

Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight #Chapter 9: The First Inquiry - Read Celestial Blade Of The Fallen Knight Chapter 9: The First Inquiry

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They came before second bell, with gold frost still furred on the corners of every shuttered window.

Soren was two dreams deep, neither worth the memory, when the bunks shuddered under the instructor's cane. The man's voice snapped like a drawn bow:

"Up. Stand by beds, faces out." He hadn't shaved, and his coat dripped icewater, as if he'd wrestled the entire morning loose from its grave.

Behind him: three strangers, faces shadowed under cloaks edged in somber blue, each stamped with a pattern of silver rings along the collar.

Soren knew no sigil in House Ashgard carried rings, but the barracks had gone so brittle with fear that even Tavren only managed a half-smirk before the instructor's cane cracked him to attention.

No explanations. Just: "March." The strangers watched as the boys scrambled into single file, eyes darting and jaws set.

Soren fell in behind Rhain, who clutched the neckline of his tunic as if he could pull it up over his own soul, and in front of Tavren, who mouthed something obscene as they passed the strangers, then broke into sweat when the shortest of them returned his look, slow as a blade.

The air was colder than out in the yard, which made no sense until Soren smelled the basement damp bleeding through the floorboards.

Instead of west, to the training ground, the instructors herded them down the side stairs. The deepest corridors beneath the barracks were older than any living house.

Soren had once run errands with Kaelrin down here, selling stolen ink or pinching oil from the root cellars, but he'd never gone as far as they were being led now.

Each lamp guttered in its iron cage, just enough light for the dark to get its bearings.

Behind them, the strangers followed silent, moving with the soft step of men who had never been forced to walk in mud.

At the bottom, stone gave way to something blacker, polished by centuries of wear. The group crowded on a landing, where three wooden benches had been dragged up against the wall. A guard posted at the door, his helmet shaped like a cut-down cauldron, flicked his hand: "Sit, all." They did.

For ten full minutes nothing happened except the sound of Soren's own heart, each thud a reminder of last night's dream, he couldn't remember it, only that when he'd woken, both hands were clenched and he'd been mouthing a word that sounded like stone breaking.

Tavren tried to laugh, but it came out wet and flat. Glen, on his left, tapped a steady tremor on the bench, the pattern desperate and accelerating.

On Soren's right, Rhain stared at the opposite wall, lips moving as he counted. Soren didn't ask what.

After a while, the bench creaked as the instructor called the first name. Tavren, of course. He straightened, wiped both palms on his thighs, squared his sunken chest, and marched through the door. Gone ten minutes.

Soren heard nothing through the wall, not even a shout. When the door opened again, Tavren came out white as boiled bone. He took his seat, stared at the floor, and didn't say a word.

Next Glen, who didn't look anyone in the eye. Then Rhain, who started to rise before his name was called, as if he'd rather get it done than wait for whatever came next.

Soren was last.

He'd expected cold, but the room was close, damp with the sweat of too many men and too few windows.

At the far end sat a man in a black robe, the edges crusted with bands of stitched silver, as if someone had tried to bribe a corpse into looking lively.

His face was nothing special: whiskered, pitted with old acne, nose flattened from being broken and reset too late in life.

The eyes, though, were steady as river glass. Soren recognized the type, anyone from the gutter did. Men who weighed every word, never blinked at silence.

The judge, if that's what he was, motioned for Soren to sit. There was no table, only a single wooden chair, slightly lower than the one the judge occupied. A kill shot for arrogance, Soren decided.

The judge spoke without lifting his chin. "You are Soren, un-parented, claim no house."

Soren nodded, then remembered how the instructors hated that and added, "That's correct."

A faint click as the judge's knuckles pressed together. "I have a series of questions. Answer plainly. If you lie, I'll know. If you hide, I'll assume worse."

Soren met his gaze, careful to neither smirk nor flinch.

"Have you witnessed any forbidden artifacts among your peers?" the judge asked.

Soren blinked. In the moment, every instinct screamed at him to say no.

But the memory of the Remnant's warmth, the way it sang dormant behind his ribs, forced him onto less certain ground. "Not that I know of," he said, as deadpan as possible.

The judge tilted his head, fishing for tremor. Found none. "Are you aware of any boy here who has displayed... unusual talents, not taught on these grounds?"

Soren's mind darted to Rhain's hands, to Tavren's voice, to the way Glen's fingers moved too quick for even the instructor to catch.

Mostly, though, to himself, and the phantom movement that had, at least once, made him someone else's weapon. He shrugged. "Everyone here fights dirty. Or else they bleed early and go home."

The judge's mouth twitched, the ghost of a smile. "Have you noticed changes in your own body, or your mind, since coming here?"

Soren waited, as if trying to recall something trivial. "I sleep worse," he said.

"Dreams?" the judge pressed.

Soren shook his head. "Just the usual," which, for him, was not exactly a lie.

There was a long pause. The judge tapped a silver coin between thumb and forefinger. "Loyalty to House Ashgard. Would you die for it?"

Soren considered the angle. He knew the city's rule: If you said no, you vanished. If you said yes, you bled for it. Either way, your tongue got you dead.

"I would die for the line," he said, evoking the ancient phrase every gutter child learned from the alley priests. "But not for the rot that grows on it."

The judge let the words hang. File it away, Soren thought, for later punishment or promotion.

Finally: "Stand."

Soren stood, shoulders back, leaving both hands open and visible.

"Is there anything more you wish to confess?" the judge asked, almost kindly.

Soren studied the man's face. No hint of ridicule or even impatience. Just a slow, grave waiting.

The shard burned against his chest, heat pulsing to the rhythm of his heartbeat. He nearly blurted everything, about the alley, the sword, the voice that haunted him after dark.

Instead: "No, sir. Only that I wish to keep my place here."

The judge nodded, wrote something on a slip of bone-white card, then motioned him out.

Back in the hall, the air felt thick as soup. Tavren picked at a raw seam in his knuckle, eyes refusing to focus on the world.

Rhain sat with head bowed, but one knee jogged under the bench, betrayed by nerves. Glen hunched low, as if afraid his shadow might draw comment.

The instructor appeared at the door, arms folded tight to his chest. He addressed them all at once:

"You've been spoken for. That means you're somebody's problem now, not mine. Don't disappoint." With that, he led them back up to the ground floor. Soren's legs wobbled, but he kept pace, the shard burning cold and luminous under his shirt.

Lunch was cut rations. Tavren didn't speak. Glen scraped every crumb from his bowl, eyes darting to catch the least sign of intent in anyone near him.

Rhain ate little, but kept glancing at Soren as if trying to measure something intangible, like a fever you can't see.

The rest of the day passed in terse drills and suicide sprints, as if the instructors hoped sheer exhaustion might wring confession from anyone who'd slipped the morning's net.

Soren said nothing, neither in word nor in curse, and focused instead on the ghost-memory of Valenna's lessons, running through the forms in his head. The sword's warmth ebbed with every repetition, as if approving the effort.

Night fell thick and quiet. In the barracks, Tavren and Glen curled in on themselves, already drifting to an uneasy sleep.

Rhain stretched on his cot, arms above his head, watching the ice creep fractal on the window. Soren waited until the fuel lamps guttered to blue, then slid his hand under the cot for the rag-wrapped shard.

He didn't call for her. Didn't need to.

"Not bad," came Valenna's voice, thin as wire but bright with mockery. *"You even fooled the Oathkeeper, which is more than I can say for myself back in the day."*

Soren stroked the edge of the fragment, feeling the phantom pressure of muscle and memory. "What do you need from me?" he whispered.

A sigh. "Not need. Want. You're alive. For now, I suggest we keep it that way. If a better host comes along, I'll let you know. Meanwhile, let's not get caught."

Soren wondered if his face showed the grin that formed behind his teeth. "You were listening the whole time?"

"Oh, never doubt it, little knife." A gathering pause, then: *"You carry me now. So we walk careful. We move fast when told. And if the Oathkeepers start asking about dreams again, you say nothing."*

Soren pressed the shard to his chest, feeling its warmth surge in time to the valley of his own heartbeat. For the first time in days, he wanted to sleep. Instead, he whispered: "I swear it."

He let the darkness close. The cold no longer touched him. Only the memory of the room, the judge's eyes, and the knowledge that the city had not yet wrung out of him whatever it truly wanted.