

CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT

Chapter 71: The Emerald Reaper

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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 sentiments...but 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 servant's entrance: three final smoke breaks before midnight.

The upper balcony: unguarded, its decorative lattice providing perfect handholds.

A patrol rounded the corner ahead. Sylas didn't alter his pace or duck into shadows. Such behavior attracted attention.

Instead, he adjusted his posture subtly, shoulders back, chin lifted, the unmistakable arrogance of nobility etched into his bearing. The guards' eyes slid over him, registering his presence and dismissing it in the same moment.

Predictable. Complacent. Trained to recognize threats based on appearance rather than essence.

Sylas continued past the main entrance, where carriages occasionally deposited late guests for whatever frivolity occupied the Marquis tonight. Music drifted through open windows, string instruments played with more technical precision than passion. The sound grated against his ears like steel on stone.

He circled toward the eastern garden, timing his approach with practiced precision. The head gardener, a man of admirable punctuality, had just completed his final inspection. The grounds would remain unattended until dawn.

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.

Sylas descended into the garden with liquid grace, landing in silence among carefully tended roses. Their scent filled his nostrils, too sweet, too cultivated, lacking the honest simplicity of wildflowers. Like nobility itself: bred for appearance rather than substance.

He moved through the gardens like a shadow sliding between torches, his steps finding the soft earth between gravel paths.

The servants' entrance stood unguarded save for a single dozing watchman, chin resting on chest, breath emerging in gentle snores. Sylas passed within arm's reach without disturbing the man's slumber.

Inside, the manor opened before him like a body splayed for dissection. Corridors leading to dining halls, ballrooms, galleries filled with art the Marquis appreciated for its cost rather than its beauty.

Sylas oriented himself quickly, recalling the floor plans he'd memorized from a drunken architect's boasts in a tavern three towns away.

Second floor. East wing. The Marquis's private study connected to his bedchamber.

Sylas ascended the main staircase without hesitation. A servant rounded the corner, arms laden with linens. Her eyes widened briefly at his unexpected presence, but his confident nod...the gesture of a guest who belonged, smoothed her features. She dipped in a quick curtsy and continued on her way.

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.

Plain steel, unadorned but immaculately maintained. No jewels or engravings...nothing to distract from its purpose. Nothing to compromise its function.

The door opened silently beneath his hand.

The Marquis sat at a massive desk, back to the entrance, quill moving across ledgers with practiced strokes. He didn't turn at the sound of Sylas's entrance, likely mistaking it for a servant come to refresh his brandy.

"Leave it on the table," he said, voice heavy with the boredom of privilege.

Sylas closed the door behind him with a deliberate click.

The Marquis stiffened, finally sensing something amiss. He turned, irritation transforming to confusion, then to fear as he registered the sword in Sylas's hand.

"Who—" he began, rising halfway from his chair.

Sylas didn't waste breath on explanations. The blade moved in a single, perfect arc, opening the Marquis's throat with surgical precision. Blood fountained, staining the ledgers recording centuries of exploitation. The nobleman clutched at his neck, eyes wide with disbelief rather than understanding.

They never understood. That was the tragedy and the justice of it.

The Marquis collapsed across his desk, fingers still grasping for the bell that would summon help that would arrive too late.

Sylas watched the life drain from him with the detached interest of a craftsman observing his work. No joy. No regret. Simply the satisfaction of necessary labor completed correctly.

The door behind him opened. A valet, drawn by some sound or sixth sense.

"My lord, I—" The words died as he took in the scene.

Sylas's blade moved again, efficient and economical. The servant crumpled without a cry, eyes already glazing as he hit the carpet.

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 object...a 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

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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.

Beneath these proud standards, knights assembled with military precision, armor gleaming despite the early hour, weapons checked and rechecked with ritual care.

Squires darted between them like nervous birds, adjusting straps, delivering messages, offering final cups of watered wine to masters who barely acknowledged their existence.

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed cold, Valenna's presence sharpening as she observed through his eyes.

'Look at them,' she whispered, her voice like frost forming on glass. 'How they preen and posture. One might almost believe they're united in purpose.'

Soren shifted his weight, easing the pressure on his still-healing ribs. The formal Velrane blacks he wore felt heavier this morning, the silver threading catching the light whenever he moved. He'd polished his blade before dawn, not for show like some of these peacocks, but because Kaelor would have skinned him alive if he hadn't.

'They're supposed to be allies,' he thought back, watching as a Trescan knight deliberately turned his back on a Karvath counterpart mid-conversation.

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.

"You know," he said conversationally, "I've often wondered why House Trescan bothers to train its sons in swordcraft at all." His voice carried easily in the silent courtyard. "Seems a waste, given how readily they turn and run when real fighting starts."

Harrick's face flushed crimson. "You dare—"

"I was there," Kaelor continued, as if the other man hadn't spoken, "at the Battle of Torven's Pass. Saw the Trescan banner retreat first, before a single blade was blooded." His scarred face twisted in what might have been a smile. "But perhaps that's why they send you, boy. Can't tarnish a reputation already stained."

A collective intake of breath swept through the assembled knights. The Battle of Torven's Pass was recent enough that many present would remember the shame Kaelor had just resurrected. Harrick's hand tightened on his sword hilt, his face contorted with fury.

"You'll answer for that," he hissed.

Kaelor shrugged, already turning away. "I answer for many things. Your hurt feelings aren't among them."

Laughter, quickly suppressed but unmistakable, rippled through knights from several houses. Even a Dravien captain failed to completely hide his smirk. Harrick stood rigid, humiliation and rage warring across his features as Kaelor returned to the Velrane position with unhurried steps.

The confrontation had lasted less than a minute, yet Soren knew its impact would linger far longer.

Kaelor had won this exchange, but the victory felt hollow. The damage was done, House Velrane's representatives had been publicly questioned, their capabilities doubted. Now every knight present would be watching, measuring, judging their performance against Harrick's lowered expectations.

Lord Ashgard mounted his warhorse, the action drawing all eyes back to the center of the courtyard. The lord's expression revealed nothing of his thoughts on the exchange, his steel-gray eyes sweeping over the assembled knights with equal parts assessment and command.

"The hunt begins," he announced, voice carrying to every corner of the gathering. "Form your ranks. I will announce the riding assignments."

Knights moved to their mounts with practiced efficiency, banners raised high as each house positioned itself for Ashgard's inspection. Soren swung into his saddle, adjusting his sword belt as his gelding shifted restlessly beneath him.

Ashgard raised a gloved hand, and silence fell once more.

"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 Syllas, 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

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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.

The shard against his chest warmed slightly, Valenna's presence sharpening after hours of silence.

'The land is honest,' she whispered, her voice like wind through winter branches. 'Unlike the men riding it.'

Soren adjusted his position in the saddle, easing pressure on muscles still stiff from yesterday's ride. *'What do you mean?'*

'This terrain doesn't pretend to be welcoming,' she continued. 'It shows its thorns openly. These nobles wear pretty colors to hide sharper points.'

The expedition crested a rise, revealing a valley spread below like a rumpled blanket. Farmland had disappeared entirely now, replaced by wild growth and rocky outcroppings. In the distance, a line of dark trees marked what might be a forest boundary.

As they descended into the valley, Harrick of Trescan maneuvered his mount alongside Soren's, close enough that their knees nearly touched. The young knight's face bore the same contemptuous smile he'd worn in the courtyard.

"Keeping up so far, gutter rat?" he asked, voice pitched low. "The real hunting hasn't even begun."

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's hand drifted toward his sword hilt before he caught himself. The shard against his chest flared hot with shared anger, Valenna's presence surging forward.

'Patience, little knife,' she whispered. 'His kind always overreach. Wait for the proper moment.'

The sun climbed higher, beating down on the expedition with increasing intensity. Sweat trickled down Soren's back beneath his leather armor, and dust from the road coated his throat. Still, they pressed onward, Ashgard setting a pace that suggested urgency without panic.

As they passed a particularly twisted oak, Harrick found his way alongside Soren once more.

"I wonder," he said conversationally, though his eyes held nothing friendly, "how a street rat earned such elevation. On your knees, perhaps? Lord Veyr has... unusual tastes, they say."

Heat surged up Soren's neck, anger threatening to boil over. This time, Kaelor maneuvered his mount between them before Soren could respond.

"Problem, Trescan?" the Swordmaster asked, his scarred face a mask of deadly calm.

Harrick's smile didn't reach his eyes. "No problem at all, Master Kaelor. Simply making conversation with our... unusual companion."

"Save your breath for fighting," Kaelor advised, though the words carried a warning edge. "You'll need it when we find what we're hunting."

When Harrick had fallen back to his position, Kaelor guided his horse closer to Soren's. "He's trying to goad you into a mistake," he said quietly. "Don't oblige him."

"I know," Soren replied through gritted teeth.

"Your time will come," Kaelor added, his single eye fixed on the road ahead. "The Trescan pup won't let it go. When he makes his real move, be ready... but not before."

The expedition continued through increasingly wild country. By mid-afternoon, they had left anything resembling civilization far behind.

The road narrowed to little more than a trail in places, forcing them to ride single-file through passages bordered by thorny brush that snagged at cloaks and scratched exposed skin.

Soren found himself watching Lord Ashgard with growing curiosity. The gray-haired 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.

"How many?" asked a Dravien captain, surveying the carnage with professional detachment.

"At least eight," replied one of Ashgard's scouts. "Hard to be certain with the condition of the remains."

Harrick pushed forward, his face pale beneath its usual arrogance. "Bandits?"

"No." Ashgard's single word carried absolute certainty. He knelt beside one of the wagons, examining something in the dirt. "Bandits take valuables. This was destruction for its own sake."

He rose, brushing ash from his gloves. "The Noble-Killer," he said, voice carrying to the entire gathering. "Sylas doesn't limit his attentions to lords, it seems."

A murmur ran through the assembled knights. Soren studied the wreckage more carefully, noting details that had escaped his initial assessment. The fire had burned hot enough to warp metal, hotter than a normal campfire or torch. And the bodies... they hadn't tried to flee. They had died fighting, weapons still clutched in charred hands.

"They fought back," he said, the observation escaping before he could consider its wisdom.

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 subdued by the carnage.

Chapter 74: Sylas Appears

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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."

Across the clearing, the argument had expanded to include representatives from House Dravien.

"My knights require proper rest if we're to continue this hunt effectively," Lady Dravien's captain insisted, his midnight blue cloak wrapped tightly against the evening chill. "These sleeping arrangements are entirely inadequate."

"Perhaps House Dravien should have brought feather mattresses if stone ground offends their delicate sensibilities," retorted a Karvath knight, earning approving laughter from his green-clad companions.

Soren took a long drink from the waterskin, the cool liquid soothing his dust-parched throat. "They act like they're at some noble gathering, not hunting a killer."

"Most of them have never faced real danger," Kaelor replied, his voice low enough that only Soren could hear. "Tournament champions, palace guards, they think themselves warriors because they've won contests with rules."

The shard pulsed cold against Soren's chest. *'The street taught you better,'*

Valenna whispered. *'No rules there. Just survival.'*

The bickering intensified as twilight deepened into true darkness. A Trescan knight shoved a Lanther squire who had accidentally encroached on their designated area.

Two Karvath guards argued loudly over watch rotations. Even the normally composed Dravien contingent had joined the fray, demanding more space for their horses.

Lord Ashgard stood apart from it all, conferring quietly with his captains near the edge of the camp. His expression remained impassive as he observed the deteriorating order, those steel-gray eyes missing nothing.

When he finally moved, it was with the same deliberate economy that characterized everything he did. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to.

"Enough."

The single word cut through the clamor like a blade through silk. Conversations ceased mid-sentence. Knights froze in place, suddenly aware of their lord's attention.

"You bicker like children while death watches from the trees," Ashgard continued, his tone carrying neither anger nor disappointment, only cold certainty. "House Ashgard knights will take the outer watch. The rest of you will maintain inner perimeter by paired houses, as assigned."

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."

The hours crept by. Knights established watches, checked weapons, prepared simple meals over smaller cook fires. The initial chaos gave way to wary vigilance as the reality of their situation sank in. They weren't on some noble adventure, they were hunting a killer who had already demonstrated both brutality and cunning.

Soren remained by the fire, the warmth failing to reach the cold knot that had formed in his stomach. Kaelor sat beside him, methodically sharpening his blade with smooth, practiced strokes. Neither spoke. Neither needed to.

The camp had grown quieter when Soren first noticed something wrong. It wasn't a sound that alerted him, but rather the absence of sound. The night forest, which had hummed with insect songs and occasional owl calls, had fallen completely silent.

The shard against his chest turned ice-cold, Valenna's presence surging forward with sudden urgency.

'He's close,' she whispered, her voice sharp with warning.

Kaelor sensed it too. The Swordmaster paused mid-stroke, his head lifting like a hound catching a scent. His single eye scanned the treeline, narrowing as it searched the darkness beyond their circle of firelight.

Across the camp, other veterans had noticed the unnatural silence. Ashgard knights reached casually for weapons, their movements unhurried but purposeful.

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!"

Several knights nodded in agreement, reaching for weapons and moving toward their tethered mounts. But Ashgard's voice stopped them cold.

"No."

The lord hadn't moved from his position, hadn't raised his voice, yet the single word froze every man in place. His expression remained unchanged, though something in his eyes had hardened further.

"He found them," Ashgard said simply.

A ripple of unease passed through the gathered knights. Hands tightened on sword hilts. Eyes strained against the darkness beyond the firelight.

The fire popped loudly, sending sparks spiraling upward. In the sudden flare, shadows seemed to deepen at the forest's edge. Soren rose slowly to his feet, the shard burning cold against his chest. Something was watching them from the darkness. Something patient. Something dangerous.

Kaelor stood beside him, blade now drawn and ready. The Swordmaster's scarred face betrayed nothing, but his single eye remained locked on the treeline, tracking something only he could see.

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

Chapter 75: The Hammer Falls

The air changed.

One moment Sylas stood across the fire, his eyes locked on Soren's, the next, something invisible yet overwhelming poured from him like a flood breaking through a dam.

The campfire guttered and shrank, flames bending away as if fleeing his presence. The very air grew heavy, pressing down with the weight of an ocean.

Soren's lungs seized. His vision swam. Every instinct screamed to run, to hide, to escape the crushing pressure that threatened to collapse his chest.

Around him, men staggered like drunkards. A Lanther knight dropped to one knee, face contorted in silent agony. Another clawed at his throat as if drowning on dry land.

The horses screamed, a sound Soren had never heard before, primal terror stripped of any restraint. Several broke their tethers, bolting blindly into the darkness.

'*Aura*,' Soren realized with dawning horror. This was what Kaelor had described during training, the manifestation of will made tangible. But the Swordmaster's clinical explanations hadn't prepared him for this reality.

Across the clearing, Lord Lanther collapsed to his knees, blood trickling from his nose. "What... what is this?" he gasped, voice barely audible above the chaos.

The shard against Soren's chest burned like a brand, Valenna's presence surging forward with savage intensity.

"Don't you fall," she snarled inside his mind, her voice a blade against the crushing pressure. *"Watch."*

Soren locked his knees, fighting to remain upright as the world tilted around him. Through watering eyes, he saw Harrick stumble backward, his face drained of color, pride replaced by naked terror. Even the Dravien captain, a veteran of three campaigns, had fallen to one knee, hand braced against the ground.

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.

Then Sylas changed.

The pressure that had filled the clearing doubled, then tripled. The remnants of the campfire died completely, plunging the scene into darkness broken only by the moon's pale light.

Soren's ears popped as if he'd descended a mountain too quickly. His vision narrowed to a tunnel, the edges going gray.

Through this narrowing window, he watched Sylas strike the shield wall again, not with greater force, but with perfect placement. A shield cracked. A knight fell. The formation buckled.

"Enough of this," Sylas said, voice still conversational despite the havoc he wrought. "I came for specific prey."

His blade blurred, and another Ashgard knight collapsed, blood spraying from a wound no shield had blocked. A third fell to one knee, shield arm suddenly limp and useless.

The formation, so perfect moments before, began to disintegrate under the precision of Sylas's attacks.

A flash of silver cut through the darkness as Kaelor stepped forward, his scarred face set in grim determination. The Swordmaster's blade hummed with visible power, silver aura spiraling along its length like living lightning.

"Get back," he growled to the remaining knights. "Reform behind me."

Sylas paused, those inhuman green eyes shifting to assess this new threat. Something like recognition flickered in their depths.

"A Swordmaster," he observed, a faint smirk touching his lips. "At least one of you is worth my time."

Kaelor didn't waste breath on reply. He moved with speed that belied his bulk, blade tracing a silver arc through the darkness.

Sylas met it with his own, the clash sending visible waves of power rippling outward. For a heartbeat, the two stood locked together, steel against steel, will against will.

Then they broke apart and truly began to fight.

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.

Sylas not only defended; he countered. His blade slipped past Kaelor's guard, opening a thin line across the Swordmaster's ribs. Not a killing blow, but a message, saying he could have ended him, but choose not to yet.

Kaelor stumbled back, silver aura flickering as blood darkened his side. Still, he raised his blade again, refusing to yield.

The pressure of Sylas's aura suddenly shifted, like a current changing direction. Those inhuman green eyes locked onto Soren, piercing through the chaos of battle with terrible focus.

The shard against Soren's chest erupted in searing pain, as if trying to burn its way through his flesh. His knees buckled as Sylas's full attention crashed into him like a physical blow.

Through the agony, images flashed behind his eyes, a battlefield strewn with corpses, blood-soaked mud stretching to the horizon. Lightning split a storm-black sky. At the center of it all stood Sylas, sword raised, surrounded by the fallen.

"Even monsters can bleed," Valenna's voice cut through the vision, cold and clear. *"Stand."*

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 Syllas, 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-

haired killer. Blood darkened the Swordmaster's side, but his stance remained unwavering, blade held in the Iron Gate position that had been drilled into Soren since his first day of training.

"Run," Kaelor growled without turning, the command meant for those behind him. "Get the nobles out. Now."

Sylas regarded the wounded Swordmaster with something like professional curiosity. "Admirable," he said, voice still conversational despite the chaos surrounding them. "Most would have fled by now."

"Not done with you yet," Kaelor snarled. The silver lightning of his aura intensified, crackling along his blade and spiraling up his arm.

Soren struggled to his feet, the shard burning against his chest as Valenna's presence surged forward. Through the haze of pain and pressure, he watched as Kaelor launched himself at Sylas, blade moving in the complex pattern of the Sevenfold Strike, a technique Soren had only seen demonstrated once, when the Swordmaster had been in his cups and feeling nostalgic for his tournament days.

Sylas met each strike with minimal movement, his blade intercepting Kaelor's with precision that bordered on prescience. The green-haired killer wasn't just defending; he was studying, analyzing, learning his opponent's patterns with each exchange.

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

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, Syllas 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," Syllas 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.

Syllas 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 instant. Something brushed against his mind, not Valenna's familiar presence, but something alien, probing, curious. It felt like fingers sifting through sand, searching for something buried beneath the surface.

Sylas tilted his head slightly, his expression shifting from deadly focus to something more contemplative. The pressure of his aura changed, becoming less crushing and more... evaluative. The corner of his mouth lifted in what might have been a smirk.

"Not yet," he said, the words so quiet Soren wasn't sure if he'd actually spoken or simply projected the thought directly into his mind.

With a casual flick of his wrist, Sylas sent Kaelor crashing to the ground with a final blow to the chest. The Swordmaster collapsed in a heap, blood pooling beneath him, but his chest still rose and fell with stubborn persistence.

Soren waited for the killing stroke that would end him next, but it never came. Instead, Sylas turned away, dismissing him as one might dismiss an uninteresting insect.

The green-haired killer walked unhurriedly toward the edge of the camp, pausing only to cut down a fleeing Lanther noble who had the misfortune to cross his path.

The body fell without ceremony, blood darkening the earth. Sylas continued without breaking stride, disappearing into the treeline as casually as he had emerged.

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 steel-gray 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

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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.

Soren's gelding stumbled beneath him, nearly sending him tumbling from the saddle. The poor beast had been running for hours without rest, foam flecking its heaving sides. He leaned forward, patting its sweat-slick neck.

"Just a little further," he murmured, though he had no idea if that was true.

The shard against his chest remained cold, Valenna unnervingly silent since they'd fled the camp. Her absence left him feeling strangely exposed, as if a shield had been withdrawn when he needed it most.

Ahead, Lord Ashgard rode with spine rigid as iron, his silhouette a darker shadow against the night.

He hadn't spoken since ordering the retreat, hadn't looked back at the ragged column trailing behind him. But his silence pressed down on them more heavily than any reprimand could have.

To Soren's right, two knights struggled with the makeshift stretcher carrying Kaelor, the uneven terrain making their burden all the more difficult. The Swordmaster's breathing came in ragged gasps, occasionally punctuated by half-coherent curses. Even in delirium, Kaelor fought.

"Watch the flank," the Swordmaster muttered suddenly, his voice startlingly clear. "They'll come from the trees. Always the trees."

Then, softer: "Blade up, you worthless whelp. Die on your feet."

Soren couldn't tell if Kaelor was reliving past battles or fighting Syllas again in fevered dreams. Either way, the Swordmaster refused to surrender, even as blood soaked through hastily applied bandages.

Behind them rode the remnants of what had been a proud hunting party. House banners had been abandoned, insignias covered, anything that might draw attention.

Noble lords who had sneered at each other over precedence now huddled together like frightened children, their earlier rivalries forgotten in the face of shared terror.

No songs broke the silence. No boasts or challenges. Just the hollow sound of retreat, hooves on dirt, leather creaking, men breathing through clenched teeth.

"Should have brought more men," a voice whispered from the darkness, Lord Lanther, recognizable by the petulant edge that even mortal fear couldn't erase. "A proper force. Not this... this inadequate assembly."

"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 Syllas 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."

The silence that followed felt heavier than before. Lanther opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking. Even in his grief-maddened state, he recognized the cold truth in Ashgard's words. They hadn't been meant to win. They had been meant to die.

"Tend to your wounded," Ashgard continued after a moment. "Rest while you can. At dawn, we ride for Northaven."

The gathering dispersed, lords retreating to whatever comfort their remaining retainers could provide. Soren finished with the horses and made his way to where Kaelor had been placed, beneath an outcropping that offered minimal shelter from the night wind.

The Swordmaster lay still, his breathing shallow but steady. Someone, one of Ashgard's knights, probably, had changed his bandages and cleaned the worst of his wounds. In the dim moonlight, Kaelor's scarred face looked oddly peaceful, the permanent scowl smoothed by unconsciousness.

Soren knelt beside him, checking the bandages with careful fingers. The largest wound, a deep slash across the ribs, had finally stopped bleeding. Kaelor stirred at his touch, his single eye fluttering open.

"Still alive then," the Swordmaster rasped, recognition flickering across his features. "Disappointing."

Despite everything, Soren felt his mouth twitch toward a smile. "Sorry to disappoint."

Kaelor grunted, shifting slightly before wincing as pain reasserted itself. "Water."

Soren held a waterskin to the Swordmaster's lips, supporting his head as he drank. It was strange to see Kaelor like this, vulnerable, dependent. The man who had seemed invincible during training now struggled with tasks a child could manage.

"You fought well," Soren said quietly as he lowered Kaelor's head back to the folded cloak serving as a pillow.

The Swordmaster's laugh was a broken sound that ended in a cough. "I lost."

"You survived."

"Not the same thing."

They fell silent, the weight of the night pressing down around them. From nearby came the murmur of other survivors, knights comparing wounds, nobles

whispering contingency plans, all of them casting nervous glances into the darkness beyond their meager camp.

"Should have killed me," Kaelor muttered, his voice fading as exhaustion reclaimed him. "Why didn't he kill me?"

The shard against Soren's chest pulsed once, Valenna's presence returning like a cold wind after long absence.

'Your Swordmaster bleeds like any other,'

she whispered, her voice sharp with something that wasn't quite mockery. *'You thought him invincible. Learn from this.'*

Soren adjusted Kaelor's blanket, an unexpected surge of protectiveness rising in his chest. For all the Swordmaster's cruelty during training, for all his cutting remarks and impossible standards, he had stood against Syllas when others fled. He had bought them time with his blood.

'He's earned my respect,' Soren thought back.

'Respect is earned in victory,' Valenna replied coldly. *'Not noble defeat.'*

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 reached the makeshift shelter where Kaelor lay, kneeling to check the Swordmaster's bandages. The old warrior's breathing came shallow but steady, his single eye closed in fitful sleep. At least here, Soren could escape the accusations, if only for a moment.

'*Valenna?*' he thought, reaching for the familiar cold presence that had guided him through darker moments. The shard against his chest remained silent, its usual chill absent. Alone, then. Even she had withdrawn.

"...marked him somehow," came Harrick's voice again, closer now, pitched to carry. "Why else would the killer spare him? There must be some connection."

The bandages needed changing. Soren worked methodically, cleaning Kaelor's wounds with what little water they could spare.

The Swordmaster didn't stir, lost in whatever dreams claimed him. Or nightmares. The lines around his eye had deepened, as if he fought battles even in unconsciousness.

When he finished, Soren rose, brushing dirt from his knees. The camp had grown quieter, survivors finally succumbing to exhaustion, but the weight of their suspicion remained. He couldn't stay here, not with their whispers circling like carrion birds, not with the shard's silence leaving him hollow.

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 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 half-light 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 circled slowly, movements fluid and precise as he studied Soren from different angles. Not threatening, evaluating, like a butcher appraising livestock.

"I see it in you," Sylas said, stopping directly before him. "Genius buried beneath mediocrity. Potential hidden beneath constraints you don't even recognize." His green eyes narrowed slightly. "You carry a weight you do not yet understand."

The words struck Soren like physical blows. He fought to maintain his composure, to not show how deeply they resonated. How could this killer see what he himself could barely articulate, the sense of something greater just beyond his grasp, the constant feeling of carrying a burden whose shape remained unclear?

"You know nothing about me," Soren said, though the words sounded hollow even to himself.

Sylas's laugh held no humor. "I know what it means to be shaped by forces beyond your control. To be molded into a weapon when you might have been something else." He gestured toward the distant camp.

"These nobles you serve, they're part of a system that has been rotting for centuries. They play their little games of politics and power, never realizing they're already irrelevant."

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.

Then the full weight of Sylas's aura descended, just for an instant, a crushing pressure that made his knees buckle and his lungs seize. Not the full force that had flattened the camp, but enough to remind him of what he faced.

His hand froze on the hilt, unable to complete the motion.

Sylas nodded, as if confirming something he had already known. "Not yet," he said quietly. "But perhaps... someday."

The shard against Soren's chest burned suddenly cold, Valenna's presence surging forward after hours of silence. "*He sees what you cannot,*" she whispered, her voice like winter wind through dead branches.

Sylas's head tilted slightly, his eyes narrowing as if he had heard, or sensed, something unexpected. For a moment, tension hummed in the air between them, a silent communication Soren couldn't fully comprehend.

Then it passed. Sylas stepped back, his aura receding to that muted pressure that merely made the forest feel smaller rather than actively hostile.

"We will meet again," he said, the words carrying the weight of prophecy rather than threat. "When you understand what you carry."

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.

Banners that had snapped proudly in the breeze remained furled, their bright colors hidden like shameful secrets.

Near the front of the column, tensions simmered visibly. Trescan knights glared at their Dravien counterparts, blame passing between them without need for words. House Karvath's survivors rode in tight formation, muttering among themselves about who had broken first, who had shown cowardice.

"Abandoned us," a Trescan knight hissed, loud enough to carry. "Left our flank exposed."

A Dravien captain's head snapped around. "Your lord was already mounted and fleeing when mine fell."

"Enough." Ashgard didn't raise his voice, yet the single word silenced both men instantly.

Behind them all rode Lord Lanther, his fine clothes torn and stained, his face a mask of grief hardened into something dangerous. He stared at the trail before him with unseeing eyes, occasionally muttering to himself.

"Vengeance," Soren caught the word as they rounded a bend. "Blood answers blood."

The shard pulsed cold against Soren's chest. 'Grief makes men simple,' Valenna observed. 'Reduces them to creatures of instinct. His son is dead, so someone must pay. The target matters less than the satisfaction.'

Soren watched the grief-maddened lord with a mixture of pity and wariness. Such men were unpredictable, and often looked for convenient scapegoats.

Midday came and went without a proper rest. They stopped only long enough to water the horses and check on the wounded before pressing onward. Ashgard set a pace that acknowledged their injuries without yielding to them, steady progress over comfort.

During one such brief stop, Kaelor stirred on his litter, his single eye opening slowly. The Swordmaster looked disoriented at first, gaze drifting across the canopy above before focusing on Soren.

"Water," he croaked, voice rough from disuse.

Soren knelt beside him, holding a waterskin to cracked lips. Kaelor drank sparingly, each swallow seeming to cost him effort.

"The others?" he asked when he'd finished.

"More than half made it," Soren replied, keeping his voice neutral. "Ashgard leads us back to Northaven."

Kaelor's eye narrowed slightly. "You." He paused, gathering strength. "You went into the forest last night."

The statement hung between them, its implications clear. Soren felt his throat tighten, the lie he'd prepared suddenly sticking like a bone.

"What did you see?" Kaelor pressed, his voice weak but determined.

Soren hesitated, acutely aware of nearby knights who had paused in their tasks, heads tilting slightly toward the conversation.

"Nothing," he said finally. "Only shadows. I thought I heard something, but..." He let the sentence trail off with a shrug. "The woods play tricks after what we saw."

Kaelor studied him, his single eye revealing nothing.

