

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 8: The False Step - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 8: The False Step

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The barracks had gone candle-deep with cold; Soren woke certain he'd broken his own teeth from shivering. His tongue fumbled at the roots of his molars just to be sure.

The bunk above was empty, Tavren already up in the dark, leaving only the ghost of his feet, bruised half-moons pressed in frost on the planks, by way of greeting.

Soren traced them with a finger, then levered himself upright, bones popping one after the other like an untuned instrument.

He expected the voice. Wanted it, even: a brittle echo in his skull, some dry admonition or scorn, anything at all.

But the only trace of Valenna was the absence. An exquisite absence, sharp as a hunger that turns the stomach to bile.

Soren's first and last hope of grandeur, borrowed or otherwise, had wrapped itself in ice, so that every movement of his hands felt years out of date.

He dressed slowly. Ritual, he thought, might trigger the spark: left arm through first, pull the sleeve tight against the wrist.

Flex fingers, re-count the scars along the knuckles, twelve, if you included the one where the blade nicked bone.

Pull laces taut enough to cut off circulation; arrange the patched coat so the blue lining didn't show, lest someone mistake him for a petty thief.

The sole of his left boot, lined with a wedge of last week's newsprint, made a second squelch with each step. He relished the repetition of it; the world, at least, could be depended on to stay indifferent.

By the time he reached the refectory, the other boys were already huddled over their bowls. Tavern hunched over his with both arms bracketing the soup, daring any of the others to reach for bread.

Soren took a seat where the window glass caught the dawn and flayed it into ribbons on the table. The bread was gone; the soup, already cold at the bottom.

He ate it anyway, each swallow an act of remembering how to be a person.

Outside, the yard was two shades paler than the sky, the sand frosted to glass where foot-traffic hadn't worn it bare.

The instructor, a rumor or a relic, depending on which bunk you asked, waited at the center, arms folded. The tip of his cane sketched shallow scars into the crust, a pattern as meaningless as it was ominous.

Soren watched him through the refectory pane, felt the ache in his hands grow urgent and then recede.

The drills began by the numbers: pair off, single file, then a set of shuffling lunges that threatened to spill the entire line into the gutter.

Soren moved through it like an actor mourning the vanished script. Every step lagged, every feint lost the beat by a hair. He watched, sickened, as the others did not bother to hide their amusement.

Tavren went first, catapulting from stance to stance as if he'd never once learned the difference between show and substance.

But it worked. The instructor marked him for praise, if the hardening of the mouth could be called praise, then moved down the line.

Soren sharpened his focus, let the memory of last night's sequence, elbow high, weight forward, never plead for balance, run laps in his head.

He tried to set his feet as instructed, but the floor seemed to undulate beneath him.

When it was his turn to partner up, Glen or maybe Glesk; distinctions here were always provisional, smirked at him with the blank rudeness of a boy whose only ambition was not to be last.

Soren squared himself, ready for the flicker of guidance, the sly correction, but... nothing.

Glen's first thrust caught Soren flat, the stick rapping his collar so hard it numbed his arm. Soren countered, poorly, telegraphing the swing by a full three heartbeats.

Glen sidestepped, tripped him, and dropped the point to Soren's throat.

There were no jeers, not this time. Even Tavren only shook his head and spat into the dirt, as if embarrassed to have ever considered Soren a rival.

The instructor said, "Again," and Soren obeyed, slower each time, like a marionette whose strings had been cut in half.

By late morning his body was a treasury of bruises, each limb painstakingly catalogued by a different flavor of ache.

Soren didn't bother changing for lunch, he sat on the bench, barely tasting the ratty grains, letting his thoughts calcify around the question: why had the sword left him?

No answer, not from within. Not even a pulse of warmth from the fragment wrapped in his pocket. He pressed it under the table, felt only the geometry of stone and cloth, no hint of the other presence.

He remembered the day before, how natural it had seemed to move with something greater than himself, the brief utopia of muscle and mind in nonverbal conspiracy, and found the memory already going thick and unreliable.

He snapped the bread in half, swallowed, watched the sky darken then lighten again as clouds tumbled over the walls.

Afternoon: more pairing, this time elimination matches. Winner stays, loser rotates. Soren met Rhain first, who approached with a practiced humility that made Soren hate him a little.

Their first clash was over in seconds, Rhain's blade popping Soren's fingers so that the wooden sword clattered to the ground and rolled an insultingly small distance.

Soren picked it up, tried to make eye contact, but Rhain just offered a faint, apologetic bow.

Next was Tavren. Soren braced for a lesson in humiliation, and Tavren delivered: three quick strikes, a laugh too loud for the setting, and a deliberate stomp on Soren's boot for good measure.

"Come on, gutter," Tavren said, voice low. "I thought you'd figured out the trick." He said it with the easy cruelty of someone already bored by his own victories.

By the sixth round, Soren's arms were liquid, his will evaporated. He moved when told, but his movements were as unremarkable and slow as the daylight running out across the training ground.

He wanted to shout, or beg, or demand the voice's return. Instead, he just nodded at each defeat, and cycled to the end of the line.

When dusk pinned itself to the barracks windows, the boys filed back silent, already consumed by their own calculations of rank and injury.

Soren trailed behind; he didn't want to see anyone's face, not even the back of their heads. He passed through the empty corridor, past the refectory where the bread crusts had gone stale in the hour, and slipped into the dormitory.

He did not remove his coat, or boots, or even the satchel. Just sat at the edge of the bunk, hands on knees, feeling the raw weight of air inside his chest.

For a while he stared at the wall, waiting to hear the scrape or sigh of Valenna's return.

When it did not come, he unwrapped the shard and held it up to the last light leaking through the glass.

He waited.

Nothing.

He tried the ritual again: left hand, right hand, lace the boots, sit tall, imagine the voice coming back to correct him. He even whispered her name, quiet, so quiet the word unspooled in his throat and never quite landed on his tongue.

"Valenna? Are you listening?"

Stillness. The kind of silence that suggested not indifference, but a pointed withdrawal. Soren squeezed the shard tighter, so tight the rough edge cut a crescent in his palm.

"Please," he said, voice cracking in the empty room.

A space opened in the dark, cold and absolute.

Then the reply, dry as wind through a spire: *"Pain teaches faster than I do."*

Soren flinched at the thought. The voice was there, but hollow, detached, as if broadcast from another continent.

He stared at the fragment, seeing nothing but the memory of someone else's glory, and the echo of a promise: *'I swear, though it will ruin me.'*

He let the silence thicken. He tried to imagine, for one childish moment, that the loss of the voice was just a trick, a lesson nested inside a lesson. It didn't matter.

The bond was real, real enough to leave him changed, and then real enough to leave him, period.

Soren lay down fully dressed, boots over the edge. He pressed the shard to his chest and felt the heat return, small, angry, not at all comforting.

His last thought before sleep claimed him was not a wish for strength, or even redemption, but a fear:

That he would never again move as something greater than himself.

The cold did not touch him that night. The pain did. He let it.