

# The Bookkeeper

## #Chapter 11: Revelation - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 11: Revelation

*Chapter 11: Revelation*

*"I'm the only one with a voice, huh?"* His elbows hit the table, hands coming up to rub his forehead. *"This might not be hell after all—could be there's more to this whole thing than I thought."*

*"I'll go back regardless... got to gather every bit of strength and magic I can find."* His fist clenched and trembled slightly, betraying the truth that before that could happen, he would need to defeat Levi—someone stronger than him.

Three days of training and endless questions; was he really the only one who could think freely? It only showed him there was something enormous at work, something he'd been oblivious to.

Still, this remained his personal hell. Never avenging his brother would be the deepest wound anyone could give him. He refused to carry that burden.

Raiden snatched the handbook off the desk, thumbing through to the final page. Something had caught his eye, likely the reason Levi handed it to him in the first place.

The book read in Noorian: "To contract a human is a feat in any blue crest bearer's catalog, however, only a few can manage this feat. It rather falls under luck and hard work."

"This only works with mutual agreement on a binding contract. It could mean Number 0 serving Number 9, the contract shows no bias either way. However, the summoner needs sufficient mana to burn the seal of contract."

Raiden ran his hand through his hair while reading. He'd already tried to burn one of the seals without success, which meant his last resort was pushing his training to the limit.

[You have to get stronger, papa.]

Ash broke through Raiden's thoughts. He looked over at her, smiled warmly, and ruffled her hair before standing up. Sword in hand, he ran through his usual ritual and started training.

He wanted to get stronger to take down Levi, sure, but ignoring advice from someone as cute as Ash would be stupid. Most of her words centered on him getting stronger,

which meant she was clued into something he wasn't. Too much of anything only becomes a problem when you don't know how to use it.

He kept cutting through the air at full strength, adding muscle to what he'd already developed. When sunrise finally came, he ended with his meditation routine.

**[ALERT]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 9: LEVEL- 65/100 XP.**

**MANA CONTROL: 60**

**MANA POOL: 70/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 120**

**STAMINA: 110**

**AURA: 15**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 1**

**—Swordsmanship: 30%**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 92%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 1.**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**NEW ABILITIES: LOCKED.]**

*"Can I really defeat him?"*—he shook his head, shaking off the uncertainty.

Over the past few days, guards and Aeris had been delivering messages, his mother wanted to meet with him. He'd ignored them for a while, but the requests never stopped. Whenever Yara visited, Raiden was always too busy training.

"At least just a day..." she said.

Not wanting that 'imposter' label thrown at him again, Raiden had to go. But before heading out, he picked up a seal from the training room and attempted to channel mana

into it. No blood was needed this time, but the infusion felt like hauling triple his body weight.

Before long, he made it home, his face slick with sweat, and had to shield his eyes from how bright their place was.

Yara was seated in the living room and immediately moved toward Raiden with excitement, patting Ash while he stayed unaffected by her lively mood. But once Raiden sat down, Yara's expression grew dark.

She let out a sigh, eyes growing fierce—exactly like the look Jack's mother used to pin him with. That unforgiving expression that could make anyone's pulse quicken.

"I've gone along with this charade long enough." Raiden's eyes widened as he stared back at her, his heart racing faster with each second as he shook internally. "This change of yours is drastic—practically unheard of."

*"What do you mean?"*

Her stare turned even more penetrating. "I know the kind of toll a brush with death takes on someone."

Raiden nodded stiffly, throat working nervously, while Ash simply fled; she could sense what was coming.

"This experience has turned you into someone I don't even recognize..." She let the words hang for a moment. "That's why I think we should stop protecting the book."

Relief coursed through Raiden's body as he held back the impulse to yell, his lips flickering with barely contained emotion. But he had to stand firm and keep playing Raiden.

He wore a look of dim disbelief and disappointment. *"What do you mean, Mother?"*

Yara leaned forward, her face softening. "We should let this be someone else's problem for once!"

The pain and frustration were clear in her voice. "I do not want to lose you too." Tears began streaming down her face as she tried to wipe them away. "You've changed, Raiden... you don't come home anymore, and all you care about is protecting that damn book."

Jack was never one to get wrapped up in these emotions because showing anything like this to his mother, Jane, would bring punishments beyond his understanding. But Raiden pulled her into a hug.

*"Don't worry, Mother. I'll be okay."*

"No, you won't." She pushed out of the hug and rose to her feet. Raiden wore genuine confusion now. "Look around, everyone is gone! They are all dead."

She paused, taking a deep breath to clear away years of bottled grief. "The only survivors are those who abandoned the Night name completely... your own cousins won't even claim it anymore."

Her exhaustion was obvious and her words rang true, but Raiden viewed the bookkeeper position as an advantage. If he played it right, it could be his ticket back to his world, something he refused to abandon. Trade a high-class noble life for being a commoner? His parents hadn't raised him to give up treasures like that.

He took a deep breath, expression turning dark as he rose. "No, Mother..." He locked eyes with her like a wounded lion defending his pride, voice becoming cold and intimidating. "This is the Night family's duty and no one else's. I won't give it up for anyone, not even you."

Ash stayed on the floor, her head whipping from side to side as she looked between them, confused.

His voice turned even more menacing. "You can leave and abandon the name if you want... but I won't."

Yara remained before him, her gaze flickering through the tears, visibly robbed of words.

Raiden stood there for a moment, shook his head, and left the room without giving her a chance to speak. She made no move to stop him, just stood frozen as he vanished from her sight completely.

As soon as Raiden left, relief washed over his face in a wide grin. He fished the seal from his pocket and picked up where he'd left off with training.

He viewed the confrontation as the ideal opportunity to drive Yara away. With her out of the picture, he wouldn't need to watch his back anymore, and given what he'd said, he was certain she'd go. Besides, he might end up enslaved by their enemies within days.

Just a few steps into his walk back, he halted. *"Whoa, I think it's working, Ash."* The seal showed the first signs of burning along its edges. Maybe a relieved, focused mind was the key.

**[ALERT]**

**[SUCCESSFUL MANA USAGE]**

**[+20 XP]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 9: LEVEL- 85/100 XP.]**

*Chapter 12: Soul of Dragon*

Burning a seal required an absolute sense of relief, a clear mind, and a desire to watch it burn. Yet despite his increasing experience points, the seal failed to burn completely—it stopped not long after the edges caught fire.

This gave Raiden some insight into what Leo was really getting at. "Play around with different ways of using your mana alongside your familiar"—that's exactly what Leo had said.

He didn't take him seriously since he despised his demeanor. He only saw him as someone passionate about magic who, if given the opportunity, could learn more and provide him access to whatever magic he might need.

But after getting sufficient proof that he was right after all, he decided to take things a step further and experiment with mana and Ash—and Ash seemed keen on the idea too, since she'd been pushing for something like this.

After all, he only had to make use of his mana. It seemed simple enough.

Since the seal hadn't burned thoroughly, it was clear he needed more mana. This prompted him to take a gamble—200 out of 5000 from his mana pool. It was a rough guess, but he would have needed it regardless.

For the past several days, he'd only concentrated on building his mana and storing it up, and by the time he achieved his goal, just two days were left before their duel.

It was afternoon, and he had to know precisely where he stood before the final day, since he'd reserved that entirely for training.

Raiden remained seated at the center of the room, Ash standing beside him and gently observing as he closed his eyes and controlled his breath.

He gripped the seal at both edges, pushing away every desire related to the seal and filling his mind with thoughts of warmth and peace—thinking of Ash.

He then slowly began to visualize his mana flowing through his hands into the seal, like gas being released from a cylinder.

He repeated his approach again and again, and before he realized it, the seal had started burning from the edges. Ash began dancing around in excitement while Raiden's eyes stayed closed, his focus solely on burning it through completely.

Suddenly, an insistent nudge from Ash brought him back to reality, and he opened his eyes to see the seal completely reduced to ashes. He smirked and patted Ash.

His assumption had proven correct after all. However, his expression darkened as he picked up Ash and placed her on his lap.

*"Let's try this, Ash, just like you wanted ... we might get somewhere with it."* He offered her a warm smile as Ash smiled back and settled comfortably on his lap.

Just like he had done with the seal, he wanted to see what would happen if he managed to channel his mana into Ash. Without any further ado, he began the process.

In the first few seconds, his body flinched with goosebumps surging under his skin, but he paid no heed. Ash, however, began to give small yelps, but Raiden was far beyond hearing, so she started giving him light scratches.

He continued channeling the mana with all his strength and inner senses, but this time everything was vivid—like white powder scattered through the air. He saw it all clearly, though his mana core seemed to be diminishing in size.

By then, he was too absorbed to think rationally, and even Ash's scratches on his hand couldn't break his trance. The guilt and fear were written across her face as she blamed herself.

**[ALERT]**

**[WARNING: MANA DEPLETION]**

**[MANA POOL: 118/5000]**

Suddenly, another sensation flooded his body, draining the color from his face and leaving him increasingly cold. He started sweating heavily even though his skin felt dry.

He desperately wanted to break free, but he couldn't—trembling with every attempt as fear took hold and his heart pounded wildly.

Ash whimpered guiltily beside him, unable to move while trapped in Raiden's grasp.

**[MANA POOL: 90/5000]**

Raiden was trapped, and his mana started flowing out like escaping air at an alarming rate. He struggled to break free or open his eyes, but his mana kept draining away by itself, as though Ash's body was somehow drawing it out.

Before he realized it, everything had vanished, just like when he'd first encountered Ash.

**[MANA POOL: 0/5000]**

It wasn't his body collapsing on the floor that followed—cold, with labored breathing and a weakening heartbeat.

Instead, he remained trapped in that deep trance while his body became filled with something entirely new, something relaxing and calming that pulled him gently into sleep. The last sound he registered was a message from his system.

**[ALERT]**

**[SOUL RENDERING COMPLETED]**

**[+20 XP]**

**[FAMILIAR TRUST: +10%**

**[NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: SOUL OF DRAGON- 0%**

**—You now possess the spiritual power, will, and legacy of Ash. This enhances instinct, danger detection, mana, and aura.]**

**[DRAGON MANA POOL: 200/5000]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL- 5/100 XP.**

**MANA CONTROL: 0**

**DRAGON MANA POOL: 200/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 160**

**STAMINA: 140**

**DRAGON AURA: 20**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 1**

**—Swordsmanship: 60%**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 102%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 1.**

—Name: [ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

**NEW ABILITIES:**

—Soul of Dragon: 0%

—Others Locked.]

And with that, he finally fell into sleep. Ash scurried around and nudged him persistently, but Raiden remained unresponsive. She continued whimpering as she curled up beside him.

They both stayed on the floor for roughly six hours, awakening at 8:27 pm. Raiden instinctively sat up to find Ash still resting on his left side. A wave of relief, calmness, and warmth flowed through his chest, as though all his burdens were suddenly lifting away.

But he needed to reach the library, so he quickly got to his feet and carefully positioned Ash on his shoulder. As he walked, he stopped to instruct some guards to bring his meal to him.

He hesitated for a moment as he could see something radiating from their body, corresponding to their mana crests. It took him a little while to actually realize it was their aura—he could see them now. With a gentle smirk, he instructed them nevertheless.

The instant he stepped into the library, Ash woke up, sprang down from his shoulder, and darted to the desk where she positioned herself. Raiden took his seat with a smile, watching her.

*"Did you do this?"*

Ash smiled faintly, jumped onto Raiden's leg, and started nudging him affectionately. [Yes, I did.] Her voice carried that same warm, childish tone.

Raiden's grin broadened as he gently patted her. *"I would have appreciated a heads-up... but I suppose you just didn't have the words to explain it."*

Ash made herself comfortable on Raiden's leg while he briefly examined himself before touching his crest with satisfaction. He was now at level 8.

Suddenly, something caught his attention as he looked to his right, toward the wall where the Book of Ashes lay hidden. He could sense it now—that immense dark energy emanating from it, even through the barriers.

He could actually hear the energy striking the wall, producing a grating, unsettling scraping sound that made chills race down his spine as he swallowed hard.

*"So this is why Ash didn't want me going in there... I would have been dead."*

This made him realize that even those pursuing the book had no clue what it actually was. What he sensed was something threatening that went far beyond human understanding.

He touched his crest again. *"Since they confirmed that Raiden's mother has finally abandoned the Night name as we expected, I think I should deepen my involvement with the request."*

He looked toward the walls once more. *"I can't allow this feeling to hang over me any longer... I might lose my humanity."*

He paused and squeezed his fist into a tight ball. All the nervousness and anxiety he had been holding back finally began to show as tremors ran through his body. *"I must defeat Levi."*

### *Chapter 13: Binding Oath*

Ash rested on the floor as she watched Raiden.

*"I'm not sure what it is you see, Ash, but when everything's on the line, I'll need to know you're just as committed."*

Rising from his meditation on Ash's profound act of entrusting her soul to him, Raiden's words carried weight.

He grasped his sword's hilt firmly with both hands, shutting his eyes as he inhaled slowly and deliberately. The familiar words of his ritual flowed from his lips as his training commenced.

His body trembled with more than just the sword's resonance; anticipation of the coming day's trial sent fear coursing through him. Whatever power his ritual words possessed, they offered no comfort against an opponent like Levi.

How he'd measure against Levi in pure combat, stripped of magical enhancement, was anyone's guess—but that question haunted him above all else.

Levi's self-assurance was intimidating, yet what truly chilled him was the thought that he might seize up during the fight if he realized his own strength exceeded his opponent's.

His practice resumed with an intensity that surpassed all prior sessions, extending far beyond his typical duration.

He drove himself relentlessly until his palms ran red with blood and his body shook from exhaustion. Only when complete darkness surrounded him did he finally acknowledge the late hour.

**[ALERT]**

**[MANA CONTROL +5**

**DRAGON MANA 205/5000**

**DRAGON AURA +2**

**SOUL OF DRAGON +1%**

**SWORDSMANSHIP +5%**

**STAMINA +10**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH +15]**

Returning to the library with barely a glance at those around him, he concentrated on nothing but relaxation and sharpening the enhanced perception Ash had granted him.

He wouldn't allow the malevolent energy radiating from the book, nor his anxiety about facing Levi, to overshadow his preparation—steadily restoring the resolve that had sustained him before every mission. Sleep finally overtook him.

The sun rose before he'd fully registered the night's passage, Ash taking her place on his shoulder as he issued orders to the assembled guards.

Security around the library needed strengthening, he told them, with at least three of their finest warriors positioned inside. Projecting his characteristic confidence, he made his exit from the palace.

In the past, missions began with comprehensive briefings: the target's assets, attendants, defenses, and exploitable flaws were all mapped out beforehand.

This preparation hadn't made his enemies less dangerous, but it offered him strategic insight to work with as he closed in. Against even the most formidable foes, advanced knowledge had leveled the field. This time, he'd be going in completely blind.

The moment the palace was behind him, his fingers wrapped tightly around his odachi's black sheath, his gaze settling on the fountain at the heart of the three-way intersection. He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs completely, then proceeded along the forward route before hailing a red carriage and settling into it.

His pulse hammered as the carriage departed, rolling straight ahead without deviation while pedestrians bustled along the roadway. Soon they'd passed beyond the city proper into an area that required no introduction—the trenches.

Unlike the well-dressed children he'd observed in the uptown district, complete with proper clothing and hats, these youngsters appeared gaunt and ashen.

They approached the moving carriage with hands pointing to their mouths, but what struck him most was their complete lack of family crests.

Beyond their dusty robes and the rags bound around their waists, heavy bundles weighing down their backs, the surrounding structures told their own story—brick houses built low compared to the towering cityscapes, yet still proper dwellings for those wandering the streets.

This meant the buildings belonged to minor nobility, while the homeless had likely drifted in from distant settlements.

Yet their desperate faces failed to move Raiden in the slightest. The glass window alone stood between him and striking one of them for having the audacity to come so close to the carriage.

The carriage came to a stop before long. "Here we are, 20 Persa," the driver announced.

Without a word, Raiden passed him the smallest bill he carried—50 Persa—and exited onto a thin walkway flanked by lush greenery on either side. The planted areas were unmistakably private farms tended by the locals.

He moved forward cautiously yet consistently, heading toward a wooded area backed by mountain ranges. When he'd covered considerable ground and reached the forest's threshold, he halted and pivoted to his left. Instantly, Levi appeared in his line of sight.

The instant Levi appeared, Raiden's eyes went wide with astonishment.

*His presence is so weak... hardly stronger than the palace guards—he realized, and a smirk slowly spread across his face.*

[Yes...] came Ash's response as she leaped down from Raiden's shoulder, walked a short distance, and lowered herself to the earth.

Raiden's smirk deepened further, interpreting Ash's withdrawal as confirmation that this should be swift work.

Levi advanced with an even more arrogant grin. "I was beginning to think you'd lost your nerve... have you come to surrender?"

*"Why would I feel such pity for you..."*

Raiden casually reached into his pocket and produced a seal.

Levi stepped closer, his grin stretching even broader as he saw this as the chance he'd been anticipating. "Like a free present." Raiden merely offered him an indifferent glance while his fist tightened in annoyance at how Levi had made him anxious over nothing.

Levi held the other half of the seal. "By the right of duel-bound fate, I stake my soul in combat. Let the victor bind the defeated under the Oath. No plea, no protest, no escape. Only will, and the weight of defeat."

Raiden exhaled deeply and echoed Levi's words, his expression betraying every emotion coursing through him. The instant he finished speaking, the seal suddenly crumbled to ash in his hand.

Yet without either of them making the slightest motion or uttering a sound, a blade came flying straight toward Raiden's skull—his head jerked aside on pure instinct, the weapon missing him by mere millimeters.

Before he could even register what had happened, Levi's leg swept toward his skull, but Raiden's block came up instantly to intercept it. Levi immediately retreated, creating space between them once more.

Raiden's eyes grew more focused as he studied Levi intently. "*Traps?... you went and set up traps?*" His head moved side to side in disgust. "*What kind of fool are you?*"

"Let's find out." He smirked.

In a split second, four blades came hurtling toward Raiden. He drew his sword and deflected everyone without shifting his position even slightly.

Levi then charged forward, unleashing a relentless barrage of strikes with barely a pause between each assault.

Raiden evaded the majority and deflected the remainder, though the attacks carried considerable force—his hands grew battered from the impacts, and he found himself being driven steadily backward.

Yet throughout the exchange, Raiden kept his focus on Levi's footwork while fighting to hold his ground, determined not to position himself within range of any hidden snares.

A few minutes passed before he grinned and released his grip on his sword. Capitalizing on the opportunity, he parried a strike and focused every ounce of his strength into a single blow, slamming his thenar into Levi's windpipe.

Levi crumpled to the earth immediately, struggling for air as he convulsed in pain, his feet kicking frantically while one hand extended outward.

Raiden remained where he stood, rubbing his aching hands with a pained grimace, his attention entirely absorbed by his own discomfort.

[Papa won!] Ash said as she finally closed in and nudged Raiden.

However, Raiden immediately shifted his attention to Levi and approached him. Tears streamed down Levi's face, his complexion had turned deep red, and he appeared to be on the verge of death. Raiden simply dropped to one knee beside him.

*"Do you admit defeat?"* His voice was slightly above a whisper.

He started to mumble something, but the words came out garbled and unclear. Raiden then placed his hand over Levi's mouth and leaned in closer. *"What was that?"*

He attempted to mumble again, but this time the words came out even more garbled than before. *"That's a no, then."*

Without hesitation, Raiden drove his fist into Levi's stomach, making his already dire condition even worse. Levi's breathing became ragged and desperate, each gasp fragmenting as though his windpipe had been severed.

As the agony became unbearable for Levi, Raiden settled beside him, wondering if he'd grown soft because Jack would have simply killed him without regard for any agreement. He let out a derisive sound and delivered another blow to Levi's stomach almost unconsciously. Then another.

**[ALERT]**

**[NEW CONTRACT MANAGED]**

**[+5XP]**

**[NEW ABILITY: INVISIBILITY]**

**[CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 2.]**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**—Name: [?]**

**—Bond Type: Binding Oath.]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL- 5/100 XP.]**

At the system's prompt, Raiden instantly shifted his attention to Levi, who lay motionless with blood flowing from his nostrils and lips, staining the earth below. When he glanced at Ash, she immediately grasped the situation and fled.

Raiden's expression showed complete surprise, his lips parting slightly as he watched her disappear. He then focused back on Levi and pressed his fingers to his neck—there was still a pulse. Exhaling heavily, he struck Levi's cheek with his palm. "*Levi?!*"

**[ALERT]**

**[CONTRACT NAME UPDATED.]**

**[NAME: LEVI.]**

Ash came back with a leaf in her mouth, pawing at Raiden urgently to get him to take it from her.

He grinned. "*I thought you'd run off...*"

*Chapter 14: There might be more*

It was still a little early into the morning when Raiden stood before King Hannes in the throne room. The yellow aura surrounding the king was unmistakably kingkind as he sat upon his white throne, its armrests tinged with gold, his hands resting calmly on them.

The elders sat on red seats beside him—three to his left and three to his right—cloaked in their black robes.

The room was slightly narrow, yet vast in its own right, making the king's superiority feel heavier with every step taken from the entrance. The floor and ceiling were adorned with portraits of victorious battles.

Raiden cleared his throat. "At first, I only asked for an apartment. But now, I want something bigger."

He glanced around for a moment. "*I want the book removed from the palace premises entirely.*"

The elders exchanged confused looks as they stared at him.

*"It's a no-brainer that the book is in the palace... so why not use that to our advantage?"*

He glanced at their faces—still confused about whatever he was saying. Raiden massaged his forehead in disappointment.

He had expected them to catch on, but if the so-called kingdom of wisdom and education was this narrow-minded, then he had a long way to go.

*"I request that a mansion be built in my honor as the Bookkeeper—a mansion of libraries, designed to confuse anyone except the Bookkeeper himself. And the library here... use it as a decoy to lure the assassins into the palace."*

King Hannes smirked as he stared at him, while the elders remained as chatty as ever, their low mumbles filling the room.

"Silence!" Hannes' commanding tone echoed through the room, drawing everyone's attention.

"Can't believe you climbed the ranks in just a few weeks... that's practically unheard of."

Raiden's eyes widened in confusion. *How?*

—it was a question written all over his face, clear enough that even a single glance at him would tell.

"I feared the four months I initially gave you wouldn't be enough—but I suppose you truly meant your words. One way or another, you've done it."

Raiden stood frozen for a moment, still caught up in how climbing the ranks was considered such a great feat—then he shrugged.

However, King Hannes' expression darkened in that instant. "About your request... the fact that you've thought this thoroughly about the book clearly shows your devotion."

He paused. "However, this was your father's initial request—not long before he was killed on duty, though his was far more detailed."

Raiden raised an eyebrow as a sense of unease crept in—his alternative was already being considered. Still, he gave them the benefit of the doubt and waited silently for more.

"His description required a lot of resources we didn't have in Persia. That led us to enter several negotiations with other kingdoms, and it cost us quite a bit."

*"So, are you done?"* he asked curiously, leaning forward slightly.

King Hannes offered a warm smile. "Yes... in fact, we finished about a month ago."

Raiden showed no sign of excitement or enthusiasm toward their achievement. He simply nodded and bluntly spoke the words that followed. *"Alright. I've already chosen my apprentice—Leo Odin. He works at the Odin jewelry shop."*

[Papa, he's awake...]

He narrowed his eyes slightly, already feeling the urge to leave. *"Can you bring him to me in the next few days?"*

King Hannes smirked and gave a nod. Without hesitation, Raiden turned and hurried out of the room, heading straight for the library.

The moment he arrived, he found Levi lying on the floor with Ash standing on top of him, pawing at his face while scoffing in annoyance.

After their duel, the leaf Ash had plunged into his mouth turned out to be a coca leaf. The moment they squeezed its pigment into him, he drew a shallow breath and regained consciousness.

Using his invisibility to their advantage, they managed to sneak him into the library—though he ran out of energy and collapsed shortly after.

*"I need some answers from you... Levi."*

He walked past him and took his seat, with Ash joining him immediately.

Levi pressed himself up from the floor and rose to his feet, rubbing his stomach. Raiden tossed him a piece of bread he had saved for just such an occasion, and Levi began stuffing himself immediately.

*"Your strength, it feels too shallow for an assassin... nowhere near the one I faced a while ago."*

Levi began pounding his chest as he retched, his eyes filled with tears as he reached out a trembling hand for water. Raiden lazily handed him a glass, and he downed it in an instant.

*"Talk now..."*

Levi took a deep breath. "The one who came before me was named Eli... he was strong—both physically and magically. Unlike me."

Raiden propped his elbows on the desk, leaned forward, and listened intently.

"However, the moment he returned without the book, he was killed." He began walking between the shelves.

"They know you're weak—that's why they aren't paying much attention to you. The Kingdom of Aurelia's Bookkeeper, on the other hand, is quite troublesome."

Raiden stopped him. "They killed him... because he couldn't kill me?"

Levi turned to Raiden. "No, they killed him because he claimed he'd killed you, yet came back without the book. And on top of that... you're still alive."

Raiden smirked, imagining how confused Eli must have been to realize that slitting his throat wasn't enough to kill him. But his expression darkened almost instantly.

*"But if I'm weak, then why not target me first? That seems like the most logical approach."*

Levi continued pacing between the shelves. "Aurelia possesses the Book of Silence, the Voice of the Devourer, and it's believed to be far easier to retrieve than the Book of Ashes."

Raiden tapped his chin thoughtfully, then glanced at the wall to his right—where the book rested—its overwhelming dark energy pulsing endlessly. That's when it hit him: whoever wanted the book... already knew exactly what it could do.

His voice darkened. *"So you were actually sent here on a suicide mission... they want to know exactly what it would take to retrieve the book. Paid for with your blood."*

Levi smirked. "Exactly. That's why they sent weaklings like me—so it wouldn't cost them anything if I ended up dead."

Raiden's eyes narrowed. *"That's the life you chose as an assassin... don't take the job if you can't stomach the consequences."*

Levi finally stopped pacing and marched up to Raiden, slamming his hands onto the desk as he leaned forward—the rage in his eyes burning against Raiden's unwavering gaze.

"Do you know what it took for me to become an assassin?"

Raiden shot him a lazy look, thinking to himself—*such arrogance.*

"I never wanted to be an assassin..." He stood upright. "Living in the desert, where food and water are rare—reserved only for the rich—all you care about is finding a way out of that hell."

He continued, "I saw becoming an assassin as my way out of that hell. Most assassins don't stay in one place, and it worked. It was the same for most of us... even Eli."

He walked over to the window on the left and leaned against it. "The moment we started learning the Persian language, I felt a thrill. The Kingdom of Wisdom and Education... it gave me hope. I began plotting my escape the moment we arrived."

His voice dropped, and his eyes shifted to the floor. "But I wouldn't be the only one with that mentality, would I?" He smirked. "The moment we arrived, a few people tried it, every one of them was caught and killed."

Raiden remained silent as he stared at him—unmoved, untouched. All he saw was an opportunity to make Levi serve him better as his master. All he had to do was feed that hungry bastard.

"I took the job personally because they said you were weak. If I'd returned with the book... maybe I could've finally left." He glanced at Ash, who rested quietly on Raiden's lap, her eyes fixed on the floor.

"But when your familiar nearly killed me—even though it was confusing—it made me start thinking. What's the best way to escape this nightmare without ending up dead? The duel... it was the only thing that came to mind."

Raiden studied him carefully. *"If you had returned, they would've killed you for failing. And if you came back to fight, you'd be killed either way..."* He tapped his chin thoughtfully. *"It's not a bad idea."*

His voice slowed, eyes narrowing as his tone turned cold. *"Well... you're my servant now. You work for me."*

His expression shifted in an instant, a smile creeping onto his face as he gently patted Ash.

"Just so you know, no one really knows who wants the books. All the assassins I've met... they're immature. It was never a real organization."

Levi paused for a moment... "I believe there's a traitor within your palace."

Raiden smirked and nodded. *"I do too, but there might be more."*

#### *Chapter 15: Attack on the Brink*

"I didn't believe it when I heard you made it to number 8, but I guess it's true..." Aeris said with a smirk, while Raiden stayed relaxed in his seat, gently patting Ash on the head as Levi remained invisible.

*"Any information?"*

Aeris's expression shifted in an instant. "Yes, about the assassins and the elders."

Raiden stayed silent, giving her a slight nod to continue.

"Right... I had a conversation with Captain Kai's son, Robin. He told me something concerning why his father wants your family out of power."

Raiden gave a simple nod in response.

"He took money from the Dawnbringer family.

They believe that since your family has already fallen apart, it's best to leave such a prestigious duty in their hands." She paused for a moment, brushing one palm against the other. "And some of the elders are in on it.

Some say the Dawnbringers are the strongest—in both physical strength and magic."

Raiden sighed in disbelief. He remembered the Dawnbringers all too well—the weakest among them was a Yellow Crest bearer with manipulation abilities Raiden used to dream of. That bloodline had always bullied him—not just him, but his parents too—for producing a "weakling" like him.

Now, the act of revenge brought Raiden only a hint of sweetness. His unreadable expression twisted into a sudden smirk of despair as he brushed his palm over Ash, eyes fixed on the floor with a quiet lust for blood.

He wasn't doing this for Raiden; this was for himself. After realizing he'd grown weaker somehow since arriving in this world, he saw this as the perfect opportunity to reclaim his confidence... and reignite his thirst for the wicked's blood.

He lifted his head toward Aeris, his smirk deepening. *"About the assassins?"*

His expression unsettled her for a moment, but she quickly pulled herself together.

"Uhm... I heard this from the elders themselves when I was snooping around one time." She glanced at Raiden.

"They said the assassins know you're weak—and that they just have to wait. Once they kill you... that'll be the end of your bloodline."

She leaned forward. "You get it, your mother abandoned the Night name, so you're the only one left." Her voice was etched with concern.

Raiden's expression darkened, his eyes filled with a cold, unwavering stillness as he locked eyes with Aeris. Her sudden concern about his bloodline puzzled him.

*"Do you want to bear my children?"*

Aeris's eyes widened, her cheeks turning crimson as she began to fidget with her fingers. "If you put it like tha—

Raiden let out a sigh, fighting the urge to say something that might break her spirit. Instead, to keep the situation from escalating any further, he shifted the subject.

*"So that's it—not only do the elders and Captain Kai want me gone, but if I refuse... I die?"*

Aeris gave him a firm nod, and Raiden smirked once more. *"I'd like to increase your paycheck by 1,000 Persa, for your utmost submission to me."*

Aeris's eyes lit up with excitement, but before she could say a word, Raiden rushed to speak.

*"This isn't something you want to refuse. However, the deal will only be sealed after you complete one specific task for me..."*

Aeris's expression darkened. "I thought my work was done...?"

He smiled. *"Yes, it is. This is an act of service, not a trial."*

She gave him a nod. "I will leave then."

Raiden watched as she left, his hand still brushing over Ash's scales, his mind turning over how a one-man army could take on such a powerful bloodline.

He smirked the moment he realized, aside from intimidation, he had nothing else.

"I gained consciousness a few hours ago, and I've already seen how much of a bastard you are," Levi said as he finally became visible. "Why not make her swear an oath for her loyalty?"

Raiden turned to him with a quiet chuckle. *"She's a traitor. One day, I might have to kill her."*

Levi's expression twisted in shock. "What?!"

Ash immediately rose to her feet; and something rang in Raiden's mind. Instinct took over, he grabbed Ash, hurled her over the desk, and dropped into a stance.

"What's going on?"

Raiden remained silent. A ringing pulsed in his mind, warning him that something dangerous was on its way. But when he looked through the windows, there was nothing.

*Is this the danger detection Ash gave me?*—he thought, eyes still fixed on the outside.

[Yes, Papa,] Ash said, then leaped to the floor.

Levi, however, remained confused as he watched both Raiden and Ash staring through the window. Still, he wasn't about to wait and find out; he turned invisible and disappeared.

Raiden's senses flared, instinctively tilting his head upward, just as something crashed through the ceiling and slammed into the floor, shattering the last shelf against the wall to their left.

*The aura's too low*—he thought. He grinned and gestured for Ash to take the route by the desk while he moved toward the entrance.

In an instant, Ash dashed forward, and so did Raiden, but before he could reach the spot, Ash grew in size and slammed the assassin into the wall.

Raiden quickened his pace, and by the time he arrived, Ash had her front legs pinned on the assassin, pressing him into the floor.

He was a middle-aged man with red hair, dressed in black, mud-stained clothes that spoke of the stress and narrow tunnels he'd crawled through just to get here.

Raiden glanced at the man's neck; he was a yellow crest bearer, ranked eighth. He knelt beside him as the man struggled to breathe. The moment Raiden saw his hands, he let out a cold laugh.

"All you can do is manipulate your hands into lion's claws?"

The man gritted his teeth in frustration. "Give me the book," he said, his voice low and tense.

Raiden's expression darkened as a sudden urge stirred within him to show the man what it truly meant to be an assassin.

*"Press down on him, Ash,"* he said, his voice cold and unwavering.

Ash didn't hesitate; she pressed down on him, and the man screamed in agony. Even through his cries, the sound of cracking ribs was unmistakable.

Raiden gently brushed his hand against Ash's leg. *"You can shrink back now, Ash... I'll take it from here."*

Ash gave a small nod and shrank back to her normal size. Raiden's eyes narrowed as he grabbed the man by the hair, dragging him toward the desk. He shoved the desk aside and dropped the man into his seat.

The man remained still, silent, his head dangling as if every bone in his body had vanished. Raiden, however, squatted in front of him and grabbed him by the neck. The man's eyes were unfocused, dazed—until they locked onto Raiden, and suddenly, he slapped him.

"Look at me properly."

The man's eyes stayed hazy, but Raiden wasn't about to tolerate that. What followed was a devastating blow to the man's stomach, its impact strong enough to make the wall tremble.

The man's eyes widened in agony as he reacted to the pain, swinging his claw, but Raiden easily dodged it and drove a strike of equal force into his gut. The man's eyes bulged once more as he coughed up blood.

"Please... stop," the man muttered, using what little strength he had left.

Raiden smirked. *"Look at me properly."*

He didn't have to say it twice; the man slowly raised his head, sobbing, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Raiden's grin deepened. "Good job."

He finally released the man's neck and sat on the desk, watching as the man struggled to keep himself together.

*"As an assassin, you don't request information; you earn it."* He leaned forward, eyes locked on the man. *"Kill. Threaten. Show me why refusing to give you the book would be a mistake."*

The man gave a feeble nod, his body hanging limp as if it had already given up.

Raiden stared at the man for a long moment, recalling everything Levi had told him about the Noorians. This one... he was probably just trying to earn something for his family, caught up in something he never truly understood.

In that case, Raiden decided to be lenient.

He rose to his feet. *"I believe you're just like Levi, no real knowledge of the operation you're part of."*

The man leaned toward Raiden, watching as he reached for his sword.

*"Whether you know anything or not, I've decided to let you go."*

Raiden turned to him and drew the sword from its sheath.

Without another word, Raiden swung his sword, severing the man's right arm.

A scream tore from his throat, echoing through the air as he clutched the bleeding stump in agony.

Raiden's heartbeat didn't waver, calm and steady as he watched the man collapse, writhing on the floor, fighting to stay alive.

Raiden bent slightly at the waist and grabbed the man by the collar.

The man hiccupped repeatedly, trying to hold back his tears; any will to fight had already left him.

*"You may escape now, but I'll be warning the guards. Make sure you're gone before they catch you."*

Without a second thought, he hurled the man through the window, sending glass shards crashing to the floor.

Levi immediately became visible and strode up to Raiden.

"I thought you were going to show him mercy?" he asked, his voice sharp with anger.

Raiden glanced out the window. Somehow, the man was still alive after the four-story fall, slowly crawling on the ground below.

A smirk tugged at Raiden's lips before he turned back to Levi.

*"I did... He came here to kill me. I can't just let him go."*

He said, starting to walk toward the entrance.

*"We have to leave tomorrow."* He smirked, clearly hinting that things might go wayward with that decision.

#### *Chapter 16: Book of Ashes*

A dune of subtle emotions—tinged with uncertainty—surged through Raiden as he stood before the wall separating him from where the book lay. Ash, however, cowered behind one of the shelves in fear, while Levi remained unseen, and two other guards stood silently behind Raiden.

He took a deep breath and raised his hand slightly above his shoulder, reaching for a surface just inches from the edge. With a gentle push, the wall sank inward, releasing a

dusty breath into the air. In an instant, a powerful gust followed, forcing them to stumble slightly as it pushed against their feet.

Raiden shielded his face with his arms as the guards gripped the window frames for balance. The wind's sheer force tugged at him, threatening to sweep him off his feet.

He saw it.

This was no ordinary wind—it was dark energy, long sealed within the room, now unleashed at last. In no time, it swept through the entire library. Though only Ash could see the swirling darkness, its oppressive presence pressed heavily on them all.

Before things could spiral further, Raiden dug in his heels and began pushing forward.

Teeth clenched, he seized the room's edge and hauled himself through. The wind lashed against every part of his face—no pain, only resistance—yet each step felt like dragging himself through a storm.

Despite everything, he made it into the room. Cramped and barely fit for three, its walls were covered in enchanted stickers etched with ancient symbols—but Raiden had no interest in them.

His gaze was fixed on the black chest on the floor, thick chains wrapped tightly around it. From his back pocket, he drew three enchanted stickers and, bracing himself against the oppressive energy, placed them on the chest.

In an instant, the sensation was yanked abruptly back into the chest. They all collapsed to their knees, but before anyone could catch a breath, the stickers burst into flames. Raiden sprang to his feet and signaled the guards to retrieve the chest.

Without hesitation, they rushed forward, lifted it, and carried it out immediately.

"Follow them, Ash." Without a second's pause, she took off after them.

Raiden stayed behind, rolling his neck and cracking his knuckles and joints, steadying himself.

"So this is what they brought me here for?" Levi asked, becoming visible once more.

With a sigh, Raiden walked to his desk, grabbed the notes and his sword. "I bet it's capable of far worse..."

Raiden didn't spare him a glance as he turned and made his way to the training room. Without a sound, Levi faded from sight and followed.

As they entered the training hall, they found Ash, King Hannes, and three elders gathered around the chest. The original stickers Raiden had used were already burnt away, replaced with three new ones. Several guards stood nearby, their eyes fixed on the ominous object.

As Raiden walked in, King Hannes turned to face him. Once he was close enough, the king silently handed him a few stickers.

"Very few know the true location of the Bookkeeper's hideout... Even the ones who built it had their memories wiped clean."

He paused briefly. "That said, the Kingdom of Eldon took the same precautions, and yet their book was still stolen. So stay alert—they might find it no matter what."

Raiden gave a firm nod, watching as the three elders moved a few steps away and began chanting an incantation. A portal shimmered into existence on the wall. At that exact moment, Aeris and Leo stepped in—Leo beaming with a huge smile, his luggage slung over his shoulder.

Raiden gave him a brief smirk, then motioned for Aeris to come closer. When she did, he leaned in and whispered something in her ear.

Her eyes widened at once, but with just a subtle lift of her eyebrow, she nodded firmly and slipped out of the room without a word.

"The teleportation is ready, my lord," the elders said, backing away from the portal.

King Hannes turned to Raiden, gesturing toward the portal. "One of the rooms holds a portal that will allow you to travel across the city at will. However, this one will be dismantled after use—so whenever you need access to the city, you must return to the palace to have a new one created."

Leaning in, he whispered the exact location where Raiden was to hide the book. Then, with a faint smile, he nodded toward the portal. "You can go now."

Instead, Raiden turned to the chest and pressed three new stickers onto its surface.

*"We're not leaving yet. We must wait for Aeris."*

King Hannes' face darkened. "Why is that? I was under the impression you'd be traveling with your apprentice alone."

Raiden glanced at him. *"She's my tutor."*

The king let out a small smirk. "Fair enough."

They waited in silence, Leo's curiosity drawing him closer to examine the chest. Not even five minutes passed before Aeris returned and gave Raiden a sharp nod.

With a smirk, he motioned for her to help Leo carry the chest. As soon as they had it in hand, Raiden turned to King Hannes, gave a firm nod, and without another word, followed the others—Ash by his side—as they stepped through the portal.

Raiden appeared in the living room of a grand, two-story library. It exuded classic luxury—rich with dark wood paneling and towering bookshelves that reached from floor to ceiling across both levels. Obviously, every book on the shelves matched those from the original library.

Directly across from him, a grand curved double staircase rose gracefully, adorned with intricate wrought iron railings that led to the upper gallery.

A crystal chandelier hung from an ornate coffered ceiling, its brilliance enhanced by warm ambient lighting that filled the room.

Plush burgundy leather sofas and armchairs were arranged around a beautiful Persian rug, rich with deep red tones and intricate patterns.

To either side, curved ceiling walkways stretched outward, forming a tunnel-like passage bathed in the glow of thousands of star-like lights. Shelves were built into the walls along the walkways, holding the same familiar books as the rest of the library.

Raiden slowly turned his head, taking in the grandeur of the space. As the portal sealed shut behind him, Levi revealed himself.

"This place is... undeniably beautiful."

Leo and Aeris whipped around, their hearts leaping in their chests at the sudden sight of Levi. But before they could speak, Raiden stepped in.

*"Pick up the chest. We're moving."*

Raiden started up the stairs. Aeris and Leo, still stunned, stood staring at Levi, who seemed to relish the attention and struck a playful pose. But with just one sharp glance from Raiden, they scrambled after him, carrying the chest between them.

While the others stood in confusion, Raiden's thoughts were elsewhere—wondering if the rooms here would shine as brightly as the one he once called his.

At the top floor, Raiden took a moment to scan both directions. The tunnel-like walkways mirrored those below, curving out to either side.

He turned left, and after a few strides, stopped at the second door on the right.

Inside, the room looked nearly identical to the last—its surfaces adorned with enchanted stickers, repeating the familiar pattern.

The moment they placed the chest inside, Raiden locked the door. With a heavy breath, he slipped the key into his pocket and turned to Aeris.

*"Did you do it?"*

"Yes, I added the poison to the elders' meal... but why?" she asked, a confused expression on her face.

Raiden smirked as he began to walk away. *"It was my way of saying goodbye to them..."*

His smile faded. Both his expression and tone turned cold as he stopped mid-step.

*"We need to talk."*

#### *Chapter 17: Hierarchy*

Raiden was no fool, just like what his parents had shown him ever since he was a kid. There had to be a hierarchy, a clear balance of authority and power.

He hadn't tried anything like it himself, but he'd seen it—how, despite despising his parents, he struggled to see them as anything but omnipotent, even though he knew perfectly well that wasn't the case.

And now, with three people he knew all too well he'd be a fool to trust, he had to make their roles clear and show them what it might cost to oppose him.

He sat on the last stair leading to the second-floor branches while the rest stood below, looking up at him; a quiet implication of superiority he intended.

*"This is the arc of the Bookkeeper, the one you are to serve and obey."* He paused for a moment. *"Why must you? That's an answer I'll leave to you. Find it yourself."*

With that said, he didn't want them to serve him just because they were bound to, but because they chose to. Just like his parents had used his desire for vengeance to exploit his weaknesses, driving him to work even harder for them by his own volition.

*"It goes without saying that each of you stands to gain something from this."* He stood up and began descending the stairs. *"My enemies are many, and your help, your devotion, is needed."*

He gestured at Leo. *"Leo, every single book in here holds knowledge, ancient and modern magic, the forbidden, and the basic."* He smirked. *"They're all yours to read. But you report to me whenever you find something interesting."*

Leo's eyes widened as he dropped his luggage and hurried down the walkway to his right.

*"Aeris, I'd like you to investigate the Dawnbringers for me. And while you're at it, look into the elders as well—since the poison won't do much more than give them a running stomach."*

Aeris's expression darkened as she gestured with her hands. "Those people are very powerful..." She paused, nervousness and fear lacing her voice. "They might kill me."

Raiden finally stepped in front of her. *"If you're caught, right?"* he said, tilting toward her with a falsely warm smile. *"Trust me; you won't be."*

Aeris remained motionless, still perplexed, as Raiden gestured for Levi to follow him and walked out through the mansion.

They walked toward a grassy field, where paved paths stretched out on both sides. At the center stood a fountain, quietly flowing. A long glance revealed a vast forest stretching endlessly. They were truly in the middle of nowhere.

Levi glanced back at the mansion. "Whoa, it looks even more massive from out here."

He had already been informed by King Hannes about the illusion magic, one that expanded the size and altered the exterior to resemble a five-story gothic cathedral. So Raiden barely glanced at it, instead tapping Levi on the shoulder, snapping him out of his daze.

*"I want you to follow Aeris. Wherever she goes, stay on her tail."* His eyes narrowed. *"I only want intel on the Dawnbringers and the elders. Whether she betrays me or not, keep it to yourself."*

Levi narrowed his eyes, gently brushing back his ponytailed hair. "Are you sure about this?"

Raiden gave him a nod, and with that, Levi vanished from sight and circled back toward the house. Raiden let out a sigh and tilted his head upward.

To him, Aeris was bound to betray him—because when a person's motivation is money, they follow wherever it calls. And he had no intention of letting her become the center of his problems.

After standing outside for a while, his head tilted slightly upward as he stared into the sky. His expression dimmed—an uneasy feeling settling in, a faint tingling not unlike his danger detection, though far lighter.

He took a moment to scan his surroundings, eyes narrowing, but after a while, Raiden let out a sigh and decided to let it go. He turned and headed back inside.

Now that everyone was occupied, the moment he stepped into the living room, he called for Ash. She was still seated on the stairs, but the moment he spoke, she hurried to him.

*"We have to finish what King Hannes asked, Ash."*

Ash nodded and gave him a light nudge.

Raiden walked forward, taking the walkway to the left of the staircase. Ahead, Leo stood with sparkles in his eyes, shifting eagerly from one book to another. But Raiden barely spared him a glance. After a few paces down the tunnel-like corridor, he turned into the second room on his right.

The room was opulent, styled in a classical design likely inspired by Greco-Roman architecture and aesthetics. Tall, ornate columns, dark with gold embellishments, lined the space, supporting a high ceiling and a regal canopy bed.

The room was dominated by luxurious white marble with gold veining, used for the floors, steps, and pedestals. At the center stood a majestic four-poster bed, elevated above the rest of the space. The massive, richly decorated posts supported sheer curtains that draped elegantly around it, and several marble steps led up to the bed.

A gentle warmth filled the room, radiating from the crystals and the low, muted light.

He smirked as he looked around—finally, the kind of room he'd enjoy staying in. But he didn't dwell on the excitement for long. Climbing the steps and passing the canopy, he moved toward the wall behind the bed.

With a slight shift of the bed frame, the wall collapsed and slid to the left, revealing a hidden room; one that closely resembled the chamber where the Book of Ashes was kept.

At its center sat a replica of the chest.

He took a deep breath, scratching his dark hair. *"This is where you come in, Ash."*

Ash gave a nod, leaped to the floor, and began to grow in size.

*"The book has already released enough dark energy into the previous room,"* he said, gesturing toward a switch on the wall.

*"Flipping this will teleport this chest into that room and the real one into here."*

He scratched his head again. "We're out of stickers, so he has to be faster than the teleportation; fast enough to stop the dark energy from leaking into this room."

He turned to Ash with a concerned expression. *"Do you get me, Ash?"*

[Yes, Papa.] She gave a nod.

Raiden took a deep breath—a long one—as nervousness crept in.

*"On three, Ash."*

[Okay, Papa.]

One.

Two.

Three.

Raiden pulled the switch inside the room, and at the same moment, Ash pushed the bed back into place. But Raiden had to move with lightning speed to keep the wall from smashing his hand.

Ash immediately shrank, and Raiden gave a confident smile. *"We did it, Ash..."*

However, the smile on his face dimmed in an instant, the sensation he'd felt earlier was growing denser.

Still, he wore a faint smile and picked Ash up, and she nudged him with one of her own.

*"Let's go train a little while we wait for the others."*

*Chapter 18: Sense of Danger*

**[ALERT]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL- 5/100 XP.**

**MANA CONTROL: 15**

**DRAGON MANA POOL: 205/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 160**

**STAMINA: 160**

**DRAGON AURA: 25**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 1**

**—Swordsmanship: 70%**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 102%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 2.**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**—Name: [LEVI]**

**—Bond Type: Binding Oath.**

**NEW ABILITIES:**

**—Soul of Dragon: 2%**

**—Invisibility**

**—Others Locked.]**

[Something bad, Papa,] Ash said, watching Raiden with her puppy eyes.

Raiden dropped to his knees and pulled her into his arms, holding her close to his chest. His expression was calm and reassuring as he tried to comfort Ash. He had been feeling something similar earlier—subtle, not strong enough to act on. But now, he was somewhat certain.

He gave Ash a faint smile. *"You think so?"*

They stood in the center of their new training room. The walls were lined with bookshelves, but with the flip of a switch, they revealed the weapons needed for their training. The space was dimly lit, the ceiling painted with the soft glow of thousands of star-like lights—just like the tunnel-like corridors that led to it.

*"It's getting late, Ash,"* Raiden said as he began walking out of the room with her in his arms. *"I don't think the others will be coming anytime soon... and I'm very tired."*

He let out a yawn.

The moment he stepped out of the room, he bumped into Leo.

"Sorry, Raiden," Leo said, brushing a hand through his white hair awkwardly.

Raiden stood still, watching him, wondering what it was that Leo was struggling so much to say.

"It was getting late, so I prepared something for us," Leo said with an awkward smile.

Raiden began to walk past him. *"Nice... let us have a bite then."*

They both began walking to the living room, Leo going on and on about the magic spells he'd read and was eager to try. Raiden, however, was lost in thought—the feeling he'd had earlier now felt closer than before, yet he still couldn't sense any real danger. It was nothing more than instinct... a gut feeling.

Still, they headed behind the staircase and through a door that led to a massive hall housing both the kitchen and the dining room, its design matching the style of the rest of the interior.

They took their seats and got served, but Leo kept going on about the spells. Wanting to clear his mind a little, Raiden joined in, offering the occasional nod and "aha." Before long, they were done, and both Raiden and Ash returned to their room upstairs—opposite the fake storeroom that hid the book.

The room was essentially a replica of the one downstairs, though this one was decorated with small statues scattered around.

The moment he entered, he hurled himself onto the bed with Ash. *"Let's sleep, Ash..."* he mumbled, placing her on the other side of the bed as he yawned, his eyes heavy with drowsiness.

*"I don't think whatever it is is close... or even has any killing intent."* He gave her a faint smile as sleep slowly overtook him.

[Okay, Papa,] Ash said as she watched Raiden abruptly fall asleep. She sat there for a while, her blue puppy eyes fixed on his slumbering face.

The concern and fear in her gaze were unmistakable. But soon, she wore a warm smile, snuggled up close to Raiden, and drifted off to sleep.

Before long, an electric sensation shot through their bodies at the same time, jolting them both to their feet.

[Something bad,] Papa, she whispered softly, her voice barely audible.

Raiden felt it too; this time, he could sense the danger. His heartbeat quickened as he swallowed nervously, sweat forming on his forehead. For something to make Ash this paranoid... it could only mean one thing: whoever—or whatever—it was, they were far stronger. And he might be in real trouble.

Still, he put on a mask for Ash. *"Don't worry, Ash,"* he said, gently patting her head. *"Let's go check it out."*

They both began leaving the room, but Raiden's heart wouldn't stop pounding, faster with each passing second. Still, he steeled himself and grabbed his sword. Yet as they neared the entrance, the feeling grew more intense, causing Ash to hesitate.

Raiden knelt beside her on the floor, gently brushing his hand over her scales. *"If you're scared, you can stay, Ash,"* he said, wearing that same masked expression. *"I'll handle him. Don't worry..."*

He rose to his feet and began walking toward the entrance, taking slow, steady breaths as he gripped his sword tightly.

The moment he opened the door to the outside, he saw a man dressed in cream. His silver hair was gently brushed back, giving him an elegant and confident appearance. He sat by the fountain, one leg casually crossed over the other, a cigar resting between his lips.

*"Gold Crest? Have I really gotten to that point?"* he muttered, worry evident in his eyes.

The majority of Gold Crest bearers worked in organized packs, like guilds unto themselves, and the select few who remained independent either served the kingdoms directly, had consumed the devil's milk, or had perished. So to face a gold crest bearer in this moment only compounded his troubles.

Raiden swallowed nervously as he approached him. The man's presence was overwhelming, his aura radiated gold.

Raiden's mind raced, running through every possible way to avoid certain death if intimidation didn't work. But after a long moment, he let out a quiet sigh.

*"I wouldn't know if I don't try, would I?"* he muttered, then quickly shifted into a cold, blunt expression. Raising his sword and resting it on his shoulder, he began to take careful steps toward the man.

After taking a few steps closer, Raiden paused, putting some distance between them. In that instant, the man turned to him, feigning surprise, as if he hadn't sensed Raiden's presence all along.

"Hey... you're here," he said with a smile, his voice tender and calm.

Raiden narrowed his eyes slightly. *"What do you want, old man?"* he asked, his tone bold and unmistakably threatening.

"Come on," the man said with a playful smile. "Do I really look that old?" He gave himself a quick glance. "I'm only 24... I thought I looked young, and kinda hot, honestly."

Raiden let out a sigh, his voice growing bolder. "What do you want?"

The way he said it, firm, unwavering, made it clear to anyone listening: there wasn't a trace of fear in him, and it wasn't a question he intended to repeat.

But beneath the mask stood a trembling boy.

The man's eyes narrowed, and his expression abruptly turned cold.

"I want the book," he said, his words firm, clear, and without room for negotiation.

Raiden smirked. *"You really think I'll just hand it over to you?"*

His smile widened. *"Come get it, old man."*

The man smirked as well, pulled the cigar from his lips, and tossed it to the ground, crushing it under his heel.

"Just as I'd expect from the Bookkeeper..."

He began to take slow, steady steps forward, while Raiden remained perfectly still.

"By the way," he said, "my name is Mack."

*Chapter 19: Silence Domain*

Raiden remained motionless, trembling in his boots as he watched Mack close in on him. Their eyes locked while Mack rolled up his sleeves. Raiden just stood there, his sword resting on his shoulder, his masked expression unshaken.

The moment he got a few steps closer to Raiden, he paused and smirked. Raiden narrowed his eyes slightly, trying to make sense of his intent as he watched Mack clap his hands and whisper, "Silence Domain."

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In an instant, the golden aura radiating from him vanished, drawn from his body as it surged outward, circling around them and forming a spherical barrier.

Raiden's expression darkened; he couldn't hear a thing, not even his own breath or heartbeat. He reached out to touch the barrier but couldn't push through.

He narrowed his eyes and turned to Mack, who seemed to be saying something, but he heard nothing. Raiden smirked, a faint sparkle flickering in his eyes.

*"If this is all he can do," he burst into laughter, gripping the hilt of his sword tightly. "There has to be more to this Silence Domain; if not, then you're not outmatching me in raw strength."*

However, Mack smirked and gestured toward the floor, and Raiden suddenly felt a crushing force drag down on him. His hands and sword were yanked downward by an invisible weight. Gritting his teeth, he fought to pull them back up, bracing his legs and pressing against the floor, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't lift it. Not even a little.

Raiden tilted his head toward him. *"He controls everything within it?"* He tried releasing the sword, and to his surprise, his hand let go with ease. *"So... no sound, no weapons..."*

He rose to his feet while Mack stood there, acting cocky, as if he wanted Raiden to witness the full extent of his domain. Raiden took a deep breath and exhaled, even though he couldn't hear a sound.

He scoffed. *"Let's get this over with, buddy..."*

Without wasting a moment, he dashed forward. As soon as he was within range, he swung, but Mack dodged with a smile.

Raiden narrowed his eyes. Testing his limits, he launched another strike. When that too was avoided, he used the momentum to fuel a second blow with his other hand, but Mack sidestepped it just as easily, smirking all the while.

Mack moved toward Raiden's sword, widening the distance between them. He picked it up effortlessly, as if it wasn't the same weapon Raiden had struggled with.

Pride gleamed in his eyes as he watched Raiden clench his fists in frustration. Then, he dropped the sword to the floor. Raiden began to sweat.

At that moment, Raiden realized he'd been wrong. His body trembled as he swallowed nervously, over and over. Mack didn't even seem interested in fighting. Instead, he outstretched his arms with a smirk. Raiden heard nothing, but he understood the message perfectly.

"This is my domain, and everything within it belongs to me."

And that terrified him. It made everything worse. He stood frozen, unable to move; his only hope was to beg his body to respond, to do something.

*"He's a 7... just like Levi. So how?"*

The fear on his face was undeniable now.

However, Mack's expression suddenly darkened. He gestured toward Raiden while touching the tip of his finger; within an instant, a small golden orb formed at his fingertip.

Before Raiden could make sense of it, the glowing sphere shot forward, slamming into his ribs. The impact sent him crashing to the floor, and he felt the sharp crack of breaking bone. Gritting his teeth, he lay there, fighting the urge to scream.

*"Should I play dead?"* he thought, crawling weakly across the floor, desperate to find a way out. But before he could get far, Mack was already closing in.

Raiden could tell he was saying something, but he couldn't hear a thing. He wasn't going to act tough. He wasn't ready to die. So he lay there, still, forcing himself to breathe slowly as he silently berated himself for never getting rid of this disease.

*Why?*—he thought, again and again, each time accompanied by a surge of pain and guilt in his chest.

The next thing he felt was something heavy pressing down on his back, so heavy it felt like it was trying to drive a hole through him.

This time, he screamed in agony. It wasn't just the crushing weight concentrated on a single point along his spine; it was sharp, too, like the tip of a sword slowly piercing into him.

Raiden couldn't move—not even to crawl away. He just lay there, his face turning crimson as he slowly ran out of breath.

Mack, however, deactivated his domain and leaned over Raiden's broken form on the floor. "It's not your fault," he whispered into his ear, just as Raiden hovered on the edge of passing out from the pain alone. "I'm just that powerful."

He rose to his feet. "What's on your back is my technique, Thousand Swords," he said with a smirk. "I usually strike it at people's skulls. Kills them instantly."

He leaned back toward Raiden with a smirk. "However, you are pretty, just like me. So, give me the book... and I'll let you go."

Raiden wasn't the kind of person to abandon his duty. Once a task was assigned to him, he made sure it was done, and done well. But in that instant, his priority wasn't

keeping the book safe. It was surviving. Getting back to his world. And if he died here, that dream would shatter.

At that moment, he was willing to give up the book, but he wasn't a fool. He tilted his head toward Mack.

*"Fuck you..."* he muttered through the agony. *"Free me first."*

Mack smirked, but before he could respond, Leo burst out of nowhere, sprinting forward and hurling himself at Mack, just enough to touch him.

Raiden's eyes lit up, even as pain threatened to consume him. He managed a weak smile as he watched Mack begin to float, panic and confusion flashing in his eyes.

However, before Mack could reactivate his domain, Ash dashed in, her body suddenly growing to nearly ten times its size. With a powerful swing of her tail, she struck Mack hard, sending him flying high into the sky.

Ash shrank back to her normal size instantly, and she and Leo rushed toward Raiden, whose smile was already beginning to fade.

[Are you okay, Papa?] Ash asked, her eyes filled with concern and guilt.

Raiden gave her a faint smile, though the pain was now unbearable.

However, Leo stared at the Thousand Blades, more a golden orb than an actual blade. "I think I can nullify its weight," he said.

Ash turned to him and began nodding. Leo smiled at her, gave a nod in return, then braced himself and reached out to touch the orb, immediately beginning to float.

The moment it lifted, a wave of relief surged through Raiden's body, like plunging into an icy bath. But the comfort didn't last. Pain flared through his ribs and spine at once, sharp and unforgiving, forcing his eyes shut and his fists to clench.

*That hurts*—he thought.

As he lay there, trying to process the pain, Leo helped him up, though the effort only made it worse. Still, Raiden managed to keep a somewhat calm expression.

[Sorry, Papa,] Ash's words echoed softly in Raiden's mind.

Leo touched the orb once more, deactivating the nullification. The moment it hit the ground, it crashed through the pavement, leaving a hole the exact size of the orb.

"We need to heal your wounds, Raiden," Leo said firmly.

## Chapter 20: Fear

Fear rules those who submit to it, stripping them of everything, yet those who rule fear are the ones who possess it all.

With all his experience and deep understanding of fear, he should have been the one to master it—one of the few who do, if not the very best. But here he was, lying in bed, bandages wrapped tight around his ribcage, holding him together, just barely.

Fear, his greatest tool and his most formidable foe.

*"I need to get rid of this damn disease once and for all,"* he muttered, shifting on the bed.

But the pain wasn't letting up. Not even close.

At that moment, Leo and Ash walked into the room, carrying potions in their hands.

"It's been four days, and Aeris still isn't back. What's going on?" Leo asked as he stepped closer to the bed.

Raiden shrugged. It was a question that had been gnawing at him too these past few days, but there was nothing he could do, and he wasn't about to waste energy stressing over it.

However, just as Raiden reached for the potion, the door creaked open. It was Levi, a smirk tugging at his lips as he casually flipped a dagger between his fingers.

Raiden narrowed his eyes, watching him saunter in. Then, without sparing him another glance, he drank the potion. That smirk alone was enough; something interesting was coming.

"Where have you been?" Leo asked, his voice edged with concern.

But Levi didn't answer. Instead, he turned to Leo and said, "Give us a moment."

Leo, clearly perplexed, turned to Raiden, but Raiden just gave him a small nod, silently telling him to go along with it.

Raiden tried to sit upright, but the pain in his ribs alone was enough to pin him down.

Levi, catching the unmistakable agony in his expression, spoke up.

"What happened to you?"

Raiden stayed still, watching him in silence. It wasn't out of arrogance or some calculated move, he just didn't see the point in answering.

"You look dead..." Levi sneered, leaning casually against the canopy.

*"Where's Aeris?"* Raiden leaned slightly toward Levi, gritting his teeth as he adjusted his leg. *"I want her to heal me..."*

But before Levi could respond, Aeris walked in, a sore expression on her face as she nervously played with her fingers.

Raiden let out a silent scoff; her face said it all. She had little to say.

*"Can you heal me, Aeris?"* he asked, gesturing to his ribs. *"The pain is unbearable..."*

She hesitated, frozen for a moment. But something in the softness of his words seemed to break through the fog.

"Sure..." she murmured, quickly moving to his side.

The moment her hands touched him, Raiden spoke.

*"Care to tell me what happened?"* he asked, feeling the pain in his ribs begin to ease.

"Oh, right," she said, glancing at Raiden.

"The elders didn't eat the meal. The servants did, and they were the ones who got poisoned."

Raiden shot her a skeptical look, doubt written clearly across his face.

Aeris met his gaze without flinching.

"Trust me," she said quietly. "I did it. I put the poison in the meal."

Raiden smirked and gave her a small nod, not because he believed her, but just enough to keep her talking.

"I only managed to get near the Dawnbreakers' home once, and even then, I didn't hear anything," she said.

She finally pulled her hands away as the healing ended, and for the first time, Raiden let out a smile of relief. The pain had faded to almost nothing.

"However, I did get the chance to speak with a friend who finances one of the Dawnbreakers," Aeris continued.

Raiden rose to his feet. Her words reached him, distant and muffled; he heard them, just wasn't paying them much attention.

All he focused on was the calm, the quiet satisfaction of finally standing after three days.

"The Dawnbreakers want the book too."

Raiden finally turned to her, concern flickering across his face. Then he let out a slow sigh.

"They want to steal it, and since it'll be their family tasked with retrieving it for the kingdom, they'll use that opportunity to claim the duty of Bookkeeper for themselves."

Raiden smirked, rubbing his forehead.

The moment he heard that his plan to build a hideout had not only been anticipated, but already executed, he knew he was in deep trouble. And he'd been right.

A soft, almost amused laugh slipped from his lips.

*"So this house is literally an execution ground, for me, the entire Night bloodline."*

His laughter deepened, but it faded just as quickly. He began pacing, moving from the wall to the canopy, back and forth.

He had to get rid of his fear; he knew that much. If he didn't, it would be his undoing.

But even that thought terrified him. A shiver ran through his body as his hands absently brushed through his dark hair.

After a few moments, Raiden stopped pacing and took a deep breath. A faint smile touched his lips as he turned to Aeris.

*"Why are you only showing up now?"*

She hesitated, the words catching in her throat.

"Uh..." she paused, eyes darting away.

"Uhm... I had to take care of my family for a while."

He gave her a firm nod, the weight of everything settling in. It was time to bring everyone together.

*"Can you get me, Ash and Leo?... We need to talk."*

Aeris seemed surprised that Raiden didn't press the matter, but a quick smile followed.

"Okay, I'll get them," she said, then turned and walked out of the room.

"She wasn't lying," Levi said as he settled onto the bed, "but that wasn't the whole truth either."

Raiden barely spared him a glance. His eyes stayed fixed on the door, mind spiraling around the one thing that gripped him most: fear.

Should he just become so strong that no one could stand above him?

It was the only idea that made sense to him... yet he knew it didn't make sense at all.

"We'll talk about that later," he muttered.

"Okay..." Levi said, settling more comfortably on the bed as he watched Raiden stand motionless, eyes locked on a single spot, completely lost in thought.

"You do know you could easily form an army, right?"

His words fell on deaf ears, not because Raiden didn't hear him, but because forming an army, only to be the weakest among them, was the last thing he'd ever do.

At that moment, the others walked in. Ash rushed straight to him, and the instant Raiden saw her, his eyes widened.

"How could I forget..." he murmured, a big smile spreading across his face. "All you ever asked me was to get stronger."

He scooped Ash into his arms.

[Yes, Papa,] she said softly, nudging against him.

Raiden's expression darkened the moment he glanced at the others.

"This mansion is a trap..."

Leo's face shifted instantly, his gaze darting quickly between the others. But each of them looked unbothered.

*"I don't know if King Hannes is involved,"* Raiden said, his voice steady but laced with concern, *"but I believe we were brought here for one reason: to be killed."*

He locked eyes with Leo.

*"It's no secret anymore. The masses already know where we are."*

Raiden gently patted Ash's back, the motion a quiet release of his growing anxiety.

*"It's safe to assume each one of you is a target..."* he said, his gaze steady.

Confusion deepened in Leo's eyes, but before he could speak, Raiden continued.

*"Don't worry. Once you're under me, I'll protect you with my life, if it comes to that."*

His voice was calm, unwavering. He meant every word.

*"However, you all have a part to play too..."* he paused, his voice firm.

*"We're at war, and the victory won't just be ours, but the kingdom's. That's why we all need to get stronger."*

His eyes narrowed as they swept across their faces.

*"Not just in strength, but in every weapon we've got."*

Leo's expression finally lightened, filled with renewed motivation as he gave a firm nod.

Aeris kept her eyes on the floor, silent, while Levi lay on the bed, absentmindedly flipping a dagger between his fingers.

Raiden smirked.

*"Leo, I want you to retrieve the mana realm for Rank 8 to 7."*

Leo nodded again, just as firmly.

He turned his head toward Levi.

*"Levi, I want you to duel with them, again and again, until they can finally defeat you."*

The fear in his voice, just from giving the command, was unmistakable.

Aeris finally lifted her gaze to Raiden.

"I want to get you more information... from home," she said quietly.

Raiden stared at her for a moment. He could tell Aeris wanted a way out. But he needed to know why.

*"We'll discuss yours later," he said, his voice calm but firm. "For now, just be here to heal and train."*

Aeris's eyes dropped to the floor again, shifting nervously.

Raiden kept his gaze on her, then let out a smirk.