on the ruined camp. The pressure that had filled the clearing evaporated, leaving Soren gasping like a drowning man suddenly returned to air. His limbs trembled with exhaustion and the aftermath of terror.
The shard against his chest pulsed with Valenna's presence, neither hot nor cold now, but somehow alert.
Across the clearing, Kaelor groaned, one hand pressing against the worst of his wounds. The Swordmaster lived, though blood darkened the ground beneath him.
From the edge of the camp came the sound of returning horses. Lord Ashgard appeared from the darkness, leading a small contingent of survivors back to assess the damage. His face remained impassive as he surveyed the carnage, those steelgray eyes missing nothing.
"Gather the wounded," he commanded, voice steady despite the horror surrounding them. "We retreat to the ridge."
Knights moved to obey, their earlier panic replaced by the numb efficiency of those who had survived catastrophe. Soren forced himself to his feet, legs threatening to buckle as he staggered toward Kaelor.
The Swordmaster's single eye fixed on him as he approached. "Still breathing," Kaelor grunted, attempting to rise before pain forced him back down. "Bastard could have killed me. Why didn't he?"

Soren had no answer. He helped two Ashgard knights lift Kaelor onto an improvised stretcher, the Swordmaster cursing weakly as the movement reopened his wounds.
The camp that had bustled with life hours before now lay in ruins. Bodies sprawled where they had fallen, blood black in the moonlight. Abandoned banners fluttered in the night breeze, their proud colors meaningless in death's democracy.
As they prepared to depart, Soren felt the weight of eyes upon him. Lord Ashgard stood nearby, those steel-gray eyes studying him with unsettling intensity.
"He saw something in you," Ashgard said, voice pitched for Soren's ears alone. "That's why we're still breathing."
Before Soren could respond, the lord turned away, barking orders for the retreat. The survivors mounted up, the wounded secured to horses, the dead left where they lay. No time for proper burial, no time for ceremony. Only survival mattered now.
As they rode into the darkness, the shard against Soren's chest pulsed with sudden clarity. Valenna's voice whispered through his mind, cold and certain.

"You've been chosen," she said, her presence sharp as a blade against his thoughts. "Whether to rise... or be cut down."

Soren looked back at the ruined camp one last time, the implications of her words settling over him like a shroud. Sylas could have killed him with the same casual efficiency he'd displayed against knights with years of training. Instead, he'd been... evaluated. Measured. Found neither worthy of death nor dismissal, but something in between.

The horses carried them into the night, leaving blood and broken steel behind. But Soren couldn't shake the memory of those inhuman green eyes locked on his, searching for something hidden beneath the surface.

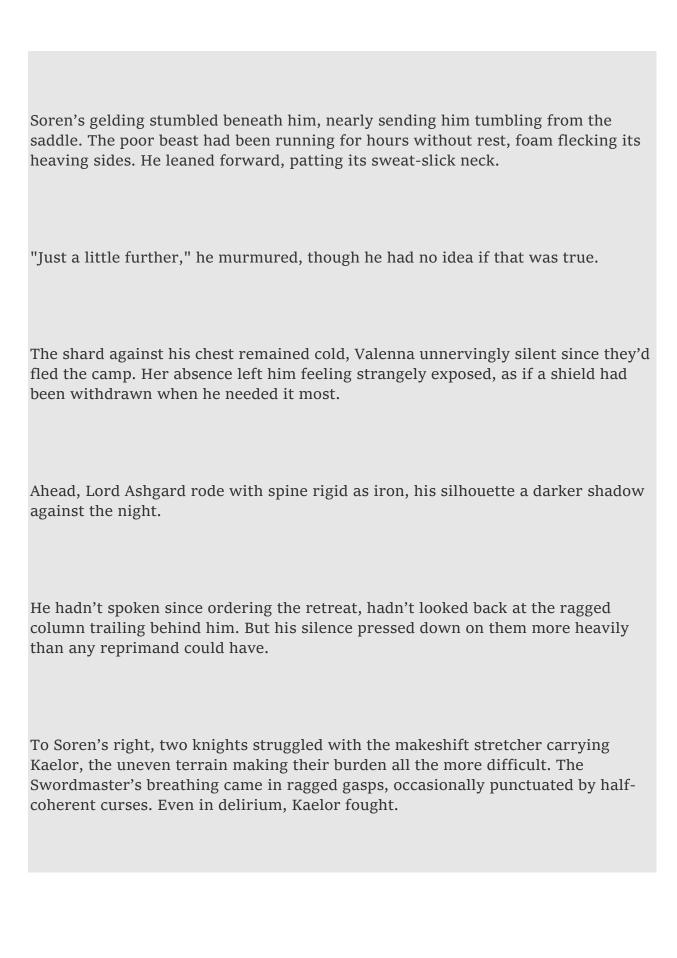
Something even he didn't know was there.

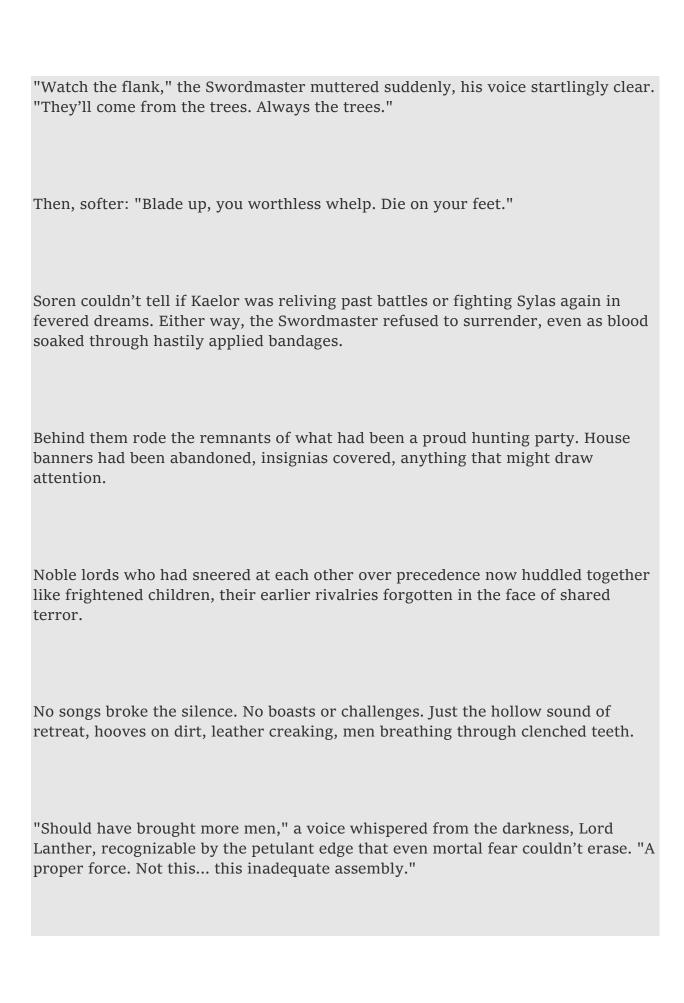
Chapter 77: Ashes of Valor

Chapter 77: Ashes of Valor

The night swallowed their retreat, broken only by the labored breathing of exhausted horses and the occasional groan of the wounded.

No torches lit their path, light would only make them targets. They rode blind through darkness thicker than ink, guided by Ashgard's scouts who somehow found passage where others saw only shadow.

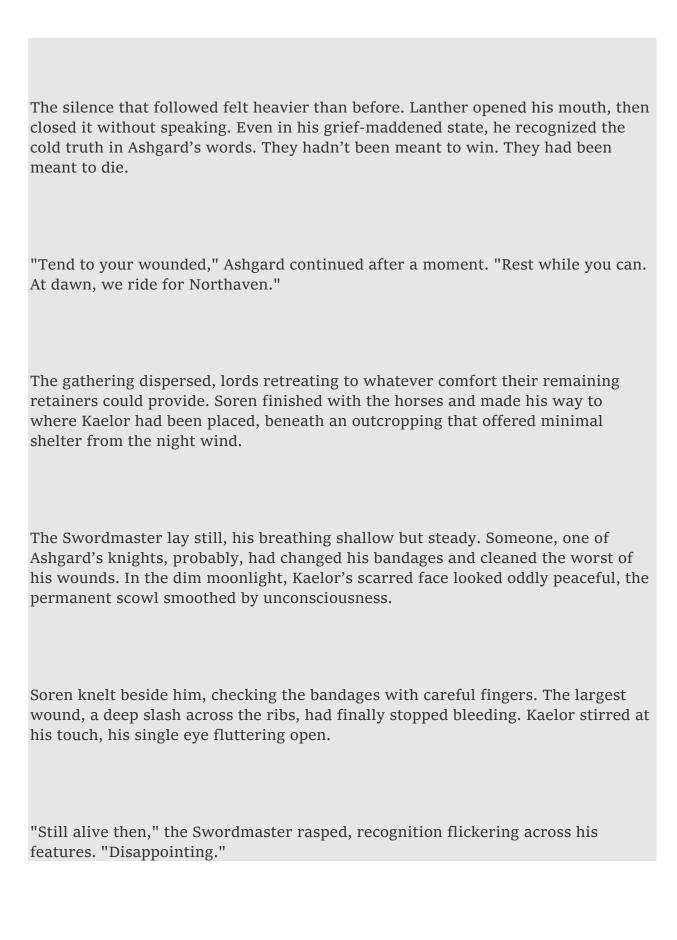


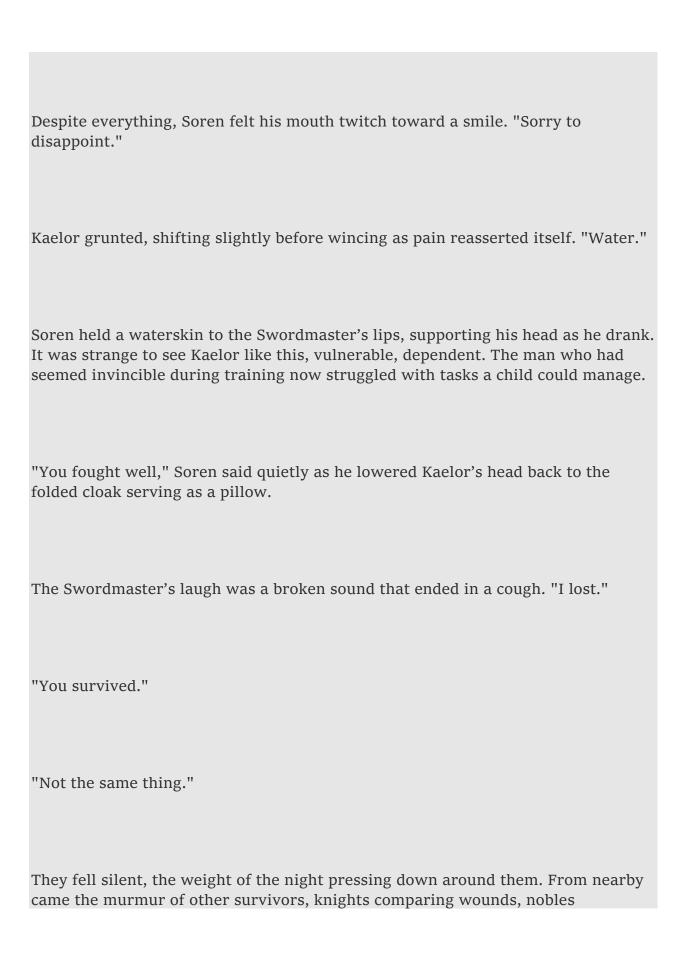


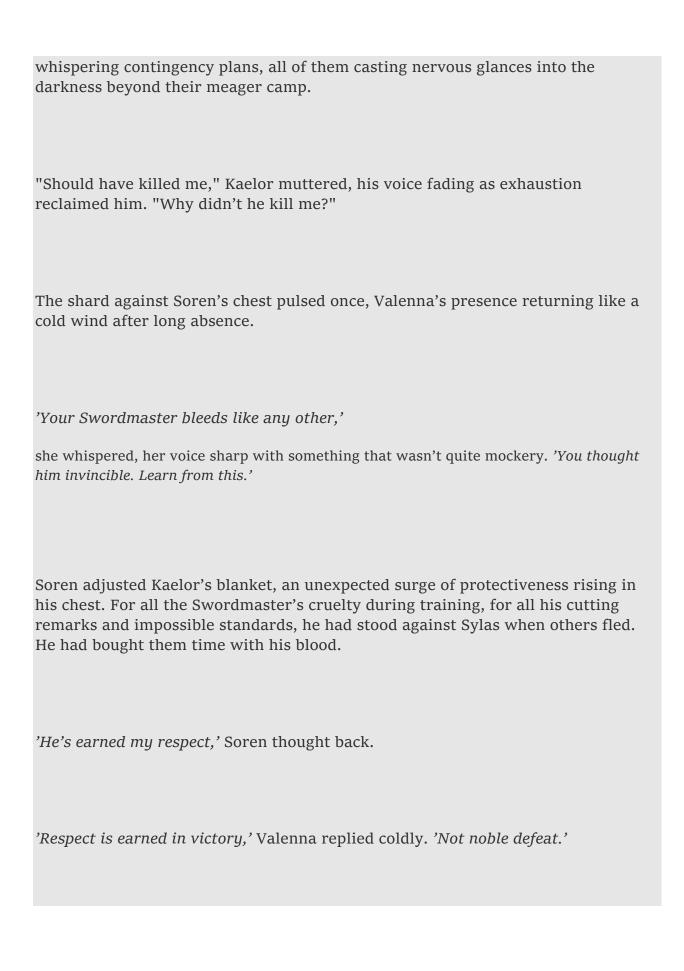
"Your men fled first," came the hissed reply, a Trescan noble whose name Soren couldn't recall. "While mine held the eastern flank."
"Held? Is that what you call abandoning your position at the first sign of blood?"
The bickering continued, hushed but venomous. Even facing extinction, they couldn't resist assigning blame. Soren wondered if they'd still be arguing as Sylas opened their throats.
The column crested a low rise, and Lord Ashgard finally raised his hand, calling a halt. They had reached some predetermined position, a ridge overlooking the valley they'd fled through, offering both visibility and defensible high ground.
"Make camp," Ashgard ordered, his voice carrying without seeming raised. "No fires. Minimal movement."
Knights dismounted with the awkward stiffness of men pushed beyond exhaustion. Some simply collapsed where they stood, armor clanking against stone. Others moved with mechanical precision to secure the perimeter, training overriding fatigue.
Soren slid from his saddle, legs nearly buckling as they took his weight. Every muscle screamed in protest. His hands, clenched around the reins for hours, refused to straighten completely. He forced himself to move, leading his exhausted mount toward where the other horses were being gathered.

"Water the animals," Ashgard commanded, already striding toward where his captains had begun assembling. "They've earned it."
Soren nodded, though the lord hadn't been addressing him specifically. He found a stream trickling down the ridge's eastern face and led several horses to drink, his own gelding nearly dragging him in its eagerness to reach water.
As the animals drank, Soren became aware of eyes on his back. He turned to find Harrick watching him from several paces away, the Trescan knight's usual arrogance replaced by something darker—suspicion mingled with fear.
"He looked right at you," Harrick said, voice pitched low but carrying in the night stillness. "The killer. He had us all at his mercy, and he looked at you."
Soren turned away, focusing on loosening his gelding's saddle straps to prevent sores. "He looked at everyone," he replied, keeping his voice neutral despite the heat rising in his throat.
"No." Harrick stepped closer, hand resting on his sword hilt. "Not like that. He recognized you."

Before Soren could respond, a commotion broke out near the center of their makeshift camp. Lord Lanther's voice rose above the general murmur, sharp with hysteria barely contained.
"We cannot simply cower here like rabbits!" the noble shouted, gesturing wildly as he confronted Lord Ashgard. "We must summon reinforcements! Raise the countryside! Hunt this monster down with proper forces!"
Ashgard regarded him with the detached interest one might give an insect behaving in unexpected ways. He didn't immediately respond, which only fueled Lanther's growing panic.
"My son is dead!" Lanther continued, voice cracking. "Slaughtered like an animal while Trescan knights fled! Where was House Dravien's vaunted discipline? Where was—"
"Enough."
Ashgard didn't raise his voice, yet the single word silenced Lanther as effectively as a blade to the throat. The lord's steel-gray eyes swept the gathering, taking in the haggard faces of survivors, nobles and knights alike rendered equal by shared terror.
"Survival was the only victory offered," he said, each word precise as a knife cut. "I took it."





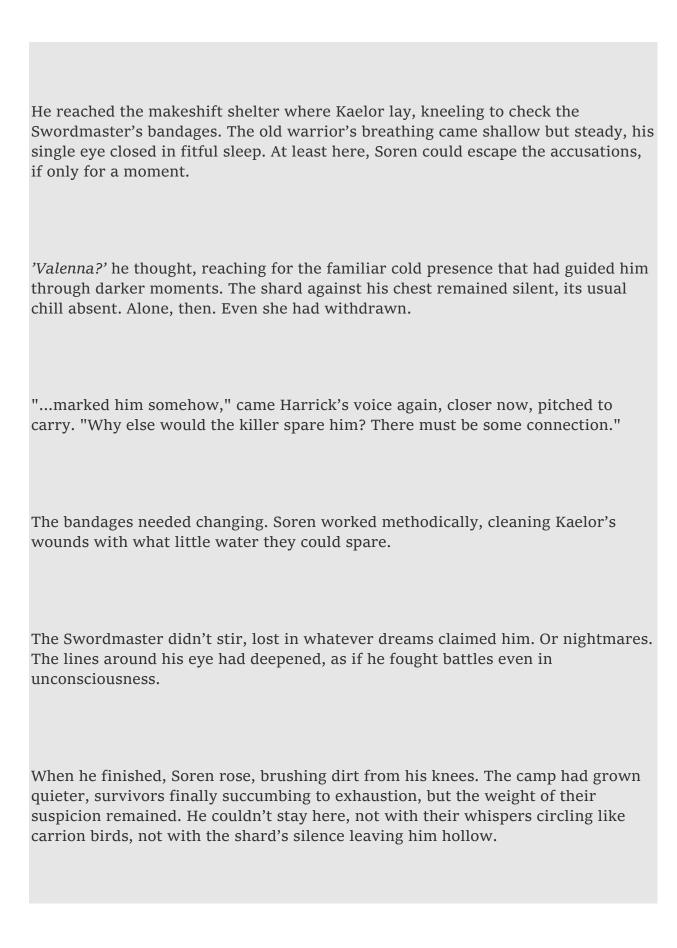


Soren rose, leaving Kaelor to his restless sleep. Around the camp, small clusters of survivors huddled together, their earlier house rivalries temporarily forgotten in the face of shared trauma.
But even in their unity, fractures showed, Trescan knights keeping distance from Dravien counterparts, Lanther's remaining retainers glaring at Karvath greens.
"abandoned us at the first sign of trouble," a Trescan noble was saying, voice low but intense as he confronted a Dravien knight. "While my men held the line."
"Your men?" The Dravien's laugh held no humor. "I saw you running before your banner even fell."
Nearby, two Karvath knights argued over who had given the order to retreat, their gestures growing more agitated as fatigue and fear frayed their control.
"Lord Merrin said to hold position!"
"Lord Merrin was already halfway to the horses by then!"
Only the Ashgard contingent maintained discipline, their gray-clad forms moving with quiet efficiency as they established watches and secured the perimeter. They

had suffered losses like the others, but their response was fundamentally different—focused on survival rather than recrimination.
As Soren made his way toward the edge of camp, seeking solitude, he became aware of whispers following in his wake. Not the arguments of nobles assigning blame, but something more insidious, speculation about him.
"stopped right in front of him," one knight murmured to another. "Could have killed him, but didn't."
"looked at him like they knew each other," came the response. "Strange, wouldn't you say?"
Soren kept walking, his back stiffening under the weight of their stares. The shard against his chest cooled further, Valenna's presence sharpening with what felt like grim satisfaction.
'Now you understand,' she whispered. 'Survival brings its own suspicions.'
He found a relatively isolated spot at the camp's edge, a flat stone overlooking the valley they'd fled through. Sitting with his back against a stunted pine, he tried to make sense of what had happened.

Chapter 78: The Shadow's Conversation (1)

Chapter 78: The Shadow's Conversation (1)
The weight of eyes pressed against Soren's back like daggers as he made his way through the camp. What had been exhaustion after their retreat had hardened into something darker, suspicion that clung to him like a second shadow.
"He should have died with the others," someone whispered as he passed. "Why was he spared?"
The words weren't meant for him, yet they carried clearly in the tense silence of the camp. Soren kept his gaze fixed ahead, jaw tight against the retort that rose in his throat. Defending himself would only feed the whispers.
Harrick of Trescan stood among a cluster of nobles, his earlier fear transformed into righteous accusation. His voice rose deliberately as Soren approached.
"Strange, wouldn't you say? The green-haired demon cuts down knights and lords alike, yet stops before this recruit." Harrick's lips curled around the word as if tasting something foul. "Almost as if he recognized him."
The nobles nodded, desperate for any explanation that didn't involve their own cowardice. Soren felt their stares like physical blows as he passed, the weight of their suspicion heavier than his exhaustion.



He approached one of Ashgard's knights, a weathered woman whose gray-streaked hair was tied back in a practical knot. "I'll gather more firewood," he said, the excuse sounding thin even to his own ears.

She studied him, her eyes neither accusatory nor trusting "Don't go far " she said."

She studied him, her eyes neither accusatory nor trusting. "Don't go far," she said finally. "These woods aren't safe."

Soren nodded, already turning toward the treeline. He could feel eyes tracking his movement, Harrick's burning with suspicion, others with fear, a few with simple curiosity. Let them watch. Let them whisper. He needed air untainted by their accusations.

The forest swallowed him after twenty paces, darkness replacing the gray halflight of the camp. He moved carefully, following a game trail that wound between ancient trunks. Moonlight filtered through the canopy in silver shards, illuminating patches of forest floor while leaving others in impenetrable shadow.

He had no intention of gathering wood. The lie had served its purpose, giving him reason to escape. Now, alone among the silent trees, he could finally breathe without feeling judged for the simple act of survival.

A distant owl called, the sound echoing between the trunks. Something small scurried through undergrowth nearby, a rabbit, perhaps, or a fox on its nightly hunt. Normal sounds. Peaceful sounds. Nothing like the screams that had filled the camp when Sylas arrived.

Sylas. The name itself sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the night air. Those inhuman green eyes, that casual efficiency as he cut down trained knights like they were practice dummies. And the way he had looked at Soren, not with the cold detachment he showed his victims, but with curiosity.
Why had he been spared? The question that plagued the camp now haunted him as well. He had stood frozen while others fled or fought. He had done nothing to earn mercy from a killer who showed none.
The shard against his chest suddenly pulsed cold, a shock after hours of silence. Soren stopped, one hand rising instinctively to press against it through his shirt.
'Valenna?'
No answer came, but the chill intensified, spreading outward from the shard in waves that matched his heartbeat. Warning. Recognition. The forest around him seemed to hold its breath. The owl fell silent. The small creatures stilled their movements.
Something approached.
Soren's hand dropped to his sword hilt, fingers curling around familiar leather. He turned slowly, scanning the darkness between the trees. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed.

Then he was there.
Not emerging dramatically from shadow, not approaching with menace, simply present, as if he had always been standing ten paces away, watching with those impossible green eyes.
Sylas.
The killer wore the same clothes from the attack, though no blood stained them now. His sword remained sheathed at his hip, his posture relaxed, almost casual. But the air around him felt different, heavier, smaller, as if the forest itself contracted in his presence.
Soren's throat closed. His heart hammered against his ribs. Every instinct screamed to run, to fight, to do something besides stand frozen before the man who had slaughtered a camp of knights without apparent effort.
"Curious," Sylas said, his voice soft yet carrying clearly in the silent forest. "Why do you stand when others fall?"
The question mirrored Soren's own thoughts so perfectly that for a moment he wondered if Sylas could somehow read his mind. He struggled to find his voice, to push words past the terror that had seized his throat.

"I don't know," he managed finally, the admission scraping his throat raw.

Sylas tilted his head slightly, those green eyes never leaving Soren's face. The pressure of his aura remained muted, restrained, as if deliberately held in check, but still made the forest feel like a room with walls closing in.

"Most men reveal themselves fully in moments of crisis," Sylas continued, taking a single step forward. "They become entirely what they always were beneath the masks they wear. The coward flees. The braggart cowers. The true warrior fights." Another step. "Yet you... did none of these things."

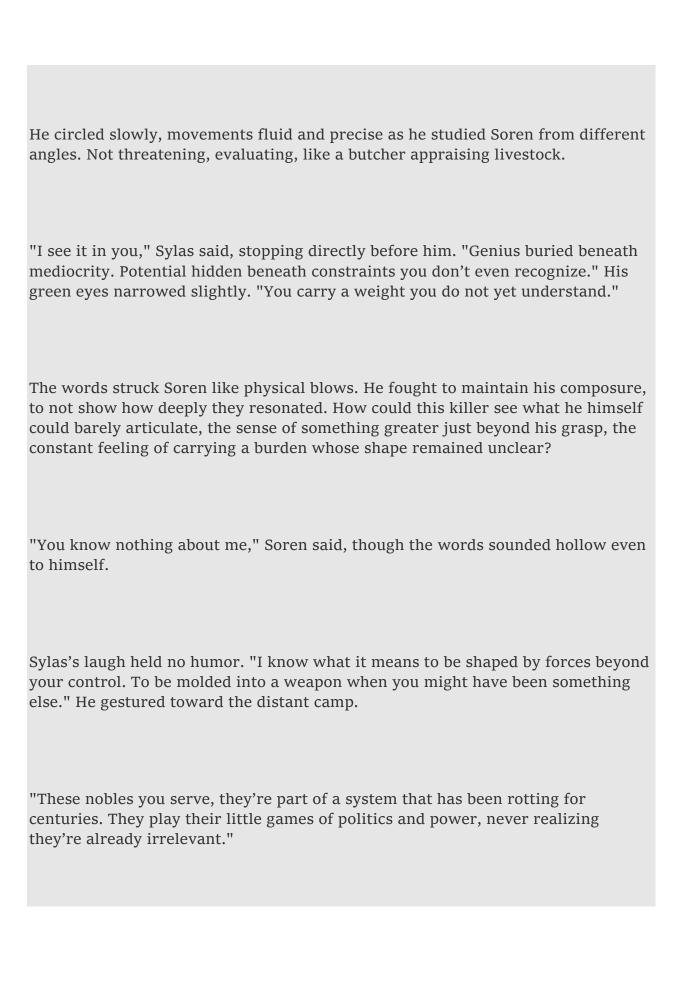
Chapter 79: The Shadow's Conversation (2)

Chapter 79: The Shadow's Conversation (2)

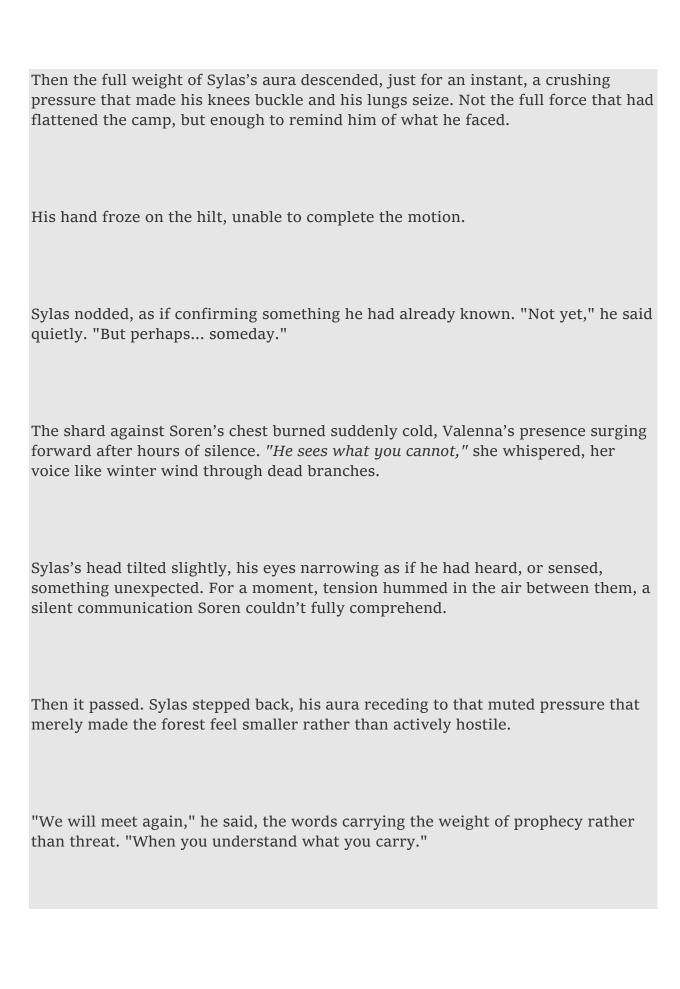
Soren held his ground despite every nerve screaming to retreat. The shard against his chest burned cold enough to ache, though Valenna remained silent.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, hating how his voice wavered.

Sylas's mouth curved in what might have been a smile on a normal man. On him, it looked like a predator baring teeth. "Want? An interesting question. What does the sculptor want from uncarved stone? What does fire want from wood?"



He stepped closer, close enough that Soren could see the flecks of darker green in his inhuman eyes. "The noble houses will fall. Not because I kill them, though I do but because they have outlived their purpose. Their kind always does."
The casual certainty in his voice chilled Soren more than any threat could have. This wasn't boasting or ranting. This was absolute conviction, stated as simply as one might observe that water is wet.
"Strike me," Sylas said suddenly.
Soren blinked, certain he had misheard. "What?"
"Strike me." Sylas spread his arms slightly, leaving himself open. "One free attempt. I won't defend."
The offer hung in the air between them, impossible and terrifying. Soren's hand tightened on his sword hilt, the familiar grip offering no comfort. This was madness. This man had cut down seasoned knights without apparent effort. Had shattered Kaelor's blade with a single stroke.
Still, something in him responded to the challenge. His arm tensed. His breath quickened. For a heartbeat, he saw himself drawing the blade, striking with all the skill Kaelor had beaten into him over months of brutal training.



And then he was gone, not with dramatic flair or supernatural speed, but simply turning and walking into the deeper shadows between the trees. One moment present, the next absorbed by the forest as if it had reclaimed one of its own.
Soren remained frozen, heart hammering against his ribs, the shard pulsing cold against his chest. Had that actually happened? Or had exhaustion finally broken his mind, conjuring the killer from his fears?
But no, the lingering pressure in the air, the cold sweat on his skin, the trembling in his limbs those were real. Sylas had been here. Had spoken to him. Had offered him a chance to strike, knowing he would fail.
He forced his legs to move, to carry him back toward the camp. Each step felt like wading through mud, his body suddenly leaden with the aftermath of terror and confusion. What had Sylas meant about a weight he carried? About understanding
The camp appeared through the trees, torches guttering in the pre-dawn breeze. Soren paused at the forest's edge, his lungs still tight from the encounter. He carried no wood. The excuse had long since evaporated from his mind, replaced by the echo of Sylas's words.
'A weight you do not yet understand.'
He stepped from the treeline into the camp's dim light. The moment he emerged, conversations halted. Heads turned. Eyes fixed on him with renewed suspicion.

Harrick stood among a cluster of Trescan knights, his finger pointed accusingly in Soren's direction. "Where's the wood you went to gather?" he called, voice pitched to carry across the camp. "Or did you have more important matters to attend?"
Soren ignored him, moving toward where Kaelor still lay unconscious. He felt the stares following him, heavier now, sharper with fresh suspicion. His back itched as if expecting a blade between the shoulder blades.
"He returns unharmed," someone whispered loudly. "While our brothers lie dead.'
"Marked," another voice added. "The killer marked him somehow."
Soren knelt beside Kaelor, checking the bandages more to escape the stares than from necessity. The Swordmaster's breathing had steadied somewhat, but his skin burned with fever. Another bad sign.
"What did you see out there?"
The question came from behind him.

Chapter 80: The Weight of Failure (1)

Chapter 80: The Weight of Failure (1)
First light crawled across the ridge, revealing what the darkness had mercifully hidden. Soren stared at the remnants of what had once been a proud hunting party, now reduced to hollow-eyed survivors clutching weapons they'd proven unable to use. The camp stirred with the reluctant movements of the defeated, men who had survived only to carry their shame home.
He pressed a hand against the shard beneath his shirt, its familiar coldness offering no comfort this morning. Valenna remained silent, as if waiting for something. Or perhaps judging him for his lies.
Across the makeshift camp, Lord Ashgard stood like a weathered statue, surveying his diminished command with steel-gray eyes that revealed nothing of his thoughts. His armor, practical and unadorned, bore new dents and scratches from the night's carnage. Unlike the other nobles, he made no attempt to hide the evidence of their failure.
"We move," Ashgard said, the words falling like stones in the morning stillness. No rousing speech. No assurances of future victory. Just the bare necessity of continued survival.
Knights limped to their mounts, wincing as damaged bodies protested. Horses stood with heads hanging low, ribs visible beneath sweat-matted coats.

No one bothered to unfurl the house banners that had been so proudly displayed days before. They remained rolled and secured, their bright colors hidden as if in acknowledgment of their shame.
Soren helped the Ashgard knights secure Kaelor to a makeshift litter between two horses. The Swordmaster's breathing came shallow but steady, his face pale beneath its network of old scars. Fever had broken sometime in the night, though whether that meant recovery or merely a different phase of dying, Soren couldn't tell.
"The boy returns from the forest unharmed," Harrick's voice carried deliberately across the camp. "While better men lie dead."
Soren kept his head down, focusing on tightening the straps that held Kaelor secure. The suspicion that had begun as whispers now flowed openly, following him like a shadow he couldn't outrun.
"Form up," called an Ashgard captain, her voice cutting through the murmurs. "By houses. We move in five minutes."
The column that assembled bore little resemblance to the proud hunting party that had ridden out days before. Gaps showed where knights had fallen. Spaces between houses widened as survivors clustered with their own, eyeing former allies with newfound suspicion.

Soren found himself riding beside Kaelor's litter, the Ashgard knights having silently assigned him this position, whether from kindness or to keep him under observation, he couldn't tell. Either way, it placed him apart from the main column, which suited him perfectly.
They set out as the sun cleared the eastern hills, moving at the cautious pace of those who expect ambush at any moment. The forest path that had seemed so promising on their outward journey now felt like a green tunnel back to disgrace.
'They blame you for surviving,' Valenna's voice finally broke through, cold as morning frost. 'As if death were the only honorable outcome.'
Soren glanced at the knights ahead of him, their backs rigid with more than physical pain. 'Can you blame them? They lost friends. Brothers.'
'And you gained knowledge they'll never possess,' she replied. 'The difference between you grows with each breath you take.'
The column wound through dense woodland, hooves muffled by the carpet of fallen needles. Where they had once ridden with songs and boasts, now only the creak of leather and occasional cough broke the silence.

	at had snapped proudly in the breeze remained fur shameful secrets.	rled, their bright colors
their Drav House Kar	ont of the column, tensions simmered visibly. Trest en counterparts, blame passing between them with vath's survivors rode in tight formation, muttering had broken first, who had shown cowardice.	hout need for words.
"Abandone exposed."	d us," a Trescan knight hissed, loud enough to car	ry. "Left our flank
	captain's head snapped around. "Your lord was alr en mine fell."	ready mounted and
"Enough." instantly.	Ashgard didn't raise his voice, yet the single word	silenced both men
of grief ha	n all rode Lord Lanther, his fine clothes torn and staned into something dangerous. He stared at the yes, occasionally muttering to himself.	
"Vengeanc blood."	e," Soren caught the word as they rounded a bend.	"Blood answers

