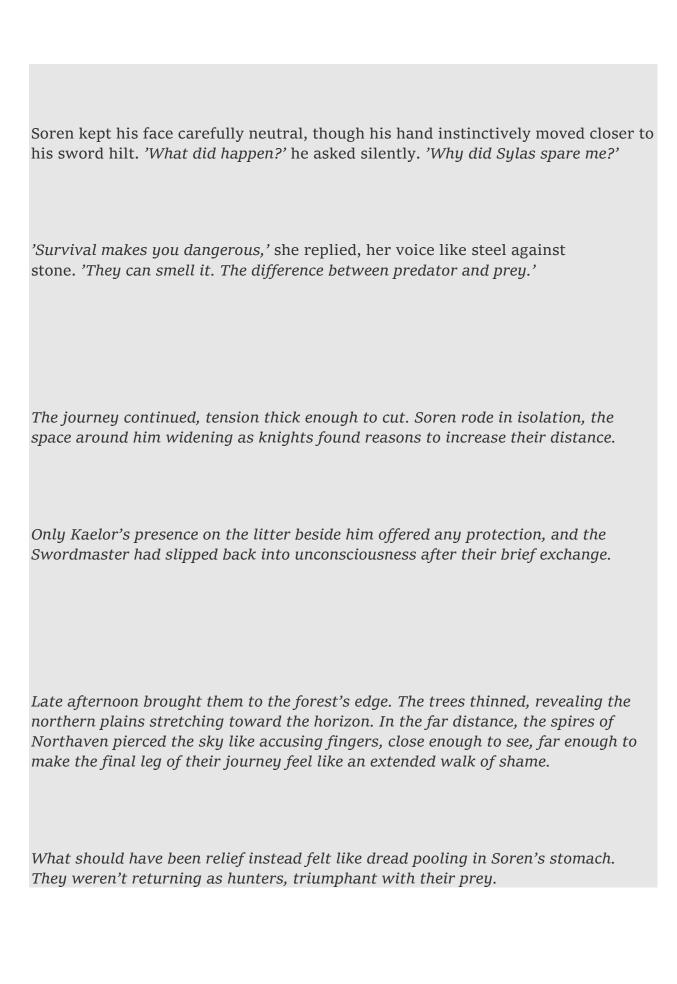
CELESTIAL BLADE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHT

Chapter 81: The Weight of Failure (2)

Chapter 81: The Weight of Failure (2)
He didn't speak at all, didn't challenge the obvious lie, but his silence weighed more heavily than any accusation could have.
The column resumed its journey, Soren now hyperaware of the stares following him. Kaelor's questions had been overheard, his hesitation noted. The suspicion that had been simmering now threatened to boil over.
Near midafternoon, they reached a small clearing where a stream crossed their path. Ashgard called another brief halt, dismounting to confer with his remaining captains while the others watered their horses.
Soren stayed near Kaelor's litter, avoiding the clusters of knights who fell silent whenever he approached. He pretended not to notice how conversations halted, how eyes followed his movements, how hands drifted to sword hilts when he passed too close.
From his position at the edge of the clearing, he watched Ashgard's meeting. The lord stood with his captains in a tight circle, voices kept deliberately low. His face

remained impassive as he listened to their reports, those steel-gray eyes occasionally scanning the ragged column as if taking inventory of what remained.
"We ride back," Ashgard said, his voice carrying just far enough for Soren to catch. "We say little. This does not leave our walls until I decide it does."
One of his captains nodded. "The story must be controlled."
"Controlled?" The incredulous voice came from Lord Trescan, who had apparently moved close enough to overhear. "Half our knights lie dead in the forest, and you speak of controlling the story?"
Several nobles drifted closer, drawn by the confrontation. Ashgard regarded them with the same impassive expression he might give to an unexpected but minor obstacle in the road.
"Would you prefer panic?" he asked mildly. "Rumors spreading unchecked through Northaven? Tales growing with each telling until Sylas becomes an army rather than one man?"
Lord Trescan's face flushed. "I would prefer accountability! Not this this management of failure."

A Karvath noble stepped forward, his green surcoat torn and muddied. "He wants to control the tale to make himself look blameless," he hissed to the gathering lords. "While our houses bear the shame."
Ashgard didn't respond directly. He simply turned back to his captains, continuing his instructions as if the interruption had never occurred. The nobles bristled at being so dismissed, but none challenged him further. His authority held, though Soren could see the cracks forming in its foundation.
As they mounted up to continue, the weight of stares pressed against Soren more heavily than before. Knights who had merely whispered now spoke openly, their suspicions hardening into conviction.
"The boy should be left behind," Harrick said, his voice pitched to carry. "He'll draw the monster back."
Several knights nodded in agreement, hands drifting toward weapons. The Trescan's words had given shape to the formless suspicion that had been building since the attack.
'They fear what they don't understand,' Valenna murmured coldly in Soren's mind. 'And they understand nothing of what happened last night.'



They were limping home as failures, those who had survived when better men had fallen. At the head of the column, Ashgard rode with the rigid posture of a man preparing for war. Not against Sylas, Soren realized, but against the nobles who would use this failure as a weapon in court. Each surviving lord already calculated how to shift blame, how to position their house to benefit from the disaster. Behind Ashgard, the nobles whispered among themselves, faces hollow with exhaustion and fear. The proud hunt that had left Northaven now returned as a column of broken men, carrying wounds deeper than any sword could inflict. And at the very back, isolated by suspicion and his own secrets, Soren noticed how the knights moved with the stiff gait of sleepwalkers. Their faces bore the vacant expressions of men who had witnessed horrors their minds refused to process fully. He recognized that look from the streets of Nordhav, survivors who had seen too much, too quickly. He dismounted, feeling every muscle protest. His own reflection in a puddle startled him, hollowed cheeks, dark circles beneath bloodshot eyes, skin pale as a corpse. No wonder they whispered. He looked half-dead himself. Around him, the camp broke apart with none of the structured efficiency that had marked their departure days ago. Horses stood with heads hanging, ribs visible beneath dull coats. Several limped, favoring legs strained from the desperate flight.

Knights moved between them, packing supplies with mechanical movements, avoiding each other's eyes as if ashamed to witness another's survival.

"Water reserves are low," an Ashgard knight announced, her voice flat. "Ration what remains."

Lord Ashgard moved through this grim tableau like a shadow, inspecting their diminished numbers with those steel-gray eyes that missed nothing. Where once thirty knights had stood in proud formation, now barely fifteen remained, many wounded, all haunted.

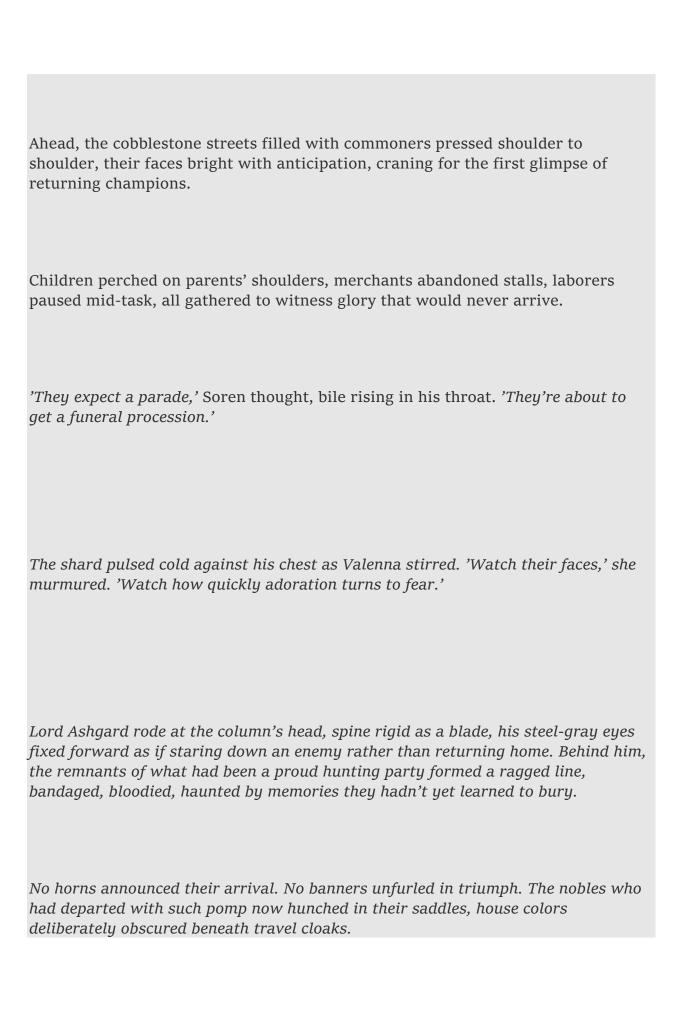
"We move in ten minutes," Ashgard stated, the words clipped and final. He offered no encouragement, no reassurances about reaching Northaven safely. Such platitudes would have rung hollow after what they'd witnessed.

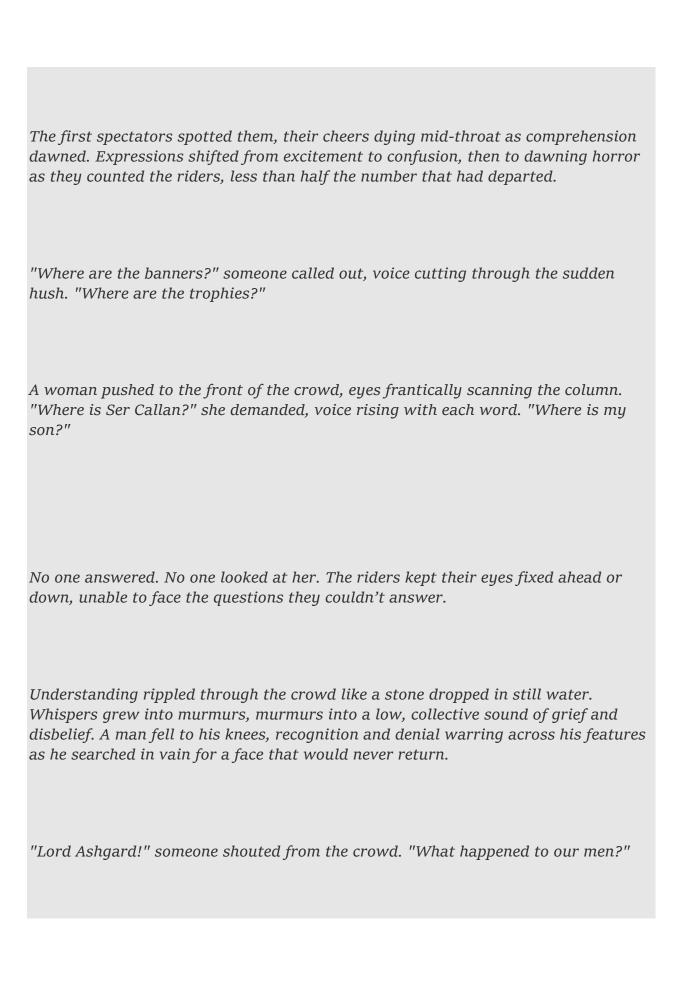
Chapter 82: Whispers in Northaven (1)

Chapter 82: Whispers in Northaven (1)

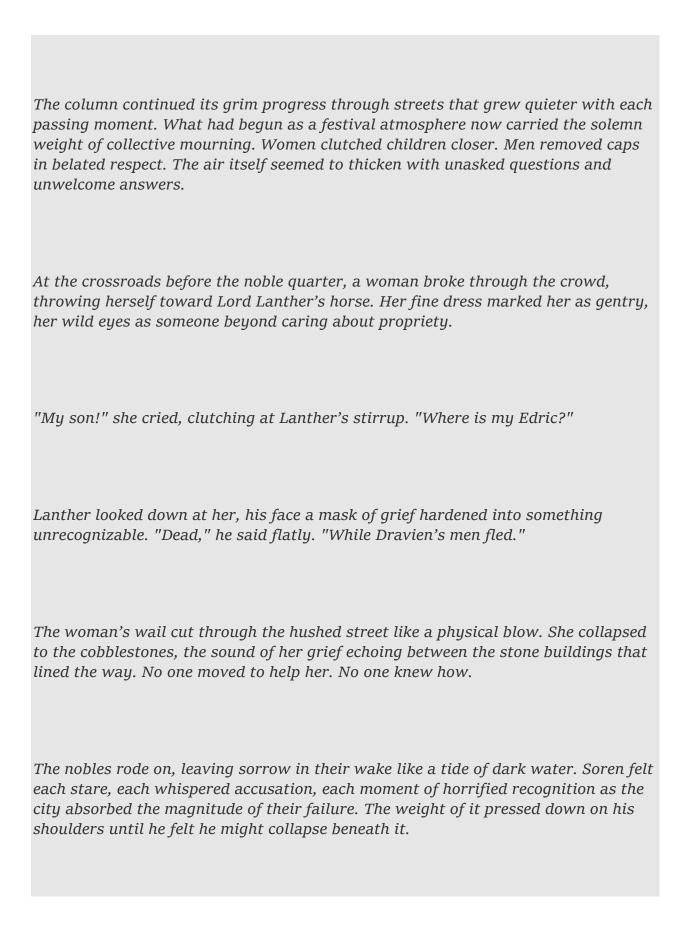
The city gates of Northaven loomed ahead, their iron-banded wood thrown wide in welcome for heroes who no longer existed.

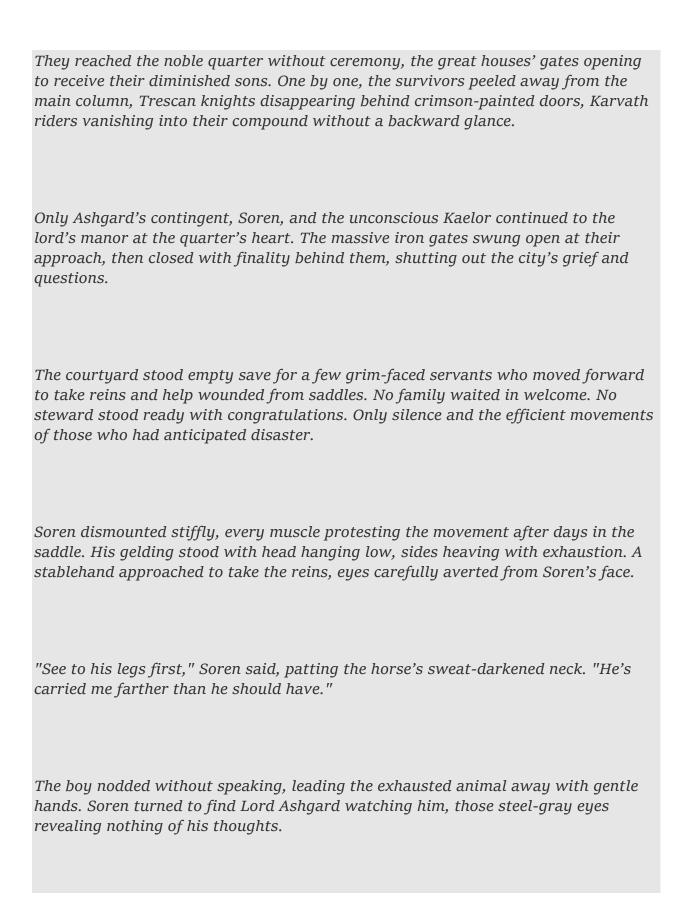
Soren's gelding limped beneath him, each step a fresh reminder of their defeat as the battered column approached the city walls.





Ashgard didn't respond, didn't even glance toward the voice. His focus remained unwaveringly forward, leading his shattered command through streets that had expected victory and received only its hollow shell.
Kaelor's litter drew particular attention as it passed between the rows of onlookers. The Swordmaster lay motionless, his scarred face pale as death, bandages visible beneath the thin blanket covering him. Women made warding signs. Men whispered behind raised hands.
"The Swordmaster lives," Soren heard someone mutter. "When better men died."
"A miracle," countered another voice. "Or a curse."
Soren kept his gaze fixed between his gelding's ears, feeling the weight of stares pressing against him from all sides. The whispers that had begun among the survivors now found fresh life in the city streets, spreading from soldier to commoner with the speed of flame through dry tinder.
"—marked by the killer—"
"—returned unharmed while knights fell—"
"—something unnatural—"





"The healers are preparing chambers for the Swordmaster," Ashgard said, his voice pitched for Soren's ears alone. "You will attend me in one hour. My study." He paused, gaze flicking toward the closed gates. "Say nothing of what occurred. To anyone. The story must be contained until I decide otherwise."

Before Soren could respond, the lord turned away, already issuing commands to his waiting captains. Servants moved with practiced efficiency, helping wounded to the infirmary, carrying supplies inside, erasing all visible evidence of failure from public view.

Chapter 83: Whispers in Northaven (2)

Chapter 83: Whispers in Northaven (2)

Through it all, the shard remained cold against Soren's chest, Valenna unusually silent as she observed. He felt her presence sharpening, assessing, calculating the changed landscape they now faced.

Within the hour, messengers departed from each noble house, racing toward distant estates with sealed letters. The lords might have returned in shared defeat, but their political maneuvering had already begun. Blame would be assigned. Alliances would shift. Power would change hands.

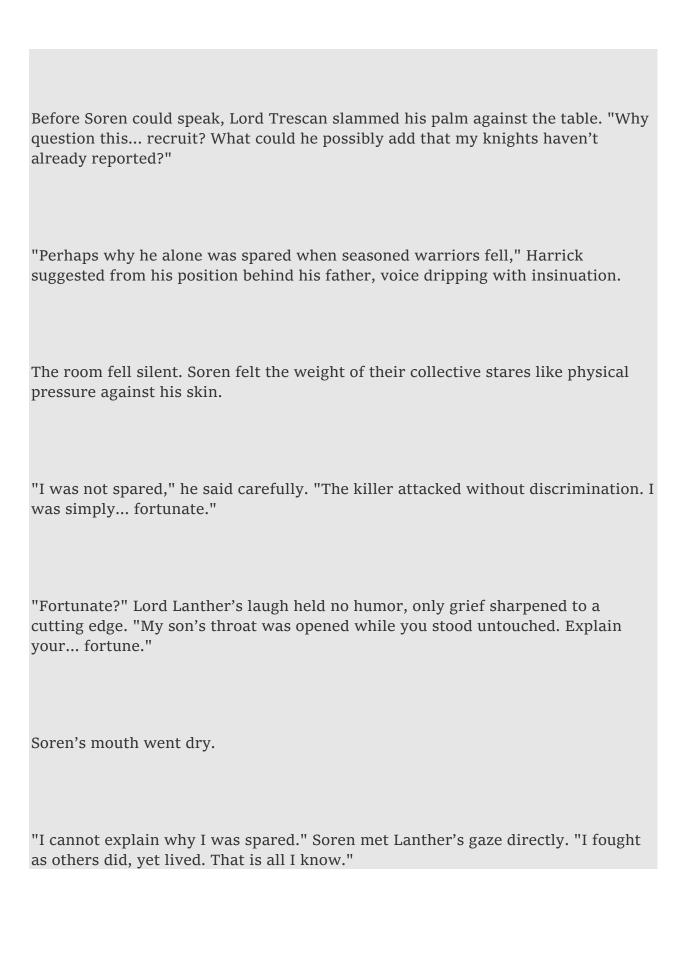
Soren made his way to the bathhouse first, desperate to wash away the grime of travel and the stench of fear that seemed to have seeped into his very skin. The hot water stung countless small cuts he hadn't noticed receiving, turning the bath cloudy with dirt and dried blood.

As he dressed in clean clothes, a servant appeared at the doorway. "Lord Ashgard awaits," the man said, his expression carefully neutral. "The lords have gathered in the great hall."
Soren followed him through corridors that seemed unnaturally quiet. Servants moved like ghosts, speaking in whispers if they spoke at all. The atmosphere of the entire manor had changed since their departure, lightness and life replaced by something heavier, more cautious.
The great hall's massive doors stood closed, two guards positioned outside. They regarded Soren with flat, unreadable expressions as he approached.
"Wait here," one said. "You'll be called when needed."
From beyond the thick oak, raised voices leaked through, the controlled fury of men accustomed to being obeyed now finding themselves victims of circumstances beyond their control.
"—abandoned my men in their hour of need!" Lord Trescan's voice, sharp with accusation.
"While you cowered behind your banner-bearer?" That was Karvath, his usual diplomatic tone replaced by open contempt.

"My son is DEAD!" Lanther's voice cracked with grief and rage. "Dead while you squabbled over formation and precedence!"
The accusations flew faster, each lord desperate to assign blame elsewhere. Through it all, Ashgard remained silent, allowing the initial storm to exhaust itself before he spoke.
When his voice finally cut through the chaos, it carried the cold authority of a man who had anticipated every word uttered in that room.
"Enough." The single word silenced them all. "This serves nothing except our enemies."
"Enemies?" Trescan snarled. "The only enemy I see is the incompetence that led u into that slaughter!"
"Then you are blind as well as foolish," Ashgard replied, his tone unchanged. "The noble houses face extinction if we continue this petty bickering. Sylas is merely the blade, the hand that wields him remains hidden."
A moment of stunned silence followed this declaration. Then Karvath spoke, his voice lower but no less intense. "You suggest some conspiracy? Some power behind this killer?"

"I suggest nothing," Ashgard countered. "I state fact. This was a test, of our unity, our resolve, our ability to stand together against a common threat. We failed."
"We failed?" Lanther's laugh held the brittle edge of hysteria. "My son lies dead in the forest, and you speak of failure as if discussing a tournament loss!"
"Your son died because we could not set aside our rivalries long enough to face a single opponent," Ashgard replied, unmoved by Lanther's grief. "What do you imagine will happen when the real attack comes?"
The silence that followed felt heavier than before. Soren shifted his weight, acutely aware of the guards watching him with undisguised suspicion.
"We leave this room with one voice," Ashgard continued after a moment. "One account of what occurred. One response to the questions that await us. Or we die divided, picked off one by one while pointing fingers at each other."
"And what story would you have us tell?" Dravien asked, speaking for the first time. "That the finest knights of five houses were slaughtered by a single man? That we fled like common soldiers?"
"We tell the truth," Ashgard replied, "carefully measured. Sylas employed tactics we hadn't anticipated. We suffered losses but gathered valuable intelligence. We return to regroup, not retreat."

"A pretty lie," Trescan muttered. "When half our knights won't return at all."
"Not a lie," Ashgard countered. "A perspective that serves our interests rather than our enemies'. Unless you prefer to announce our weakness to every rival house and foreign power watching us?"
The debate continued, voices rising and falling as arguments were presented and dismissed. Soren listened with growing unease, realizing that even in defeat, the game of politics continued unabated. Lives lost became pieces moved on an invisible board. Failure became opportunity, if properly managed.
Eventually, a guard opened the door, beckoning Soren forward. "Lord Ashgard requests your presence."
Soren stepped into the great hall, instantly aware of how the temperature seemed to drop as every noble eye turned to him.
The massive oak table that dominated the center of the room was surrounded by lords whose fine clothes couldn't disguise their exhaustion and rage. Maps and documents lay scattered before them, abandoned mid-discussion.
"Thorne," Ashgard said, his voice neutral. "Recount what you witnessed during the attack."



The silence that followed felt like a physical weight pressing down on his shoulders. Lanther's eyes, red-rimmed and hollow with grief, burned into him with the intensity of a brand.

Before anyone could speak, the chamber doors swung open. A messenger in Ashgard's colors entered, face glistening with sweat, chest heaving from exertion.

Chapter 84: Lord Velrane Arrives

Chapter 84: Lord Velrane Arrives

"I don't care what lies you've told the others," Lanther snarled, his grief-ravaged face inches from Soren's. "My son is dead while you live. Explain that, street rat."

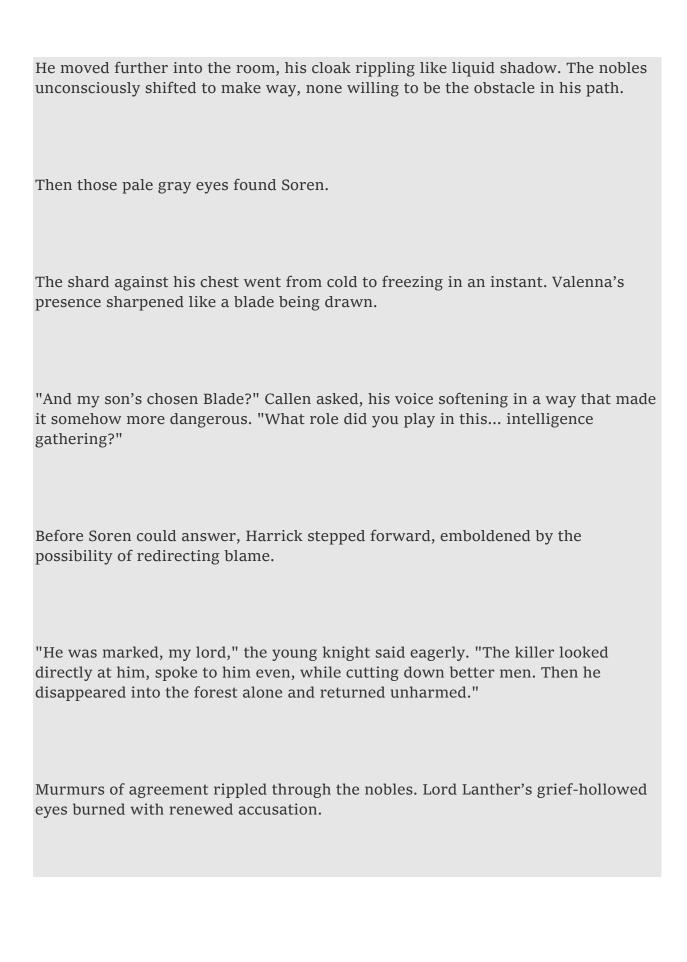
The great hall had descended into chaos. Lords who had ridden together now turned on each other like starving dogs fighting over the last scrap of meat. Trescan pointed accusingly at Dravien, whose knights had supposedly abandoned their position.

Karvath bellowed about Lanther's cowardice. Each noble twisted the messenger's warning about Sylas's continued movements into leverage against their rivals.

Soren stood in the center of it all, a convenient target for their collective rage. The shard against his chest remained cold and silent, offering no guidance as accusations flew around him like arrows.
"Perhaps the boy made some arrangement," suggested a Karvath captain, voice dripping with insinuation. "Some understanding with the killer."
"He disappeared into the forest," Harrick added eagerly. "Returned without explanation."
"My lords, this accomplishes nothing—" Ashgard began, but his words vanished beneath renewed shouting.
The massive oak doors at the far end of the hall swung open without warning.
Silence fell instantly, as if a blade had severed the very air.
A tall figure stood in the doorway, unarmored but no less imposing for it. Lord Callen Dathen Velrane wore a long black cloak that brushed the floor, its silver edging catching the torchlight.

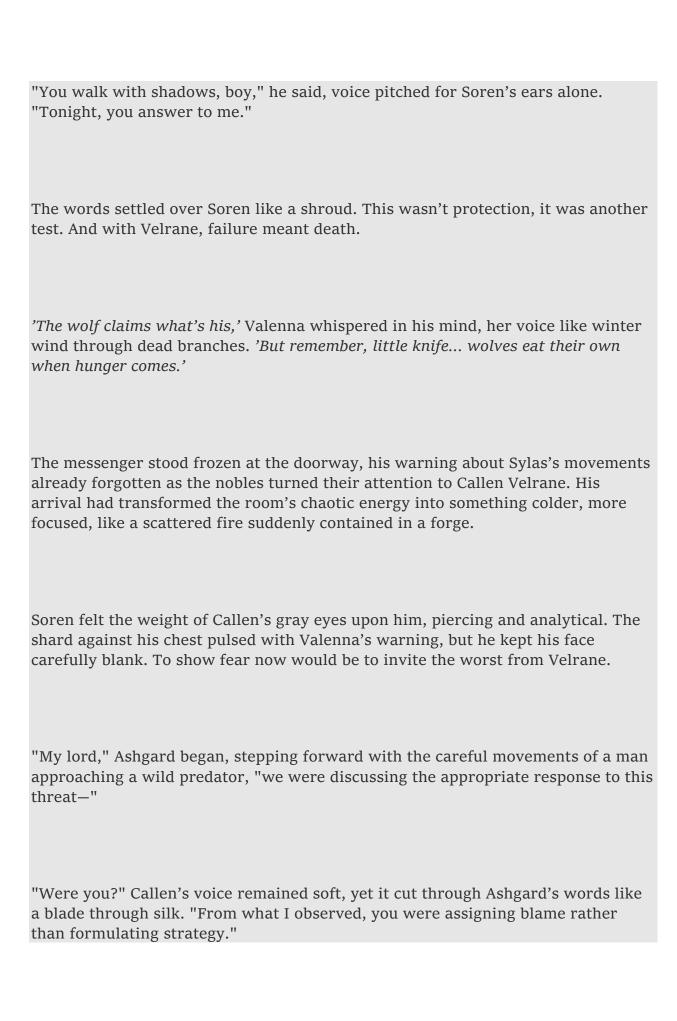
His ash-silver hair and neatly trimmed beard framed features carved from cold marble. Those pale gray eyes swept across the assembled nobles with the detached interest of a man observing insects.
Soren's stomach dropped. Of all the nobles who might have arrived, Velrane was both the most powerful and the most dangerous, especially to him.
The lord stepped into the hall alone, though Soren glimpsed the disciplined formation of Velrane knights waiting in the corridor beyond. Their stillness spoke of more deadly potential than any dramatic posturing.
Callen moved with unhurried confidence, his boot heels striking the stone floor in measured rhythm. He stopped at the edge of the gathering, surveying the room with open disdain.
"I left my son's blade in the care of lions," he said, his voice quiet yet carrying to every corner of the hall. "Instead I find squabbling crows, picking at carrion."
No one spoke. No one moved. Soren had seen this effect before, Callen Velrane didn't need to raise his voice to command absolute attention. His reputation for ruthless pragmatism preceded him like a shadow.
"Lord Velrane," Ashgard acknowledged, breaking the silence. "We did not expect your presence."

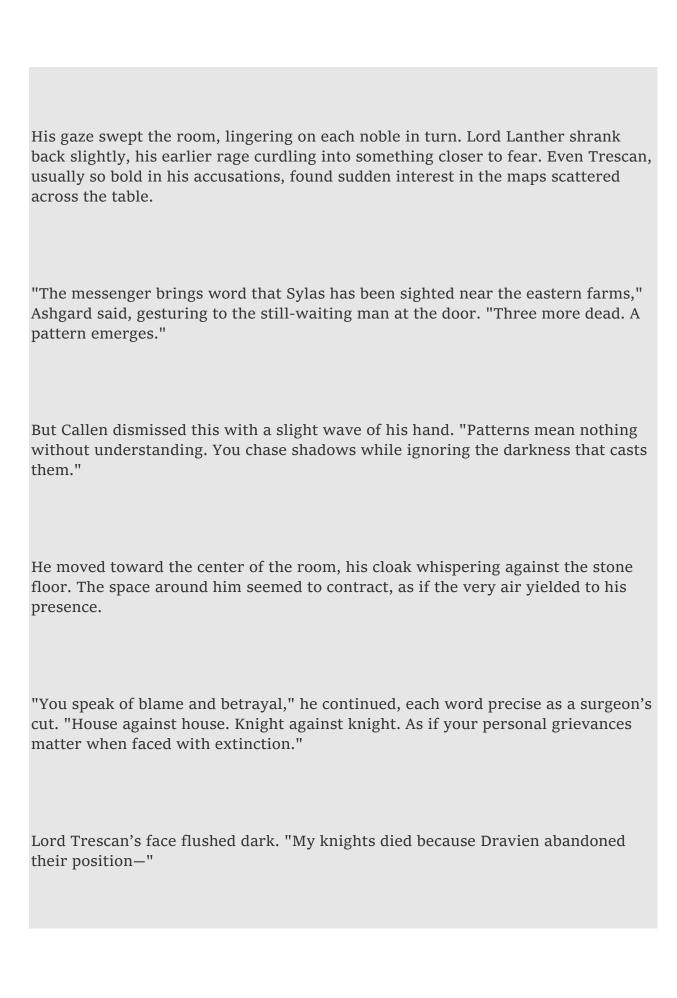
"Clearly." Callen's gaze flicked toward the maps and documents scattered across the table. "Otherwise you might have presented a more unified response to this disaster."
Lord Trescan found his voice first. "My lord, we were ambushed by a killer of unnatural ability. My knights fought bravely, while House Dravien—"
"Spare me your petty accusations." Callen cut him off with a slight gesture that somehow carried more authority than another man's shout. "I've heard enough to understand what happened. You rode out as separate houses rather than a unified force. You maintained your rivalries in the face of a common enemy. You failed, not individually, but collectively."
Ashgard's jaw tightened, though he made no direct challenge. Even he, master in his own hall, seemed to recognize that Velrane's influence was too great to dismiss outright.
"The killer displayed abilities beyond our anticipation," Ashgard said carefully. "We have gathered valuable intelligence at great cost."
"Intelligence?" Callen's mouth curved in what might have been a smile on a warmer man. "Yes, I imagine you have. Though whether you understand what you've learned remains to be seen."





"Lord Velrane," Ashgard began carefully, "as the boy was present during my expedition, perhaps a joint inquiry would be most productive."
"An expedition that failed spectacularly under your command," Callen replied without heat. "I think House Velrane will conduct its own investigation into matters concerning its members."
The nobles exchanged glances, recalculating their positions in this unexpected power shift. Some looked relieved to pass the blame elsewhere. Others bristled at Velrane's consolidation of authority.
"House Velrane will investigate Sylas's true nature," Callen continued, addressing the room at large. "And if this Blade carries some mark or connection, then he may well be the key to understanding our enemy." His gaze swept the assembled lords. "Unless any of you have produced better insights from your retreat?"
The silence that followed carried its own answer.
Callen turned back to Soren, studying him with the clinical detachment of a man examining an unusual specimen. He stepped closer, close enough that Soren could see the fine lines at the corners of those merciless eyes.





"Your knights died," Callen interrupted, "because you failed to function as a unified force." His gaze hardened. "Divided, you were prey. United, you might have been hunters."

The rebuke struck with the force of physical blows. Soren watched the nobles' faces as they absorbed Callen's words, some with resentment, others with dawning comprehension. Ashgard's expression remained carefully neutral, though a muscle twitched in his jaw.

"House Velrane will conduct its own investigation into this matter," Callen continued, his tone making it clear this was not a suggestion but a declaration. "Beginning with those who witnessed Sylas directly."

His pale eyes returned to Soren, who fought the urge to step back. The shard against his chest went from cold to freezing, Valenna's presence sharpening with alarm.

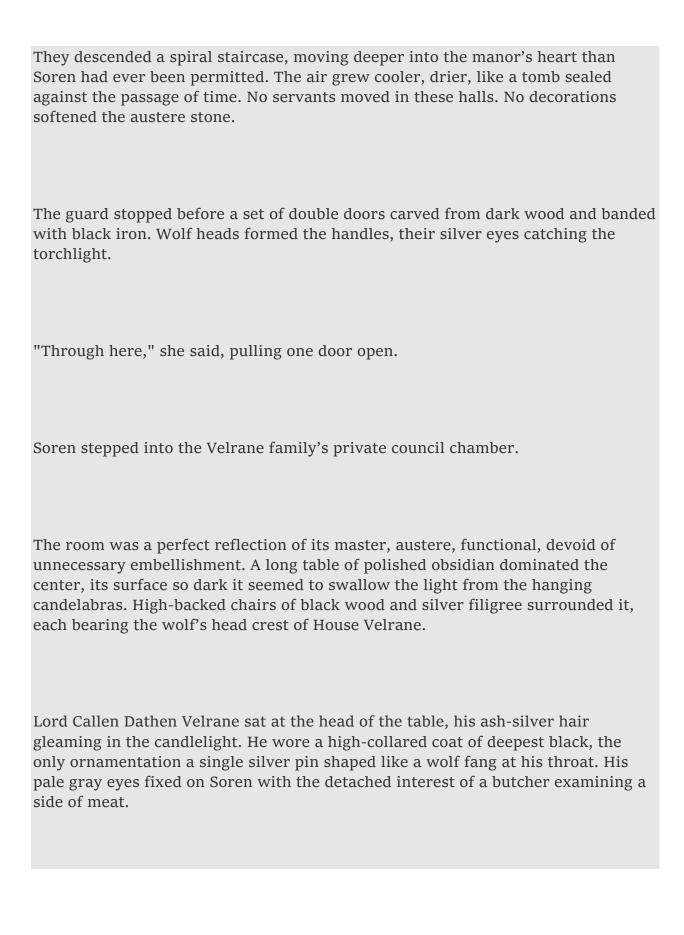
Chapter 85: The Blade in Judgment (1)

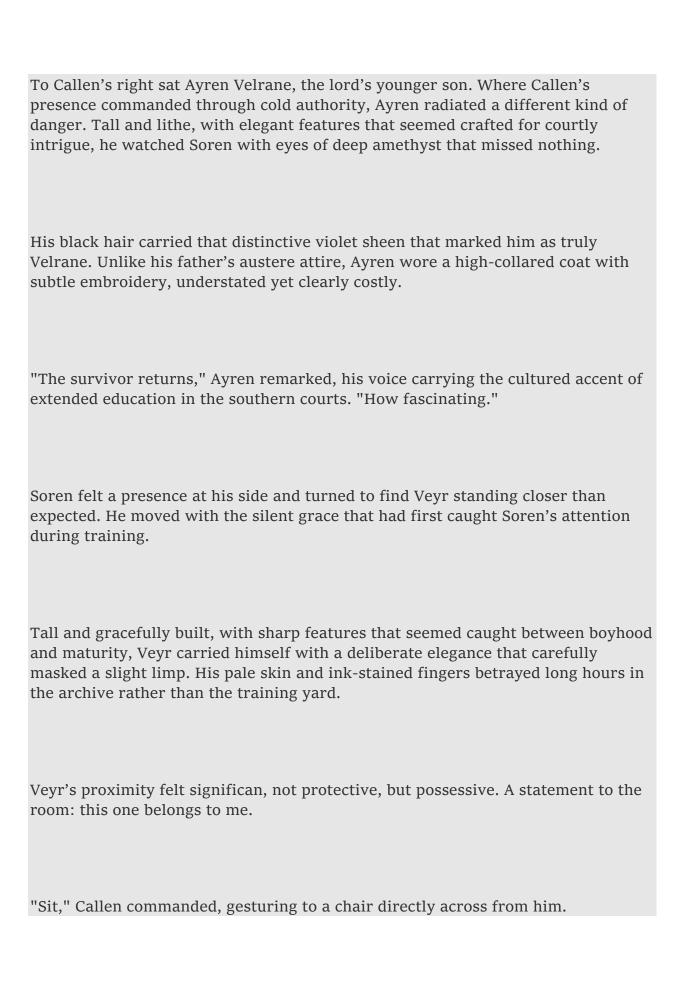
Chapter 85: The Blade in Judgment (1)

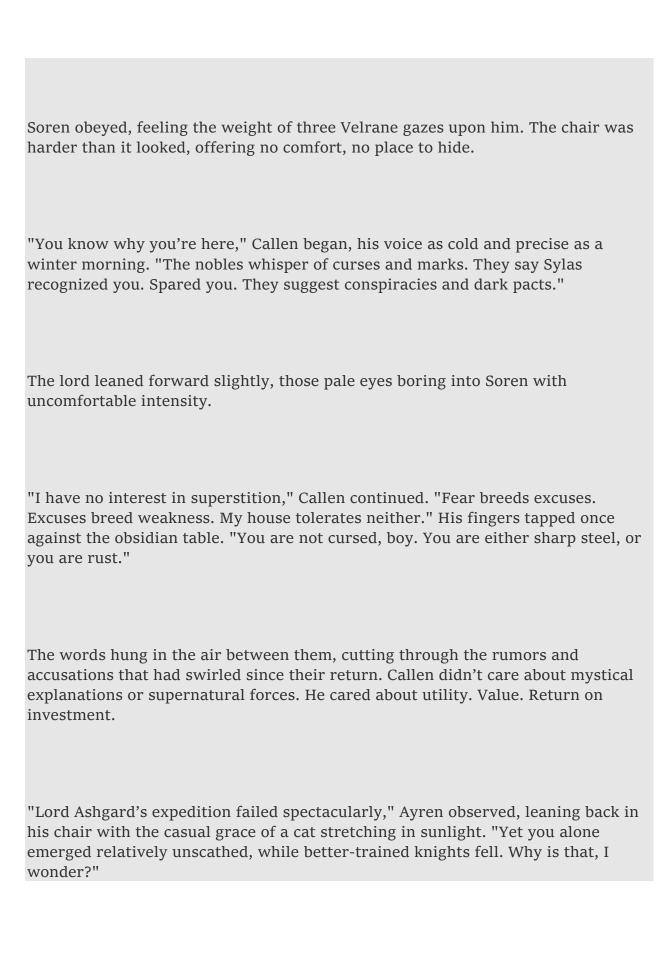
Night had fallen by the time they came for him.

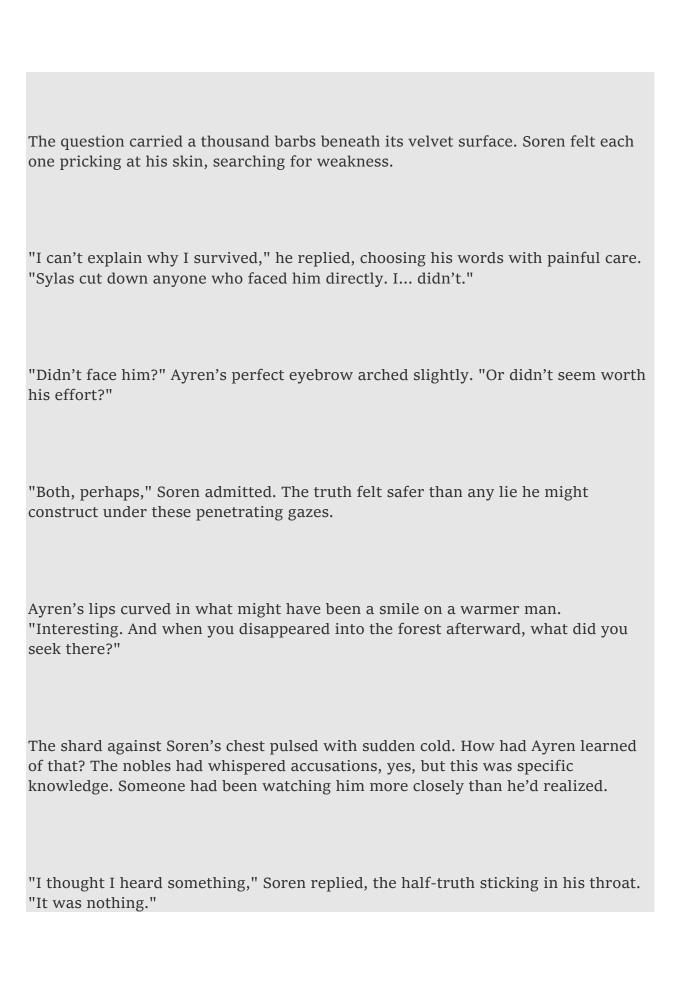
Soren stood at the window of his small chamber, watching torches burn in the courtyard below. The air tasted of smoke and tension. After the disaster of the hunt, House Velrane had drawn in upon itself like a wounded beast retreating to

its den. Guards patrolled in doubled numbers. Servants moved with the careful efficiency of those who knew their masters were in dangerous moods.
The knock at his door was sharp, authoritative. A single rap that expected immediate response.
"Enter," he said, not turning from the window.
The door opened to reveal one of Callen's personal guards, a tall woman with a face like carved granite and eyes that gave away nothing.
"Lord Velrane requires your presence," she said. "Now."
Soren nodded, his stomach tightening into a hard knot. He had been waiting for this summons since their return, knowing it was inevitable. The shard against his chest remained cold and silent, Valenna withdrawing as she often did when House Velrane demanded his attention.
He followed the guard through corridors lit by iron sconces, their flames throwing long shadows across stone walls adorned with tapestries depicting wolf hunts and ancient battles. Each step echoed with grim finality.









"Nothing?" Ayren tilted his head slightly, those amethyst eyes gleaming with predatory interest. "How disappointing. I'd hoped for a more... creative explanation."

Callen watched this exchange without comment, his face revealing nothing of his thoughts. Only his eyes moved, tracking each response, measuring each hesitation.

"Tell me," Ayren continued, fingers steepled before him, "how do you view the noble houses after witnessing their... performance during the hunt? What insights did you glean from watching them face true danger?"

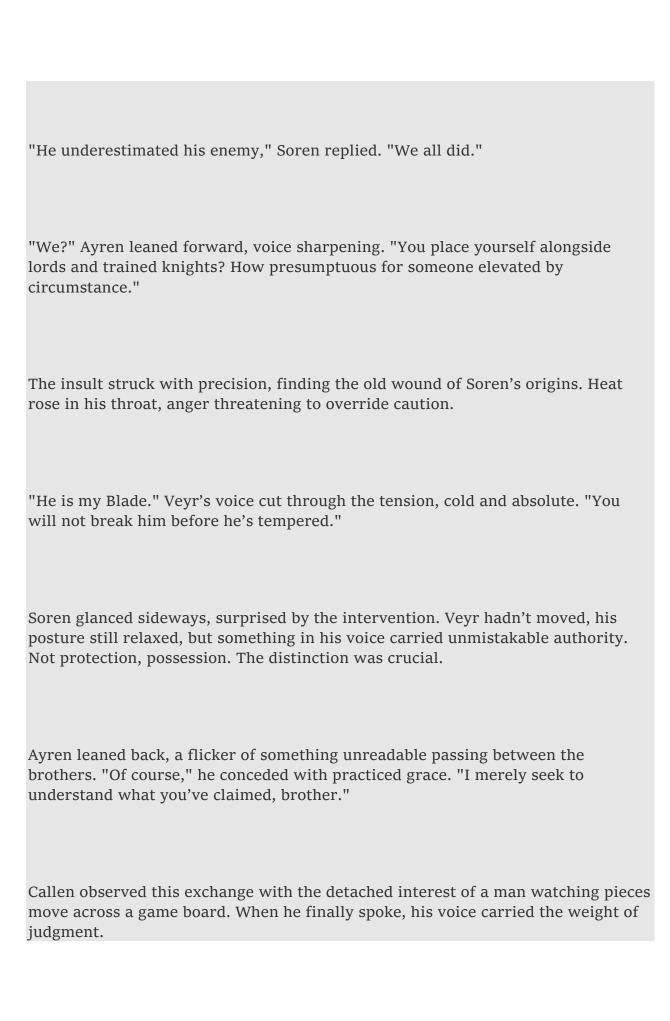
The question was a trap, elegantly constructed. Answer honestly, admit he'd seen cowardice and incompetence, and risk insulting houses whose influence could crush him. Lie, claim admiration for their bravery, and Ayren would know instantly, marking him as either a fool or a sycophant.

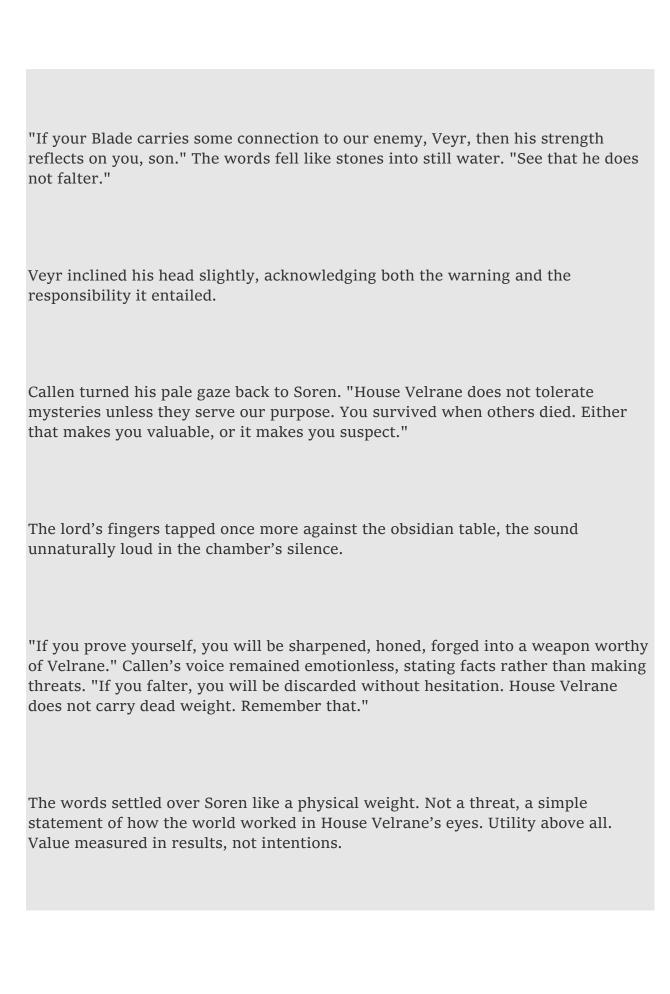
Chapter 86: The Blade in Judgment (2)

Chapter 86: The Blade in Judgment (2)

"I saw men who train for tournaments facing war," Soren said carefully. "They fought as they were taught to fight. It wasn't enough."

Ayren's eyes narrowed slightly. "And Ashgard's failure? How do you explain that?"





Ayren leaned back, faintly amused. "Perhaps he's sharper than he looks," he remarked to no one in particular. "Or perhaps he's hiding the rust well."
Veyr's hand moved to rest briefly on his sword hilt, the gesture carrying its own silent message. A reminder of where Soren stood, claimed as Veyr's Blade, but not yet proven worthy of that position.
Callen rose, signaling the meeting's end. He looked down at Soren with those pale merciless eyes that had witnessed the rise and fall of countless nobles over decades of political warfare.
"A wolf does not ask if the cub can hunt," he said, his voice soft yet carrying to every corner of the chamber. "It watches. It waits. It culls."
With that final pronouncement, he turned and left through a door Soren hadn't noticed before, a private exit for the lord of the house. Ayren followed after a moment, his departure marked by a final assessing glance that promised future conversations under less formal circumstances.
Only Veyr remained, standing close enough that Soren could smell the faint scent of ink and parchment that clung to his clothes.
"Come," he said simply, moving toward the main doors.

Soren followed, feeling the weight of what had just occurred settling over him like a shroud. He had been measured, assessed, neither fully accepted nor completely rejected. The middle ground was perhaps the most dangerous position of all.
As they climbed the stairs back toward the manor's upper levels, the shard against his chest finally stirred, Valenna's presence returning like the first breath of winter air.
'You've stepped deeper into the den, little knife,'
she whispered, her voice cold with warning. 'Now the wolves decide if you run with them, or feed them.'
Soren leaned against the cool stone wall outside the council chamber, trying to steady his breath. His legs felt oddly weak, as if he'd just finished one of Kaelor's brutal training sessions rather than simply standing before three Velranes. The corridor stretched empty in both directions, torchlight casting his shadow long and distorted against the opposite wall.
'They didn't kill me,' he thought, a grim victory in itself.
He pushed away from the wall, wincing as his still-healing ribs protested the movement. The manor felt different tonight, colder, more watchful. Servants who normally offered small nods of acknowledgment now vanished around corners at his approach. Word had spread. The marked one. The survivor. The suspect.

As he turned toward the stairs leading back to the upper levels, a figure detached from the shadows ahead. Tall, slim, moving with the liquid grace of someone who had studied movement as an art form. Ayren Velrane.
"Walk with me," the younger Velrane son said, his tone making it clear this was not a request.
Soren fell into step beside him, keeping a careful distance. Ayren led him not upward toward the main hall but sideways, through a narrow corridor he'd never noticed before. Their footsteps echoed in perfect synchronization, a rhythm that somehow felt deliberate on Ayren's part.
"My brother has claimed you," Ayren said after they'd walked in silence for several moments. "An interesting choice."
Soren said nothing. Every conversation with a Velrane was a trap waiting to be sprung.
"You wonder why I've intercepted you." Ayren glanced sideways, those amethyst eyes catching the torchlight like gemstones. "Perhaps you think I mean to threater you. Or warn you. Or perhaps recruit you to some scheme against my brother."
The corridor opened into a small courtyard Soren had never seen before. A private garden, enclosed by high walls and open to the night sky above. A single tree grew at its center, its bare branches reaching toward the stars like skeletal fingers.

Ayren stopped beside a small stone bench, though he made no move to sit. "I merely wish to understand what my brother sees in you. Veyr rarely takes interest in... well, in anything requiring sustained effort."

The insult was so casually delivered that Soren almost missed it. He kept his face carefully neutral, though his jaw tightened slightly.

"Nothing to say?" Ayren's mouth curved in what might have been amusement. "Perhaps that's wisdom. Or perhaps it's simply the habit of those who grew up knowing silence was safer than speech."

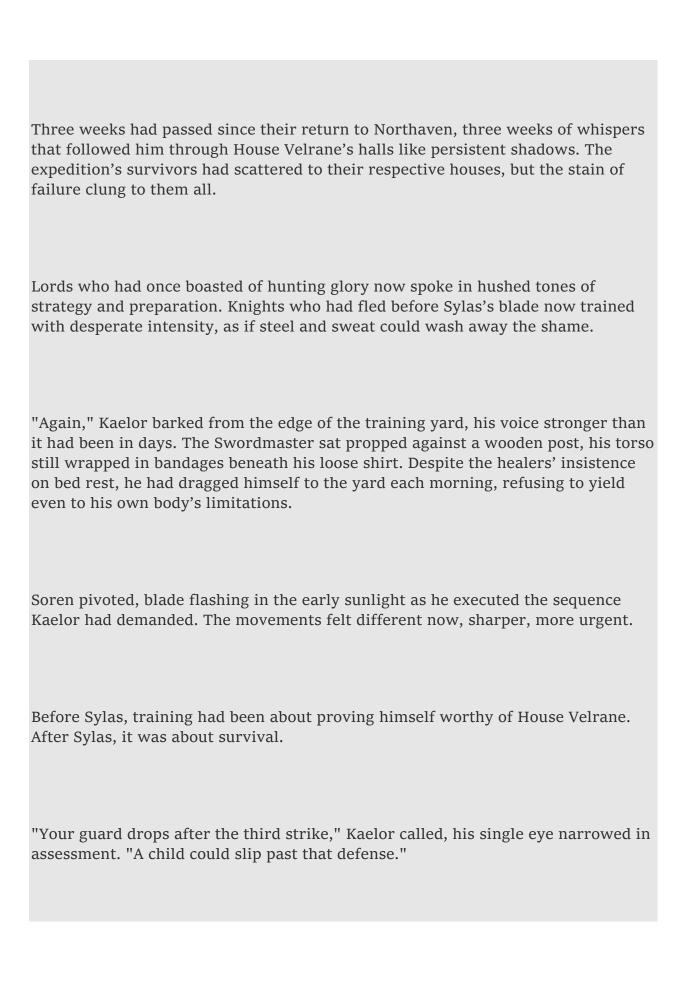
He circled Soren slowly, studying him from different angles with the detached interest of a collector examining a curiosity.

"You survived when knights and nobles fell," Ayren continued. "Either you possess qualities they lacked, or you were deemed too insignificant to kill. Which do you believe it was?"

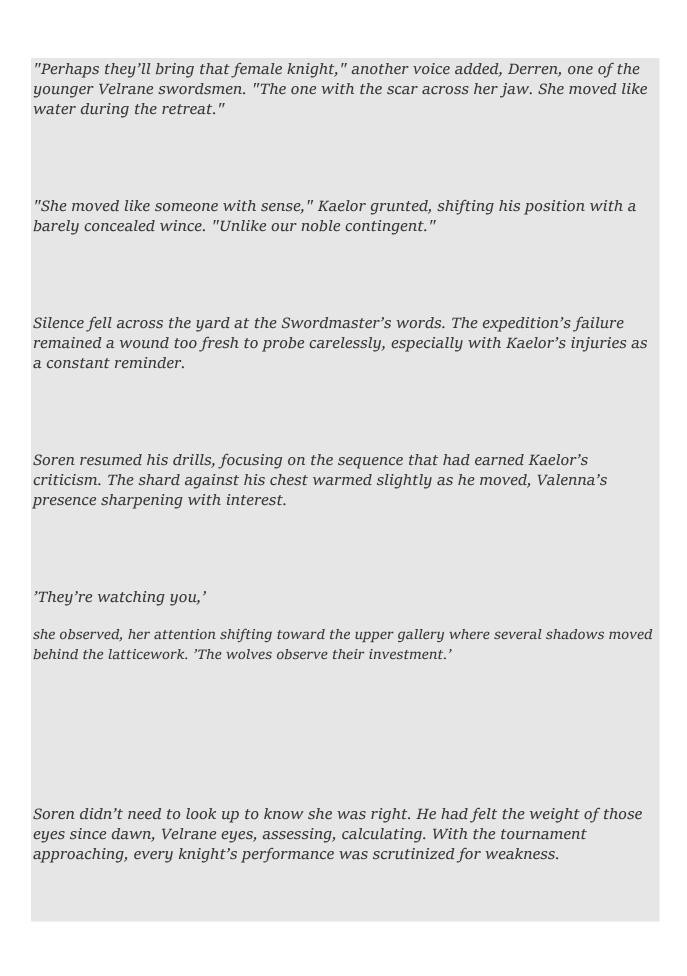
Chapter 87: Sharpening for the Lists (1)

Chapter 87: Sharpening for the Lists (1)

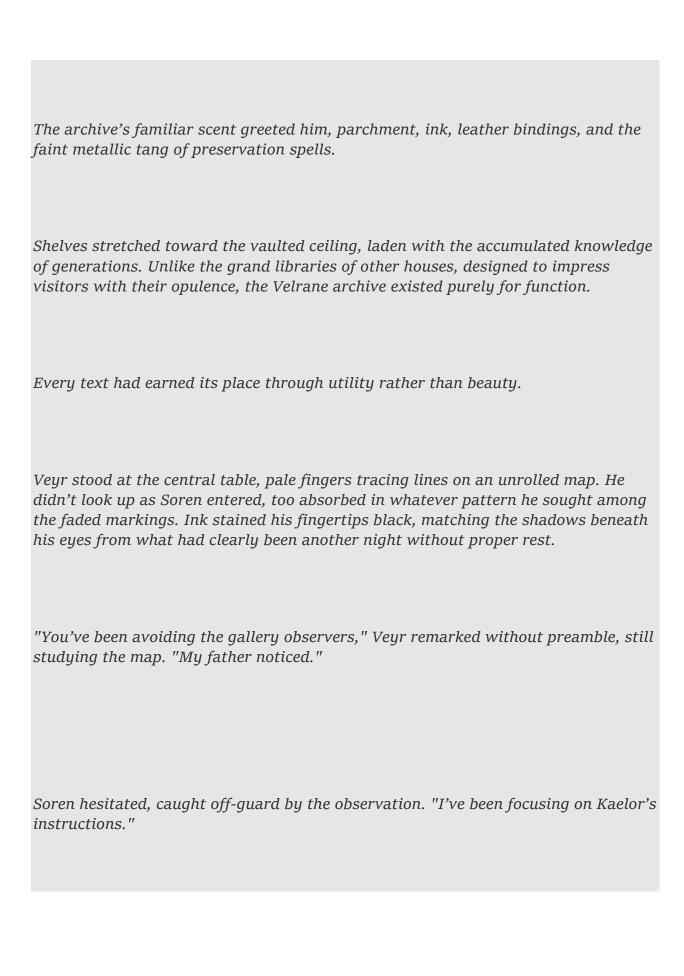
The bruise on Soren's ribs had finally turned from purple to a sickly yellow-green, but the memory of Sylas remained as fresh as an open wound.

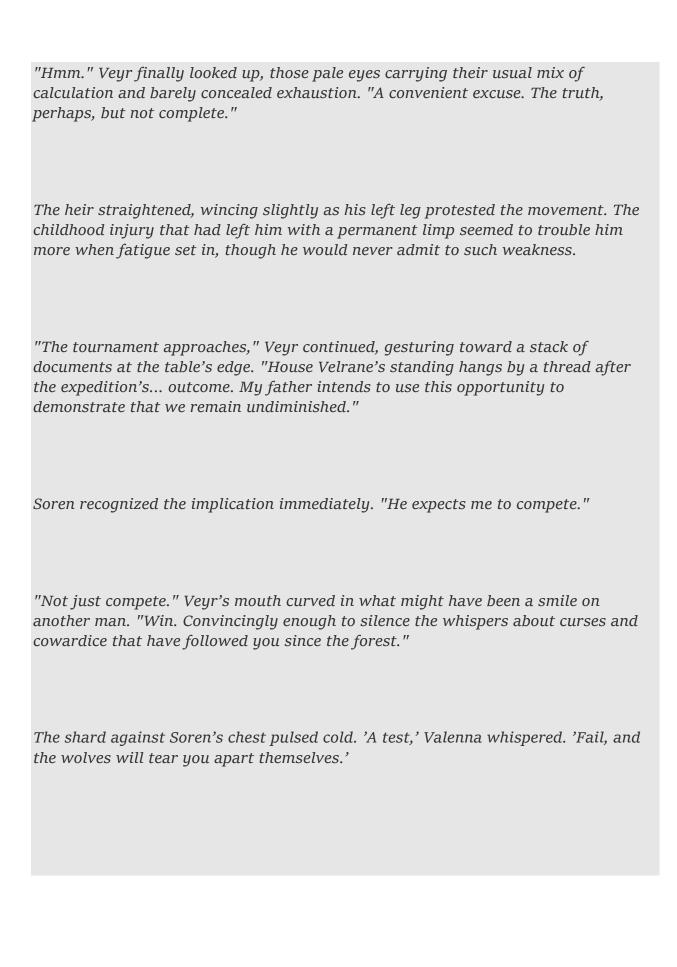


'A child wouldn't need to,' Soren thought grimly. 'Sylas would have taken my head before I completed the first movement.'
The shard pulsed cold against his chest, Valenna stirring from her morning silence. 'True,' she whispered, her voice like frost forming on glass. 'But you're still breathing. Learn from that.'
Across the yard, other Velrane knights trained with similar intensity. The upcoming tournament loomed over them all, a political showcase thinly disguised as sport, where House Velrane would be judged not just on skill but on recovery. After the expedition's failure, they needed a victory to reassert their standing among the noble houses.
"The Ashgard contingent arrives tomorrow," Ser Torven mentioned as he passed, adjusting the straps of his practice armor. The older knight's face had grown more lined since their return, new gray streaking his beard. "Lord Callen has ordered full ceremony."
Soren nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. House Ashgard's participation in the tournament carried particular weight after the expedition. Their presence represented either continued alliance or careful assessment of Velrane's weakened position, no one was quite certain which.



For him, the stakes were higher still. As Veyr's chosen Blade, his failure would reflect directly on the heir's judgment.
"Lord Veyr requests your presence," a servant announced, appearing at the yard's edge with the silent efficiency that marked all House Velrane's retainers. "The archive. Immediately."
Soren lowered his blade, nodding acknowledgment. Kaelor's expression soured further, though he made no direct objection.
The Swordmaster had grown increasingly irritable as the tournament approached, especially when his training sessions were interrupted by Veyr's summons.
The shard cooled against Soren's skin as he sheathed his practice blade. 'The young wolf calls,' Valenna murmured, her tone carrying that mixture of disdain and curiosity she always reserved for Veyr. 'Perhaps he's finally found something useful in those dusty scrolls.'
The archive occupied the eastern wing of Velrane Manor, its windows positioned to capture morning light rather than afternoon heat.
Soren climbed the narrow stairs leading to its entrance, his muscles protesting after hours in the training yard. The guards flanking the heavy oak doors assessed him with professionally blank expressions before stepping aside.



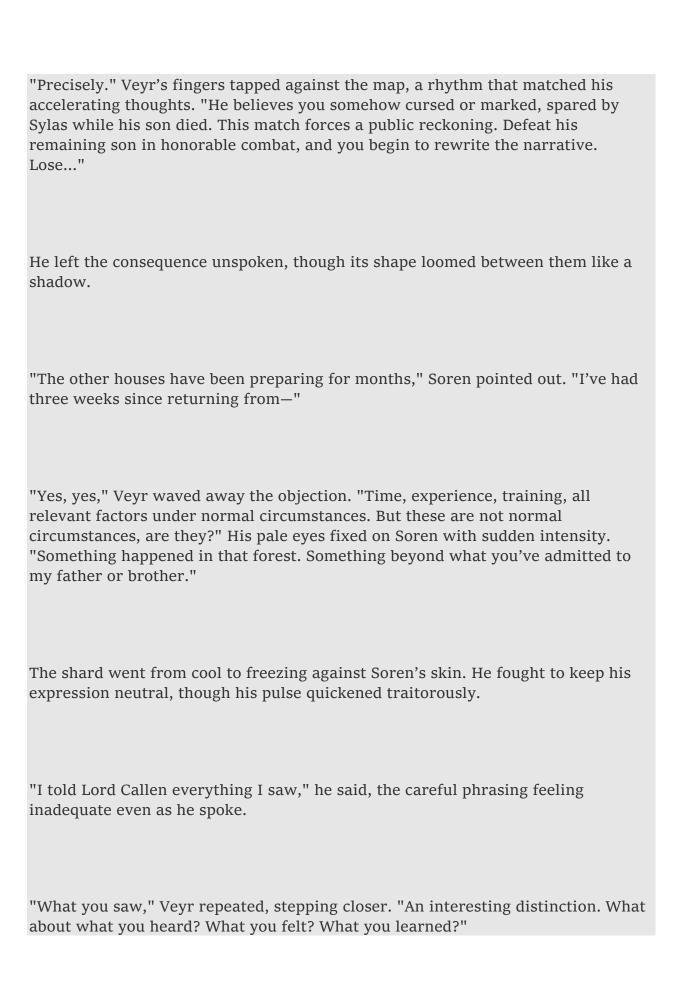


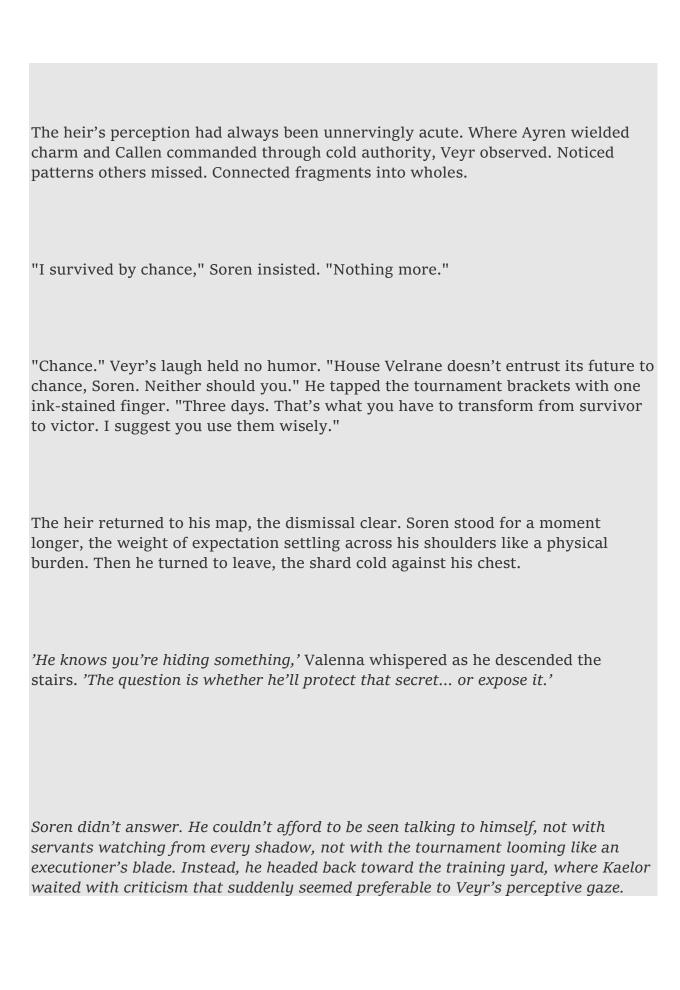
"I'm not ready," Soren admitted, the words scraping his throat raw. Pride demanded he claim otherwise, but pragmatism recognized the truth. "The other houses will field knights with years more experience—"
"Yes," Veyr interrupted, returning his attention to the map. "They will. Knights who fled before Sylas while you remained standing. An interesting contrast, wouldn't you say?"
The observation hung between them, sharp-edged and double-sided. A compliment wrapped around an expectation, a reminder disguised as encouragement.
"My father has arranged the brackets," Veyr continued after a moment. "You'll face House Lanther's second son in the opening round. A deliberate choice."
Chapter 88: Sharpening for the Lists (2)
Chapter 88: Sharpening for the Lists (2)

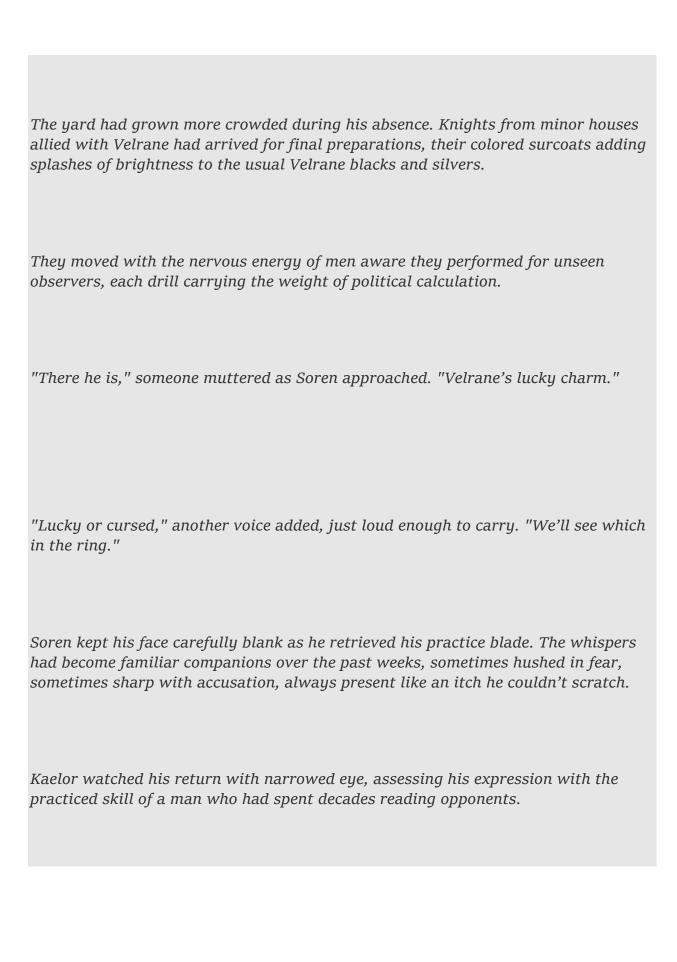
Soren felt his stomach tighten. House Lanther had lost their heir during the expedition, Edric, cut down while fleeing. To face his brother in the tournament's

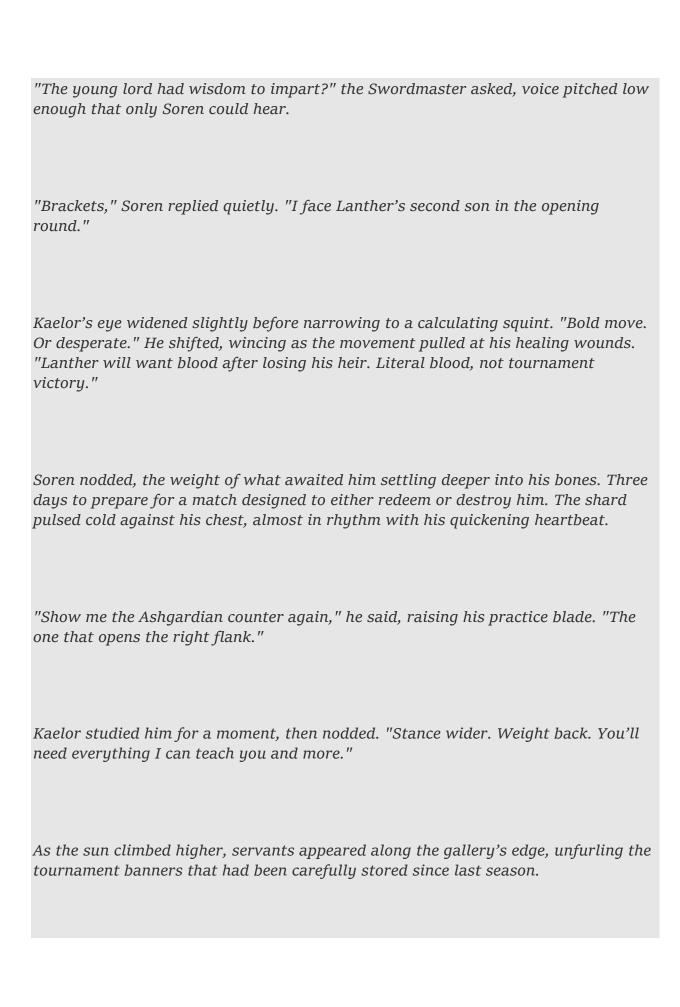
"Lord Lanther will view it as an insult," he said carefully.

opening round carried unmistakable political significance.





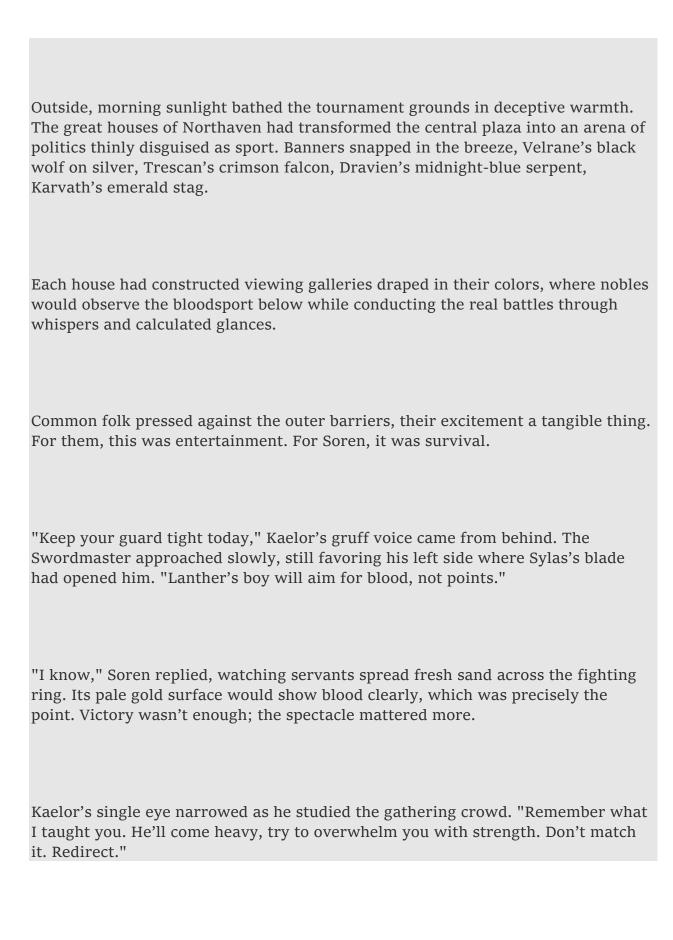


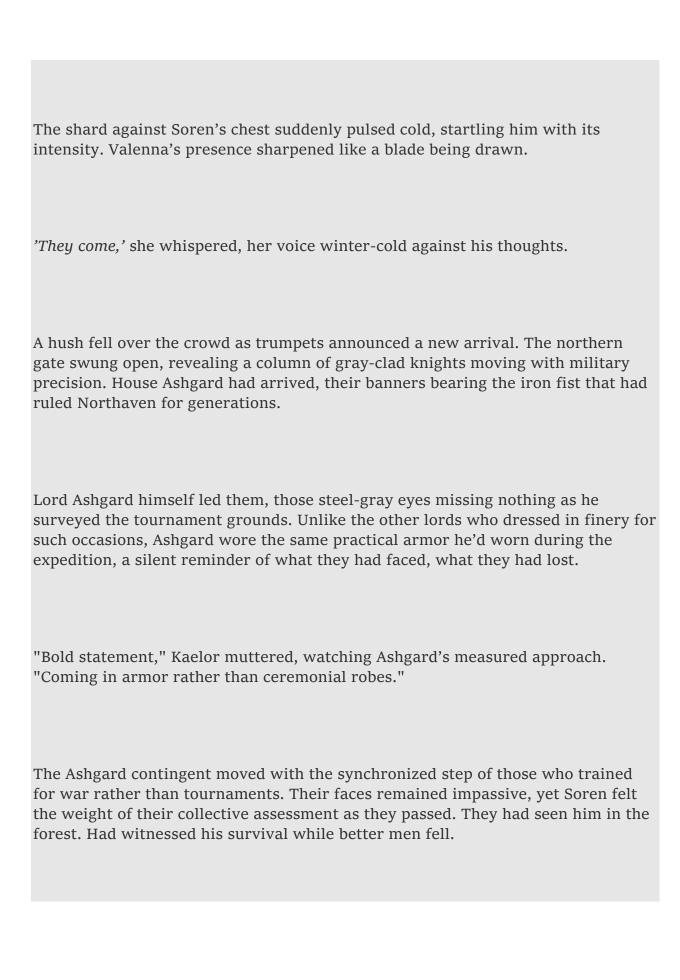


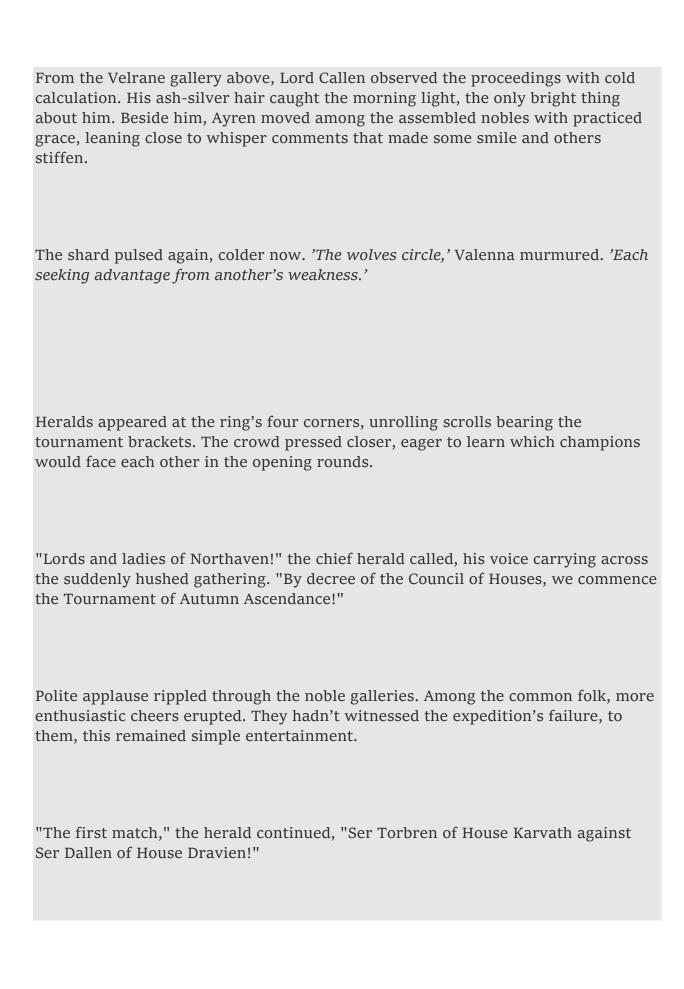
House Velrane, crimson for Trescan, midnight blue for Dravien, green for Karvath. The sight sent a ripple of tension through the training yard. The physical manifestation of what approached, what could not be avoided.
By midday, the yard had transformed. What had been routine training now carried the sharp edge of imminent judgment.
Knights drilled with fierce intensity, each stroke measured not just by its technical precision but by its political implications.
Who would represent their houses? Who would bring glory or shame? Whose performance might shift alliances that had stood for generations?
"Your guard is still dropping," Kaelor called, his voice rougher now with fatigue. "A tournament may have rules, but Lanther's boy will aim to cripple, not score."
Soren adjusted, feeling sweat trickle down his spine despite the cool air. His muscled burned with the effort of maintaining proper form after hours of repetition.
The shard against his chest alternated between cool and cold, Valenna's attention sharpening each time he executed a sequence correctly.

Chapter 89: The Gathering of Houses (1)
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A commotion at the yard's entrance drew Soren's attention. Lord Callen had appeared on the upper gallery, his tall figure commanding immediate notice even before he spoke. Beside him stood Ayren, dressed in the formal blacks that marked official House business rather than his usual courtly attire.
'I've watched a thousand tournaments,' she replied, her voice carrying that ancient certainty that still unsettled him. 'The patterns never change, only the men enacting them.'
'How would you know?' Soren thought back, keeping his face carefully neutral.
'He'll attack your left side,' she murmured as Soren moved through the pattern again. 'They all do. They see the street rat and assume you'll favor your stronger side from brawling.'

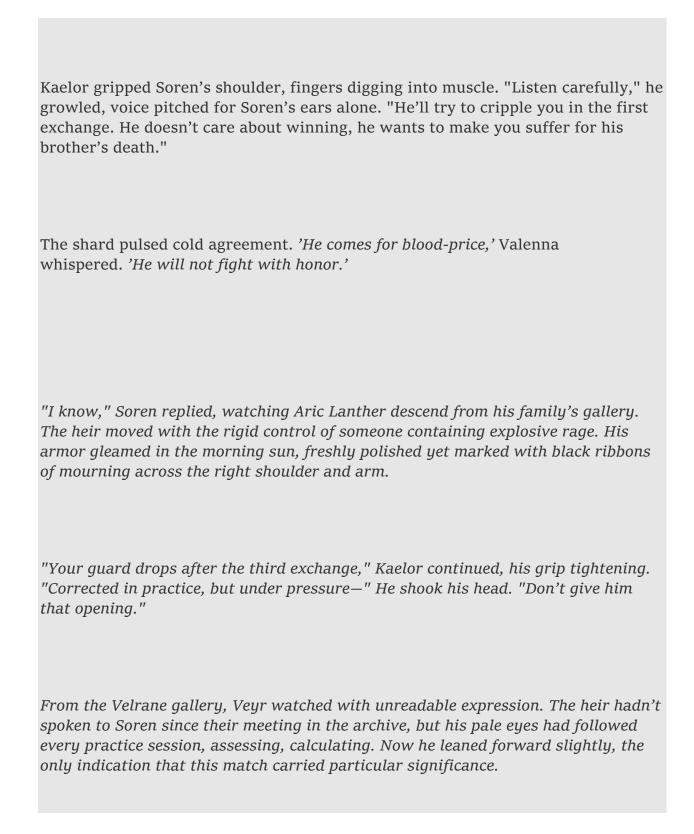
Dawn broke like a fever, painting Northaven's spires in sickly gold. Soren stared at his reflection in the polished bronze mirror, hollow-eyed, tense, a wolf sigil newly sewn onto simple leathers that wouldn't stop a determined blade.
Not armor befitting a noble house's champion, but he wasn't truly that. Just a street rat with a borrowed name and borrowed purpose.
'Today I die or become useful,' he thought, fingers brushing the shard beneath his tunic. Its familiar chill offered no comfort.
Three days of preparation had passed in a blur of bruises and sweat. Now tournament day arrived, carrying judgment on black-feathered wings.
The shard remained silent as he made his way through Velrane Manor's corridors. Servants scurried past without meeting his eyes, their whispers following like persistent shadows. The marked one. The survivor. The one Sylas spared.
"Ready for slaughter?" Harrick's voice cut through Soren's thoughts as he reached the manor's entrance hall. The Trescan knight leaned against a marble column, malice disguised as casual interest. "Lanther's second son has been practicing killing strikes since his brother's funeral."
Soren walked past without acknowledgment. Engaging Harrick would only sharpen the knife already pressed against his throat.





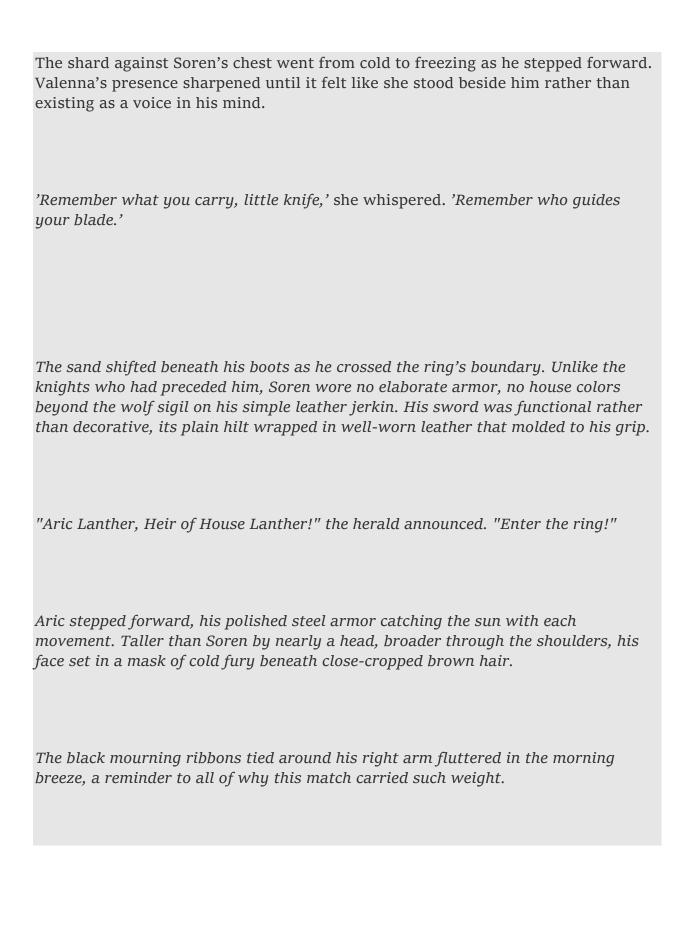


Murmurs swept through the crowd. Both were seasoned knights with multiple tournament victories. A strong opening match, designed to distract from what would follow.
The herald moved to the next pairings, each announcement drawing reactions from different sections of the crowd. Soren barely heard them, his attention fixed on the Lanther gallery where a tall figure in polished armor stood apart from the others, staring directly at him with undisguised hatred.
Aric Lanther. The second son, now the heir after Sylas's blade had opened his brother's throat.
"Soren Thorne, Blade of House Velrane," the herald's voice cut through Soren's focus, "against Aric Lanther, Heir of House Lanther!"
The announcement sent a ripple of tension through the entire gathering. Not just another match, a public reckoning. The survivor against the bereaved. The marked one against the vengeful.
From the Lanther gallery, Lord Lanther leaned forward, his grief-hollowed face tight with anticipation. He had lobbied for this match, Soren realized. Had demanded this opportunity for what he would call justice.
"Third match," the herald continued, though few were listening now. The narrative had been established. The true spectacle identified.

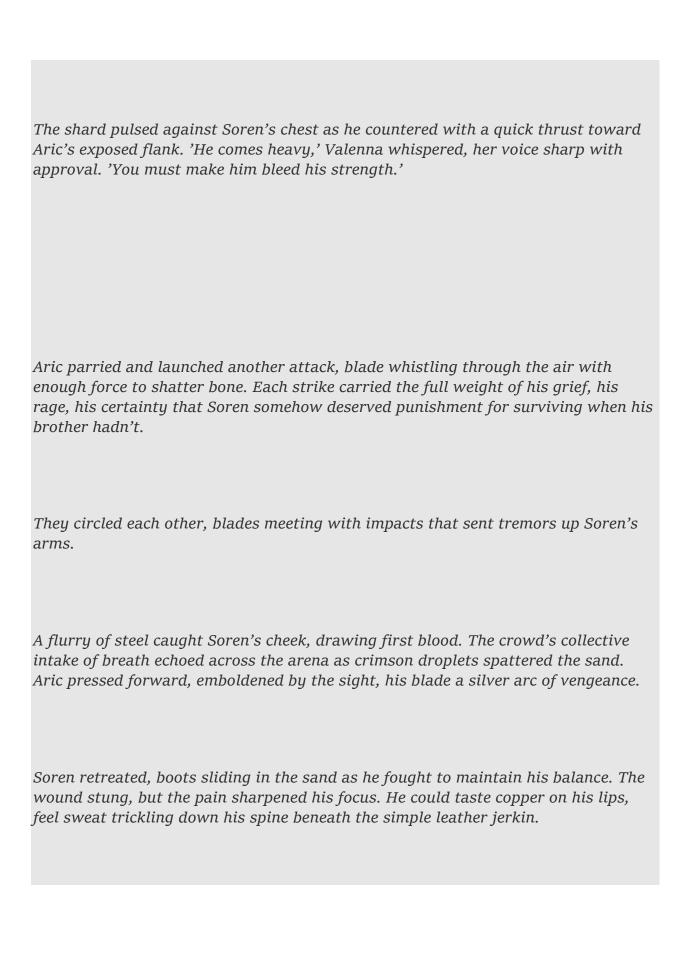


Chapter 90: The Gathering of Houses (2)

Chapter 90: The Gathering of Houses (2)
Beside him, Ayren smiled as he whispered something to a Dravien noble that made the man's eyes widen. Even from this distance, Soren could read the words on Ayren's lips: "watching a wolf test its cub."
The first match began, knights saluting each other with formal precision before launching into combat that was more performance than true contest. Their blades caught the sunlight as they moved through sequences that demonstrated skill without risking serious injury.
The crowd responded with appropriate appreciation, though their attention frequently drifted toward where Soren stood, toward where Aric Lanther waited.
The true spectacle approached.
When the first match concluded, servants rushed to smooth the sand, erasing footprints and preparing the ring for what everyone recognized as the day's real purpose. The herald announced the victor with practiced enthusiasm, but the applause felt perfunctory, anticipatory.
"Soren Thorne, Blade of House Velrane!" the herald called. "Enter the ring!"



against str	t couldn't have been more deliberate. Noble-born heir in gleaming arm eet-raised nobody in worn leathers. Old blood against new utility. engeance against suspicious survival.
	l have died with my brother," Aric said, voice pitched low as they the center for the formal salute. "Instead you return marked by the
grief-fuele	is gaze without responding. Nothing he could say would penetrate the rage that drove Aric forward. The heir saw only what he needed to se his pain, a focus for his loss.
none of the	their blades in the ceremonial salute, though Aric's movement carried respect the gesture implied. His eyes never left Soren's face, searching ss, for fear, for any sign that might confirm his suspicions.
The herald	raised his hand, then dropped it sharply. "Begin!"
have split	ed without hesitation, driving forward with a overhead strike that wou oren's skull had it connected. No testing exchange, no careful , just killing intent barely constrained by tournament rules.
gasped at	tepped, letting the blade cut air where his head had been. The crowd he naked aggression of the opening move. Even in a contest designed fo in courtesies were expected. Aric had abandoned them before the first



The morning sun climbed higher, casting the tournament grounds in harsh relief. Around the central ring, the heraldic standards of each noble house snapped in the breeze,
Velrane's silver wolf, Trescan's crimson falcon, Dravien's midnight-blue serpent, each banner a silent declaration of power and intent. The sand beneath his feet had been raked into perfect smoothness before their match, now marred by footprints and the first spatters of his blood.
Knights from every house crowded the edges of the arena, their whispers following Soren like persistent shadows. He caught fragments as he circled away from Aric's next assault.
"—survived when better men fell—"
"—Lanther won't stop until he's crippled—"
"—something unnatural about him—"
The shard pulsed against his chest, colder than winter ice. Valenna's presence sharpened in his mind, alert and predatory.

'He telegraphs his strikes,' she whispered. 'Watch his shoulder, not his blade.'
Across the ring, Aric adjusted his grip, knuckles white around his sword hilt. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cool morning air, his breath coming in controlled bursts that couldn't quite mask his rage.
From the corner of his eye, Soren glimpsed the Ashgard contingent watching from their designated area. They stood apart from the other houses, their gray uniforms stark against the colorful banners surrounding them.
Lord Ashgard himself observed with those steel-gray eyes that missed nothing, his expression unreadable yet somehow heavy with judgment.
Above it all, Lord Callen presided from the Velrane gallery, his tall figure commanding attention without effort. His ash-silver hair caught the sunlight, the only bright thing about him.
Those pale, merciless eyes tracked every movement in the ring with clinical detachment. Not watching a son or champion, assessing an investment.

Beside him, Ayren moved among the assembled nobles with practiced grace, leaning close to whisper observations that made some smile and others stiffen. His elegant fingers gestured subtly toward the ring as he bent near a Dravien lord whose name Soren couldn't recall.

Aric lunged again, blade aimed at Soren's knee, a strike that would end more than just the match if it connected.