

# The Bookkeeper

## #Chapter 2: Unknown Call 2 - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 2: Unknown Call 2

### *Chapter 2: Unknown Call 2*

Jack stood before six elders covered in black robes seated behind a high counter, roughly twice his height. In the middle was the highest seat—slightly elevated above the others—reserved for the King.

His head tilted slightly upward as he stared at them from a distance, with Captain Kai—the captain of the knights—standing right beside him.

"The fate of this realm depends on how well we protect our book. Two of the books have already been stolen, posing a great threat to ours. But even so, we must do our part and safeguard it," one of the elders said.

"If we fail, we fail not only the gods and our fellow kingdoms, but the Kingdom of Persia itself," another elder warned.

"What use is our title as the kingdom of education and wisdom if we can't put it to good use?"

"I suggest we find a more suitable family to take care of the book."

In an instant, most of the elders began mumbling among themselves, which only irritated Jack further.

He cared little about whether the book was protected or not—but now, caught in the situation, he had to act. Often, Jack preferred to remain silent, but when it mattered, he didn't hesitate to speak up.

"*What do you mean?*" His voice echoed across the room as everyone turned to look. Captain Kai tapped him on the shoulder, signaling him to stop—but Jack didn't even spare him a glance.

"How dare you speak without permission?" one of the elders shouted, slamming his fists onto the counter in anger.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he stared at the elders.

*"The book is safe, isn't it? I did my part to protect it—that was my duty. But stopping assassins from getting into the capital, and into the most secure room in the palace? That's not my responsibility."*

The elders began to mumble among themselves once more, while King Hannes remained silent, simply observing. Captain Kai grew more irritated with every word Jack spoke but forced an awkward smile to mask his emotions.

"None of you can even tell which one is the real book."

He raised the book he had been holding all this time and opened it, their eyes widening in fear.

*"This isn't the book... and yet you want to judge me for doing my job, right?"*

The elders began to murmur more loudly, pointing fingers at Jack for being disrespectful and insulting the King. But he simply stood there—unamused, unashamed.

He didn't regret what he said. Raiden had done his job, and Jack was only standing up for him. Once he got out of there, he would start looking for a way back to his own world. He had unfinished business to take care of now.

"Silence!" King Hannes commanded, and the noise in the room instantly ceased.

"The Night family has been entrusted with protecting the Book of Ashes for centuries.

Many have given their lives to keep it safe—including Tiago Night. May his soul rest with the gods."

He paused briefly, letting his words settle before locking eyes with Jack.

"As we all know, this isn't the first time the four Books of the Devourer have been hunted—and we can be certain it won't be the last. Even so, the Night family has always stood proud in their duty to protect the book.

To take that responsibility from them now would be an insult to their sacrifices—and an insult to us as a kingdom. It would mean we failed to uphold our promise to trust them."

The anger on some of the elders' faces, as they stared at Jack. It wasn't the kind an elder shows to a disobedient child—it was pure hatred. Whatever their motives were, their hostility was aimed at either Raiden or the Night family itself.

"However, the fate of the world depends entirely on how well we protect our book. We cannot rely on pride alone—and Raiden Night has yet to show the strength to match his determination for this duty."

Captain Kai smirked proudly as he glanced at Jack over his shoulder.

"For the last time, Raiden Night will be given the opportunity to prove his strength. He has four months. If, by then, his crest isn't at least rank eight or lower, we will strip him of his title as the bookkeeper and appoint a new one."

"Eight is too high, my lord. The assassins are said to be below eight," Captain Kai said, his fists clenched and legs slightly trembling—the uneasiness in his voice unmistakable.

King Hannes simply turned to him.

"You're a number 6, aren't you? Then do your job, and his number won't matter."

He slammed his fist onto the counter, and in that instant, three of the elders did the same.

"Then it's settled," the King said as he rose to his feet—and the elders followed.

Jack remained still, silently watching as the King and elders exited the room. The moment they were gone, Captain Kai stepped forward, ready to threaten him, but Jack simply turned and walked away.

His pride was stained as he began following Jack, but Jack was too lost in thought to even catch up to his words. The moment he left the courtroom, he turned to his left and began climbing the stairs.

He was trying to make sense of everything—from his mission to his home—searching for anything that could make it all feel real, or at least make sense.

*Did that old woman poison me with her touch? Or was it my parents...?*

*Because why else would I be in hell?*

Jack never believed in superstitions. He was born and raised as an assassin, surrounded by murderers and powerful people—people who created and destroyed, just like the gods were said to. To him, anyone could be a god.

But this... this wasn't something he had ever seen anyone do. And the only way it made any sense to him was that he was in hell.

He continued toward the library once more, this time with a clearer mind, hoping to find some clue—anything that might explain what exactly had killed him.

But just before he could enter, someone called out to him.

He turned—and immediately recognized her. It was Raiden's mother, Yara Night. She had long dark hair and piercing dark eyes, and wore a black luxurious medieval tunic. Beside her stood Raiden's tutor, Aeris Vilya, dressed in a brown suit and blue trousers with blonde hair. She was three years older than him.

In an instant, they closed the distance. Yara pulled him into a hug, while he wore a barely concealed look of disgust.

Both began acting concerned—bombarding him with questions about the attack, their voices laced with worry.

"Your shirt is stained with blood; where's the wound?" Yaya asked, her voice filled with concern.

But Jack remained unfazed by their act. In truth, he found it all a bit uncomfortable. Still, he stood motionless, refusing to answer a single question they threw at him.

*"Can you excuse me for a moment?"* he asked.

Their expressions darkened with confusion as if the very idea of him making such a request was unheard of—unnatural, even.

He didn't wait for a response. He simply turned and walked into the library.

Without wasting a second, he began scanning the floor—searching for something, anything... a sign that he had actually died.

But on the reflective brown floor, there was only blood—and a key Raiden had pushed beneath one of the shelves. It was the key to where the original Book of Ashes was stored.

Golden and surprisingly heavy for a key, Jack gripped it tightly before slipping it into his pocket.

He sank to the floor with a heavy sigh, massaging his forehead as he tried to think.

"It can't end like this... they can't win," he muttered, his voice low with frustration.

In a burst of exhaustion and helplessness, he pulled at his hair, trying to steady himself.

He reached for his neck, fingers brushing over the blue crest.

*"My parents wouldn't use something as cowardly as poison to kill me,"* he muttered. *"It had to be that woman... that old lady who tapped my shoulder. She poisoned me—somehow."*

*But how? How did she know exactly what poison to use?"*

Each thought pushed him deeper into frustration—so much so, he felt the urge to tear his very bones from his flesh.

He was immune to more than 70% of known poisons. For someone to have used the one that worked... they either knew him intimately or got incredibly lucky.

*"How did she even get that close to me?... I've never seen anything like it, not even from my father,"* he muttered, exhaling sharply.

*"I never knew there was magic in hell. But here I am.*

*And if I can get here... then I can damn well find a way back."*

His expression darkened as he slammed his fist into the ground.

*"I'm going back—no matter what.*

*And I'll kill them.*

*They must pay."*

Just then, the door creaked open—it was Aeris.

"Who are you talking to, kid?" he asked.

Jack's expression darkened further, his eyes narrowing like a growl beneath the surface.

*"I thought I asked to be alone..."*

Aeris paused for a moment and raised her hands. "Whoa, relax." She walked over and sat by him.

Jack simply turned away, his gaze sinking to the floor, hands resting heavily on his knees.

"I know you don't have a yellow or gold crest like most of your ancestors—and sure, magic can do just about anything in this world—but come on... you graduated from the most prestigious university in the world, the Persian University, at just seventeen. That's no small feat."

Aeris got a little closer.

"Just be a little athletic again. Hit number eight. That's all they're asking."

Jack's eyes suddenly widened, as if a breathtaking realization had just struck him.

"Yes," he breathed, eyes sparkling with relief and renewed hope.

*"Yes, magic!"*

Aeris looked puzzled. "Uhm... what's that supposed to do?"

*"If I get stronger in magic, I can go back!"*

Jack said, pride shining in his eyes as he stared right at her, as if she already understood.

"Okayyy..." she replied, unsure.

*"Let's start training."*

Without hesitation, he shot to his feet.

"I like your enthusiasm—especially since this is the first time I've seen you this happy about getting stronger," she said, her voice tinged with genuine confusion.

"As your tutor, my payment depends on continuing to train you, and that's important to me..." she paused, then asked, "But... what's really going on?"

Without a single word, Jack took the lead out of the room. Aeris sighed, still confused, before following him.

After his realization, Jack cared less about who or what killed him. If magic could really do anything, then all he had to do was what he'd always done—get stronger, so he could return and finish his mission.

### *Chapter 3: Mana*

Jack and Aeris sat in the middle of the training room as Aeris guided him on how to relax his muscles and feel his mana core. The warmth in the room and the soft glow of the white lanterns gave their session a mood.

"This is the most important part of each person's magic possession." She opened her eyes slightly to see Jack still deep in meditation, a little smile playing on his lips. Seeing this, she smiled too and let her eyes drift closed again.

The memory of Raiden being perpetually stuck on this exercise flashed through Jack's mind, making him bite back a laugh at how pathetic that seemed.

"To possess any ability or maintain it, managing your mana core and increasing your mana pool is paramount. Try to sense it within you, pulsing like a heartbeat. Yes, it is the very heart of your magic."

Jack remained quiet. Meditation sessions were familiar territory for him—in fact, they were the only training he'd ever found enjoyable. This would be simple enough as he absorbed Aeris' words.

"Feel your mana..."

Jack nodded, and slowly Aeris' voice became distant as he turned his attention to his heartbeat. An hour passed in concentration, yet he still couldn't feel his core. He plunged deeper into himself until he could sense his heartbeat in every extremity, even his toes, but his mana core remained elusive.

"It is getting late... you need to return to the library and protect the book," Aeris said, gently drawing Jack out of his trance.

Jack looked at her with bewilderment, then glanced back at his shoulder. Aeris seemed genuinely afraid of just the look he'd given her. Where he came from, interrupting meditation could cost someone their life. Seeing her cautious reaction, the reality of her words hit him with the force of a gut punch.

He rose silently, stepped outside the door, turned right, and headed for the library through the stairwell. The palace's design ensured that wherever the bookkeeper might be, getting to the library was always straightforward—corridors throughout the building were specifically laid out to lead there.

The moment Jack left the room, however, his steps became sluggish as his mind raced. If he wanted to reclaim his life soon, he couldn't put all his faith in Aeris alone. He started digging through Raiden's memories about the mana crest.

But unfortunately, he could only access fragments of those memories. Nothing came through clearly.

*There has to be something written in those notes on his desk.*

Finally picking up his pace, he entered the library and systematically examined every sheet on the desk. The majority contained Raiden's personal regrets, which served no purpose for Jack. He tossed page after page aside until at last he found something useful.

Raiden had studied numericals—analysis and statistics discipline—at Persian University. However, as the sole heir of the Night family, he'd been taught languages from childhood to enhance communication and formal protocols befitting high-class nobility.

So what Raiden had written on the sheets was in fragments of various languages—everything except Persian. Even so, Jack could read it all as easily as if he'd written it himself.

*"Interesting... he understood everything theoretically but just couldn't put it into practice,"* Jack smirked, cleared the desk, and sat on it as he began to meditate.

Just as Aeris had said, the mana core was no different from the heart—exactly what Raiden had written, but with far more detail. This helped Jack understand it better, and with that clarity, he knew exactly how to approach it: through his own way of understanding.

Jack let his body relax completely again, from the crown of his head to the tips of his toes. Everything settled as his heartbeat resonated through his entire being, synchronized with the rhythm of his blood.

Whether killed by magic, stabbed through the heart, shot in the head, or crushed by broken bones, death was always confirmed the same way—by the heart.

And if anyone knew precisely what stopped a heart and could recognize when it no longer beats, it was him. But in this instant, he was preparing to do the complete opposite of what he'd been born to do: resurrect a dead heart.

Raiden had always believed his core was beyond repair—seventeen years of neglect had dimmed it because of his cowardice, and his inability to push himself athletically. As Jack saw it, the core was effectively dead and would need to be brought back to life.

After listening to his heartbeat echo through his body for some time, Jack began to tune into the silence that existed within the chaos.

He remembered his father, Jake Grim's teaching: "Before any trigger is pulled, before any blade strikes, a moment of silence passes." This wisdom had been meant to help him truly know his weapons and develop an unbreakable bond.

Jack used this same approach. Between his heart's rapid beats was silence, and he listened to those quiet intervals while directing all his focus to his chest where the core lay dormant.

Just as there's silence before a firing pin strikes, he mentally recreated that split-second moment repeatedly. And in that brief space—like the spark generated when a striker contacts gunpowder in a cartridge—he kept producing those same sparks over and over.

Jack's body began to perspire as he maintained his position, but he dove so deeply into concentration that his surroundings ceased to exist. A thousand assassins could have struck him down without his knowledge. Yet his determination never wavered.



Though his current approach was failing, surrender wasn't in his nature—that relentless drive had always been his strength as an assassin. He would keep trying until he got it right, just like every mission before.

Nearly six hours passed with Jack sitting in perfect stillness, only his quiet breathing indicating he lived. Then, at last, he began to feel tiny sparks—reminiscent of that split second when a firework first ignites.

The instant he felt those sparks, his motivation surged. He gave himself over more fully to the silence, stretching his imagination to create what felt like veins of quietude—conduits that would strengthen the chain reaction and make it catch fire more quickly.

He persisted for nearly two hours more until at last, it occurred. Something sparked to life inside him, causing chills to ripple through his body, inside and out. A blue light appeared—tinier even than a lighter's flame.

It flickered exactly like a flame, dimming whenever Jack's concentration wavered and brightening when he refocused. At this point, it was like trying to light a fire in windy conditions—the flame had to be shielded from the wind to grow.

So Jack refused to emerge from his deep meditative state until the fire was strong enough to withstand any disturbance.

Like a devoted monk, he maintained his position without moving. The morning dissolved into the afternoon. Both his mother, Yara, and Aeris came to check on him, yet he remained perfectly still in that same place, waiting for his core to kindle into a strong enough flame.

Soon, his body started to give out. Jack had endured weeks without food or water many times before, making this seem like it should be simple. But Raiden's body was nothing like his—his stomach had begun growling, and even worse, exhaustion was setting in. Jack visibly swayed back and forth; rest had become a necessity.

Still, Jack noticed none of this because his awareness had shifted to a plane far beyond his physical form's reactions.

It wasn't long before he collapsed sideways, slumping onto the desk. Jack felt none of the physical impact, but there was something he couldn't avoid. His senses started to waver and his flawless focus began to crumble.

He felt himself slowly drifting away from the core. He couldn't react, speak, or even form coherent thoughts, though he watched himself fracturing from somewhere far away.

In an instant, he was out cold, slumped over the desk and sleeping as though he hadn't closed his eyes in weeks.

Before long, Jack stirred awake, annoyed at what he might have missed as he attempted to lift his frail body. Yet when he saw how violently he was shaking, weakness coursing through each limb, he realized he needed sustenance before it was too late.

It was well into the night, shortly before dawn would break, but with his stomach growling so insistently, he couldn't afford to ignore it. Leaning on the desk and shelves for balance, he slowly made his way toward the kitchen.

For the first time since transmigrating, Jack found himself in the grand hallway that led guests to the throne room. He knew from Raiden's memories that the palace was over 900,000 square feet, but this was Jack's first actual view of it.

The floor and ceiling alike were adorned with portraits showcasing ancient art, epic battles, and great victories—living history painted on every surface.

White stone, golden details, and lush greenery wove together with cascading flowers. To his right stretched the main corridor toward the entrance, an area that could rival any museum. Flowers bloomed in geometric patterns, punctuated by masterfully carved statues.

*This place was nothing like the hell I'd imagined...*

As he approached the throne entrance, he signaled to a guard in full armor who was standing watch and instructed him to bring him something to eat.

He didn't bother waiting for an answer before spinning around and making his way back to the library. His annoyance was unmistakable—partly from his frail condition, but mostly from how lax the kingdom's security was around the book. He had complaints to make, just not at this moment.

As soon as he returned and positioned himself on the desk, his food arrived within a minute. The moment he finished scarfing it down, he immediately returned to his meditative state.

Luck was on his side—the core remained as he'd left it. But this was still an issue. Similar to how the heart's rhythm could be felt anywhere in the body, the core should have had that same presence, yet its weakness meant it was only perceptible in deep meditative states.

'The most important part of each person's magic,' yet his body was past its prime for this development—others had awakened their cores almost ten years earlier. But this was the hell he deserved, perhaps karma for all his killings.

#### Chapter 4: Summoning

Every drop of blood spilled, every life claimed—each must be paid for in kind. And when many lives are taken by one man's hand, it is only natural to believe that, just as he ended others, those left behind are destined to end him. In the end, he must answer for each life—not by a god's decree, but by the judgment of his own conscience.

Maybe he could make hell into something beautiful after all—but only after returning to his previous life... and maybe dying all over again.

*"As the bookkeeper, I'd like to make a few inquiries. I take my duty very seriously. Whatever the task may be, if it's assigned to me, I make sure it's done—and done well."*

Jack stood before the elders and King Hannes in the courtroom, his head slightly raised, voice firm, and expression unreadable.

*"My current position as the Keeper is rather dull and lacks any sense of seriousness." He paused briefly. "I'd like the library to be rebuilt—with my own apartment inside it. That way, I can live there, carry out my duties, and avoid having to return to my mother."*

The elders exchanged glances among themselves, while King Hannes remained silent.

*"I'd also like a few guards assigned to the library, a training room, and—despite having a kitchen in the apartment—I'll need three meals delivered each day."*

*"Most importantly, I want an apprentice. I get to choose who it is. And finally... my personal free time."*

The elders' reactions were as expected—it was as if Jack's words were an abomination to the kingdom.

King Hannes cleared his throat and seized the moment.

"Ever since the book was entrusted to us by the gods and the Night family was appointed its keeper, every keeper has avoided too much exposure to it.

The only one who ever made similar suggestions was betrayed by his own apprentice—though he was skilled enough to defeat him."

He paused for his words to settle in. "Your claims are valid, considering our current situation, it is the best and safest option for us."

He locked eyes with Jack, who remained motionless—his grey eyes piercing straight into his.

"However, as I've said before, you're not strong enough to protect the book."

"Reach number eight or below, and your request will be granted."

In that moment, Jack could have said much more—but he chose silence, watching as King Hannes slammed his fist onto the counter, followed by all six elders doing the same.

He waited for them to take their leave before heading out. But just before the staircase leading to the library, Aeris was waiting.

"That didn't go as planned," she said, gesturing toward the hallway beside the stairs. *"I can feel my mana. It's not strong, but it's there. So... what's next?"*

Jack cut her off as he followed her lead. Her eyes widened, sparkling with excitement.

"That's impressive... finally." Her grin deepened. "Keep up this level of devotion, and you could really pull it off in four months."

Jack glanced at her cheerful face—she looked as if she were the one who'd achieved the feat. He wasn't fooled. He knew perfectly well she'd be getting extra payment for it.

They walked through the lavish hallway, where every corner felt like a museum. After taking two left turns, they arrived at the training room.

Jack's eyes darted around, his body shifting restlessly from side to side as if he believed something was watching him.

Walking beside him, Aeris's expression darkened.

"What happened to you? You've changed a lot since that day... and worse, you haven't visited your mother even once."

Jack's eyes continued to dart around, paying no mind to Aeris's words. She sighed and walked to the room's entrance. On the left side was a switch—she flipped it.

In an instant, the white interior walls shifted, panels flipping open to reveal racks of armor, weapons, relics, and potions lining every surface. A massive board unfolded to cover an entire wall.

Jack gave the room a second, confused glance before walking toward the wall to his right from the entrance. The board was covered in diagrams, maps, and ancient texts. At its center was the most vital element—four stars arranged in order: white, blue, yellow, and gold—each representing a mana crest.

Jack smirked. The board reminded him of studying with his mother, Jane—those days filled with lessons on the human body and psychology.

"Since you can see your mana core, we're going to put it to the test," Aeris said. She reached for a jar of ash behind Jack and began drawing a magic circle on the floor. Then, from the same shelf, she retrieved a magical seal.

"Each of the crests needs mana to function. And to function properly, you need to sense your mana—only then will the magic move naturally."

Jack finally turned to her.

"However," she continued, "as a Blue Crest, your use of mana is quite different from the others... you must be able to summon." She pointed to her own White Crest, marked with a 8.

"As a White Crest, I could use healing magic the moment I was able to sense my mana and tap into its flow. I was eleven by then."

Jack stepped closer, studying the magic circle more carefully. The triangles and ancient inscriptions etched within it only deepened his sense that he was in hell—back in his world, such symbols were used by occultists to summon demonic spirits.

"Blue Crests usually summon their familiars between the ages of ten and thirteen. It gives them more time to bond, grow their mana together, and eventually contract them."

*"I'm not too late to summon, am I?"*

Aeris shook her head. "Not at all. In fact, many scholars recommend that Blue Crests wait until they're fifteen or older to summon.

That way, their familiar is fully grown by the time they contract. So, most people actually follow that approach."

Jack gave her a lazy look. *"Then what are we waiting for?"*

Aeris took a deep breath.

"About that... the Blue Crest is also the most unpredictable of all the crests. If you fail to summon five times, you lose the ability to summon entirely. It can happen to anyone—no matter how large their mana pool is."

Jack's expression darkened. He slapped his forehead in frustration, the urge to rip his own face off crawling beneath his skin.

*"I've already tried three times."*

Aeris gave a firm nod. "Exactly."

Aside from being annoyed by Raiden's reckless decisions, Jack was surprisingly calm about the summoning. In fact, he'd faced situations with far slimmer chances of success—ones that depended entirely on his own actions. But this... this was different. It was something beyond his control, resting solely on what many would call luck.

*"I don't believe in luck—or anything superstitious,"* he said with a shrug. *"But I am in hell, after all. Not much left to expect at this point."*

Aeris's expression darkened as she turned to Jack.

"Hell? What do you mean by 'hell'?"

But Jack didn't answer. In an instant, he extended his hand, gestured for the magical seal, bit his finger, and smeared his blood across it—then tossed it straight into the magic circle.

Aeris continued to stare at Jack, her eyes clouded with confusion. The differences between Jack and Raiden made everything harder to grasp. Raiden feared pain—that was why he'd always seemed like a coward to them.

But Jack? He'd bitten his own finger without so much as a flinch.

Whoever he was now... he clearly wasn't the Raiden she once knew.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Jack, who had been staring intently at the seal, waiting for a reaction, turned to her with a distracted *"Mmm?"* He hadn't heard a word—his mind was too locked onto the seal.

He pointed at the seal.

*"Is it supposed to take this long?"*

Aeris snapped out of her daze, though her eyes still lingered on Jack with caution.

"Yes, that's normal. Once the seal begins to burn, it means it's searching for a familiar. If one answers the call, the magic circle will ignite with it—and through that, the familiar will appear."

Jack simply turned back to the magic circle, nodding to himself over and over.

Aeris took a few slow, measured steps backward.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said quietly, then slipped out of the training room.

Jack knew exactly what was going on—Aeris believed he wasn't Raiden.

But he didn't care. She wasn't wrong.

Jack sat down on the floor, his eyes fixed on the seal as he waited for it to burn. He stayed there, silently watching—patient, focused—until Aeris finally returned.

"That's unusual. It should've burned by now."

Suddenly, two knights around Jack's age stepped into the room.

Aeris gave him a cold, disgusted look. "You need to come with us... whatever you are."

Jack didn't even glance at them. *"Didn't think you'd report me this early... Can't it wait until the seal finishes burning?"*

Aeris gritted her teeth, irritated that Jack still wouldn't even look at her.

"Arrest him," she ordered.

The guards moved in, closing the distance as they reached for Jack to drag him away.

Jack's eyes lit up.

"Wait... it's burning."

The seal began to smolder, blue flames curling to life at its edges. All eyes snapped toward it, even as the guards kept a firm grip on Jack's arms.

#### *Chapter 5: Summoning 2*

Jack and Aeris, along with the knights who maintained their firm hold on Jack, found themselves frozen in place as they witnessed the seal consumed by blue flames.

For about ten minutes, it burned little by little until it turned to ash as the fire began to dim.

Everyone sighed in disappointment except Jack, who was still waiting for the fire to stop completely. He knew best not to believe something was dead just because it appeared dead. Even a little fire could cause a catastrophe.

Aeris motioned for the knights to escort Jack out, but before they could act, Jack smiled and told them to wait. When they turned to see what he was watching, the flames had found the magic circle. What began as a slow burn from the middle exploded outward through the scattered ashes, sending everyone diving for cover as the fire scorched the ceiling.

"How?" Aeris whispered, her gaze darting between Jack and the roaring flames. The fact that Jack remained unfazed by the inferno was more unsettling than the fire's brutal intensity—and she'd never witnessed a magic circle erupt with such ferocity.

*Hell isn't all that hot... but where is the familiar?*— Jack mused as fire consumed the structure around them, yet nothing else materialized from the flames.

Out of nowhere, the flames turned dark and blazed even more fiercely, as if something else had been added to make them burn hotter. This time, it was too much even for Jack, forcing him to block his face from the searing heat.

"Dark flames?!" Aeris gasped, her voice joining the knights' horrified chorus as terror painted their faces.

Jack turned slightly toward them, confused by their terrified reactions. In that instant, the flames stopped abruptly. Given their fierce intensity just seconds before, the abrupt stop was unsettling.

They all turned toward the magic circle as charred fragments of the ceiling crashed to the floor. Within the circle sat a little white dragon. It seemed barely a year old.

Aeris slapped her forehead in frustration and disbelief as the knights groaned in unison.

Jack freed himself without resistance and approached the dragon, but the small creature beat him to it, scampering over to rub affectionately against him.

It continued to widen its big blue eyes and flap its baby wings, wearing what seemed like a faint smile.

Suddenly, a voice resonated in his mind—cold but tender, unmistakably inhuman.

Jack's eyes darted around in confusion, completely baffled by the sound.

In that instant, a blue screen popped before him. The interface looked clean, with glowing elements and a futuristic, digital aesthetic.

**[ALERT]**

**[SUMMONING COMPLETE.]**

**[+50 XP]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 9: LEVEL- 50/100 XP.**

**MANA CONTROL: 10**



**MANA POOL: 20/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 15**

**STAMINA: 10**

**AURA: 0**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: NONE**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 32%**

**—LINKED FAMILIAR: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 1.**

**—NAME: [?]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**NEW ABILITIES: LOCKED.]**

*"Really?"* Jack's lips curved into a smirk.

*"I don't know what you are, but we're going to have quite the journey ahead."* He knelt down and ran his hand along the dragon's back.

The knights, however, still maintained their grip on Jack, and the little dragon merely climbed onto his shoulder to perch there as they led him away.

Since the training room was now a disaster, another group of guards and knights passed them in the corridor, heading in to survey the destruction.

Jack's irritation mounted with each repeated journey to the courtroom as Aeris's guards escorted him once again.

He could already guess what awaited him. Aeris had clearly betrayed him to either the elders or Captain Kai—why else would she have brought knights instead of regular guards?

Before long, they arrived at the courtroom and placed Jack in the center of the room while Aeris took her position beside Captain Kai near the entrance. His eyes darted around in confusion—this time, the elders wore red robes instead of black.

The room was deathly quiet, but Jack was ready for anything. He was getting closer to his goal of returning, and he wouldn't back down even if it meant killing everyone present.

"Who are you?" an elder's voice cut through the quiet. Jack was already thinking three steps ahead. He knew his play, so he paused and put on a mask of bewilderment.

"Answer!" the elder demanded.

*"Raiden Night?"* Jack replied with obvious sarcasm.

"You are an assassin masquerading as Raiden Night to steal the Book of Ashes. Speak the truth!"

Jack's face grew dark with understanding. Aeris might be greedy, but he hadn't expected her to fabricate something like this. He was indeed an assassin—just not the one they were talking about. The truth hit him suddenly, his expression turning grimmer still.

*"Is this hell's final judgment?"*

The question hit the elders' pride with the force of a thunderbolt. Hushed whispers broke out among them as Jack remained in place, his confusion real now, waiting to see how they would respond.

"Pardon me, your honors and great elders." The mumbling ceased as they turned their attention to him. "It has just come to my attention that not only is this person impersonating Raiden, but his summoning took longer than usual—and even worse, his blue flames turned dark."

Fear swept through the room like wildfire, striking terror into every face present—including King Hannes himself. Kai locked eyes with Jack, wearing a triumphant smirk, then turned and walked back to where he'd been standing.

*They reacted the same way to the dark flames before... but there's nothing in Raiden's memories about this. What the hell is happening?*—Jack's thoughts raced as he watched their terrified faces.

"Silence!" King Hannes's voice boomed through the chamber.

"Show me your crest," he commanded Jack, who turned to his left side and displayed it without hesitation. The fear in their eyes began to fade at once.

"Your crest remains blue, so how do you explain this?"

"My lord, I suspect he is a black crest assassin employing advanced illusion magic—level 4 or below—to deceive us all," Captain Kai declared smugly.

Jack searched his mind for any explanation of the dark flames, but came up empty. If he was going to defend himself properly, he had to understand what he was being accused of.

*"If I may ask, what exactly do dark flames signify?"*

"How dare you speak to the king so casually?!" one of the elders demanded, his voice filled with rage.

To Jack, that was the most polite thing he had ever said, so for it to be dismissed as disrespectful revealed just how rude he had always been.

King Hannes instantly extended his hand in a calming gesture toward the elder. "When those with blue crests perform summoning, their flames stay blue due to their blue mana core..."

He hesitated briefly. "Dark flames, however, are the mark of black crest bearers. One acquires a black crest by ingesting devil milk to enhance their advancement through the numerical system.

When this enhancement fails, it corrupts into crests like black. Three corrupt variants exist—Grey, Silver, and Black—each carrying unique properties."

The little dragon on Jack's shoulder began licking his face as he raised his hand to touch his crest.

King Hannes smiled reassuringly. "I believe we have a misunderstanding here, or perhaps your summoning ritual was flawed. Your crest is still blue, and your familiar is a white dragon—the gentlest and most peaceful of all dragon breeds. Those with black crests invariably summon demonic creatures."

Jack's face fell. *"Wait—you're saying they aren't powerful?"* He glanced down at the dragon with new eyes.

The king's smile grew wider. "Exactly. White dragons are purely companions. They spend their time playing and nurturing their summoners, but they possess neither physical strength nor magical power."

At that moment, what was supposed to be Jack's execution transformed into something else entirely—almost like a father-and-son conversation between the two of them. But it didn't last long before King Hannes' expression and tone shifted, growing cold.

"This still doesn't change the fact that you aren't the Raiden Night we all know. Tell us who you are!"

Jack's calm demeanor cracked, his eyes turning fierce as they darted to the floor. His thoughts spiraled rapidly. If he admitted to being Jack, he'd face prosecution as an assassin.

If this really was hell, they were likely testing his loyalty to his profession. No matter the scenario, revealing his true identity would almost certainly destroy his chances of getting home. Fortunately, he had plenty of false identities at his disposal.

*I must become Raiden—prove I am him. For now, it's my only option.*

He drew in a steadying breath and lifted his chin. *"Tell me what I need to do to prove I'm Raiden."*

Tension thickened in the room. *"I know I've changed dramatically, but it's been necessary for my duty... After that day, after facing someone whose power far exceeded mine, I couldn't afford to remain a coward."*

His voice thickened with sudden intensity. *"I will grow stronger... stronger... stronger. So that nothing I hold dear can be torn from me... and I mean nothing! I don't care what I must become."*

His voice dripped with such icy terror that the mere sound paralyzed everyone around him. But this wasn't Raiden speaking—this was Jack, raw and unfiltered, and he meant every single syllable.

His expression eased just a fraction, still carrying an edge of unrest. *"So what can I do to prove my identity?"*

King Hannes leaned forward, his tone dropping to an unusually deep register. "Tell me something only you and I would know."

Jack froze, desperately sifting through Raiden's fragmented memories. Beyond King Hannes stepping into a father's role after Raiden lost his own father four years prior, the memories felt frustratingly sparse. Still, he had to try.

He inhaled slowly and let out a weighted breath. *"The day after my father's death, when they made me the new bookkeeper, I was sitting in the library's corner behind the shelves, crying. You came in then."*

King Hannes smiled, but his expectant look told Jack he wanted more. Jack immediately knew he was on the right track. *"You found me in the darkness without any trouble."*

*You approached me, and I tried to get to my feet to pay my respects, but you made me promise not to be formal with you—to treat you like I had treated my father. We sat together and spoke."*

King Hannes' expression became increasingly convinced. "I think I've heard enough."

He stood slowly. "He is Raiden Night... this court is adjourned." He stepped away from the bench, and one by one, the elders departed as well.

The dragon became more playful, showering Jack with licks, but as soon as it began, Jack felt annoyance surge through him. The creature was pathetically weak!

Turning around, he saw both Aeris and Captain Kai standing there. The question burned in his mind—would Aeris still act as his tutor after trying to trade him for money?

As he walked past them, Aeris avoided his gaze entirely, though it didn't bother him. His mind was already shifting, preparing to become Raiden rather than Jack.

*For now!*

#### *Chapter 6: Persia City*

*"What am I going to do with you?"* Jack—now Raiden—brushed his hand against the dragon's head, staring into its blue eyes as it sat on the table, just before it suddenly tried to bite its tail.

*"You remind me of him,"* he said, wearing a faint smile.

When Jack was four, he'd run into a stray cat on a rainy night just beyond the walls of his house. He already knew what his parents' reaction would be, so—with his deceased twin brother, Jobe—they hid it and cared for it. They named it Ash.

Unfortunately, Ash didn't last long. The moment their parents found it, they killed it.

From the moment Jobe died, his entire existence was erased from the Grim family. In truth, the only thing that remained was his face—and all Jack had to do was look in the mirror to see him again.

But now, even that had been taken from him.

"I think I'll call you Ash."

**[ALERT]**

**[FAMILIAR NAME UPDATED.]**

**[NAME: ASH.]**

**[FAMILIAR TRUST: +20%]**

It seemed to like the name, becoming more playful—scampering around and nuzzling up to him with affection.

Raiden shook himself from his sobbing daze and began to think about what he should do next. Ash wasn't anything powerful enough to get him out of that world, after all.

He took a moment to breathe and think. Ash kept scampering around, distracting him—but that's when he realized just how little he knew about the realm.

Hell or not, he needed to understand exactly what he was dealing with.

The evening was only a few hours away, and getting out there to learn more about others and their familiars might at least give him a clue.

Maybe he could squeeze some magic out of Ash—or perhaps even summon more.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the key to the room where the Book of Ashes was kept. He hadn't even seen the book itself yet, but considering how precious they claimed it was, he wasn't willing to interfere with it—at least, not now.

He placed the key back in his pocket and rose to his feet. Ash immediately climbed onto him as they began heading out of the library.

As the bookkeeper, he was required to seek permission before leaving the palace grounds—but all that bureaucracy was bound to take a toll on him, and Raiden wasn't going to let it.

He simply made his way outside, and just before reaching the throne room, he ordered two roaming guards to watch over the library.

He began heading for the entrance, glancing at the statues lining the pavement—athletic and ripped portraits carved in stone. It was graciously peaceful as they made their way out, even lulling Ash to sleep on his shoulder.

And yet, Raiden's senses were sharper than ever.

It felt like it took forever, but he finally made it to the entrance, where two guards stood at their posts. He simply waved at them and continued on his way.

Just beyond the entrance was a wide pavement that connected the palace to the city's streets.

*"Persia City, huh?"* He smirked.

Citizens filled the streets, each going about their day. Looming over them were the cityscapes, their structures rising at symmetrical heights.

Many walked in pairs, others moved alone—but what caught his attention most were a few children who looked about eight years old, dressed in shorts, boots, and hats that matched their shirts. They were play-fighting beside a fountain right in the middle of T Street.

He paused and smiled at them, reaching into his pocket for a few notes of money. They were brown, each imprinted with a crossed book and sword. He held four of them, each marked with 500, though he had no idea how much they were actually worth.

Just as he stood there, contemplating which route to take—left, right, or forward—a few people hurried over and began yelling at him to stop the kids from fighting.

He blinked in confusion, staring at the woman in the brown surcoat.

*"I honestly thought this was normal..."*

"What? What do you mean, 'normal'?"

He gave the woman one last glance as she continued yelling, then simply turned and took the route to his left.

Raiden had yet to come across anyone with a familiar. Everyone around him seemed too busy to be interrupted. A few carried newspapers, while others moved through the crowd handing out flyers—most of them simply asking people to join their adventuring parties.

Just as he maneuvered his way through the street, something caught the corner of his left eye. He turned to see an elderly man with a potbelly and a white shirt, selling jewelry at an open-front shop.

What truly caught his attention, though, was the small flame resting on the man's dark hair.

He smirked. He could've spoken to the man through the window, where he was chatting with passersby, but instead, he chose to enter the shop.

The moment he stepped inside, he saw a boy about his age standing behind the counter—white hair, piercing blue eyes, and a worn black apron that made him look like he'd just returned from the blacksmith.

He looked strangely familiar to Raiden, though no memory came to mind.

He approached the counter, noticing a few black cords hanging around the shop.

"Welcome to the Odin Shop of Jewelry. What can I get you?"

*"Can you get me one of those cords? And... I'd like to speak with the old man over there."*

The boy's expression darkened.

"You know he doesn't like being called an old man," he whispered. "And... when did you get a familiar?"

"Do you want to talk magic?" He wore a lustful smile.

Raiden gave him a tired, almost annoyed look.

*"Do I know you?"*

"What?! What do you mean?" the boy said, turning to grab one of the cords.

"It's me, Leo," he added, handing the cord to Raiden, who still looked confused.

"Leo Odin? ...Your classmate at Persian University?"

*"Okay,"*

Raiden said, placing one of his 500 notes on the counter.

"500 Persa?" Leo asked, confusion written all over his face. "The cord is 3 Persa. Don't you have any smaller notes? Or even coins?"

*"No... Can I speak with the old man now?"*

Raiden had already seen the boy's crest—yellow, with the number 8—and had no interest in a crest he didn't even understand.

Leo walked over to the man, leaned in, and whispered something to him. The man immediately turned and approached Raiden at the counter, while Leo stayed by the window.

"You've finally gotten yourself a familiar, great job!"

Raiden gave him a firm nod and slid the 500 Persa note across the counter. The man looked confused, but Raiden was simply trying to buy all the information he needed.

*"Can you tell me more about summoners and their beasts—like my dragon?"*



The man's expression darkened.

"I've already told you all you need to know."

Raiden shook his head, clearly dissatisfied.

*"No, you haven't. I know nothing about these dragons. How am I supposed to get stronger with them? And can I even use magic at all?"*

"Kid, business is bad today, and it's almost sunset... Can we talk about this another time?"

"Wait..." Raiden said, pulling out another note and sliding it across the counter toward him.

The man narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Do you want to buy something?"

Raiden said nothing. He just stared, cold and unflinching, straight into the man's confused eyes.

"I don't know what's wrong with you today, but take your money and get out of my shop," he said, his tone gritty and unmistakable.

Raiden didn't move an inch. Instead, he calmly reached into his pocket and added another note to the counter.

Everyone had a price—and whatever situation they were in determined exactly what that price was. Whether it came through money, a task, an act of service, or even something as low as a hug... exploit that, and you could get anyone you wanted.

Jack had been taught that truth—and he had learned it the hard way.

The man sighed in disbelief.

"I haven't seen any white dragon grant magic, but other familiars do. You can stick with just your dragon or train hard in other abilities—swordsmanship, combat. If you increase your mana pool, you'll be able to interact with random creatures during battle to support you. But unless you're a Level 4 or lower, you can only contract one at a time."

Raiden listened carefully to every word, yet he still wasn't satisfied.

*"What about magic?"* he asked, his eyes darting toward the window. It was getting late.

The man's expression hardened.

"I won't answer any more questions after this..." His tone left no room for doubt.

"Blue crests can only summon—and even then, only a few lucky ones have enough time to tame what they call. That's all I know."

The moment the man finished speaking, Raiden didn't wait a second. He simply turned and walked out. It was getting late, and he needed to return to the library.

Ash was still asleep, but given how Jack's family despised delay, punctuality had been etched into his soul.

He tucked away all his thoughts and concerns—for now. He'd deal with them once he was back at the library.

By the time he reached the palace, Ash was awake. It jumped to the floor and started running ahead, both of them carefully avoiding the notice of nearby knights. Before long, they made it back to the library, where the guards Raiden had appointed stood watch.

He gave a subtle gesture for them to leave, then ran a hand through his hair in exhaustion. Pulling out the cord, he slid the key onto it and placed it around his neck.

*"Ash... I guess I'll have to summon a different creature then. I really need to get back home—for him."*

The moment he said it, Ash's expression dropped, a flicker of sadness in its eyes.

But Raiden just stared up at the ceiling, his thoughts already drifting far from the room.

*"I think this is worse than hell... The theory that hell was filled with fire would've been better—at least then I wouldn't still have my sense of awareness. But this..."*

He let out a sudden scream, the sound sharp and hollow in the quiet room.

Ash immediately jumped onto his leg, trying to comfort him.

*"I mustn't give up... This is hell, after all. The book might h—"*

Raiden instinctively grabbed Ash and leaped off the desk, landing on the other side. He held his stance, reaching for his gun—

but he was unarmed. Unfortunate.

A figure emerged from behind his seat, clapping slowly.

"You're quite sharp. Not many people can see through my invisibility."

The figure shifted into a fully human form—

He wore a red shirt, and his black hair was tied back in a ponytail. There was something stylish about him, but also undeniably prideful.

He wore a yellow crest with the number seven.

The moment Raiden spotted his crest, his body trembled on the inside, but his stance remained firm, his expression unreadable.

"You seem like a nice guy," the man said, his tone almost casual. "I'd hate to kill you... so be a good boy and hand over the Book of Ashes."

Raiden was still trembling on the inside, his voice caught somewhere in his throat.

But no matter what, he wasn't going to hand over the book.

If the magic inside was powerful enough for an entire kingdom to protect, then it might be useful to him.

And even if it wasn't... he was keeping it out of duty.

The infiltrator gritted his teeth, clearly frustrated by Raiden's silence.

Then, in a blink, he vanished again.

"I thought you were cool," his voice echoed, cold and distant. "But I've changed my mind. You're just like the rest of them."

Raiden's crumbling composure became more visible—he looked like someone deeply afraid of those stronger than him.

Yet his eyes scanned every direction, searching for the intruder.

Before he could react, a fist slammed into his ribs, launching him off his feet and crashing him hard into the ground.

"Give me the book!"

In that moment, everything about him changed—

The smile vanished, the stylish air dissolved, and in its place, dark energy radiated from him, speaking louder than any threat.

## *Chapter 7: Assassin*

"I can see the fear reflected in your gaze. You feel it too, can't you? When victory has slipped beyond reach."

Crumpled on the ground, Raiden's arms wrapped protectively around his injured ribs, a pained grimace twisting his features. Panic seized Ash as he hit the floor, clawing his way forward in a desperate escape.

His escape was cut short as the infiltrator caught him by the waist, lifting and slamming him into the desk with devastating ease, reducing it to a pile of broken wood and debris.

Raiden instantly choked up crimson, his arms wrapping around his torso. Every fiber of his being rebelled against movement; even breathing made his heart race wildly, threatening to burst from his chest.

"Give me the book..."

The voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, his terror-stricken mind unable to process its origin. Fear had become his entire existence, a suffocating presence that invaded every thought and obliterated his capacity for rational thinking.

Another futile escape attempt ended as the infiltrator seized his collar, lifting him effortlessly from the ground. Every instinct told Raiden to struggle, to break free, yet his body remained limp and unresponsive.

The trauma lived in his bones—a childhood spent cowering before overwhelming force had conditioned him to shut down completely when faced with an opponent he couldn't overcome.

Fingers closed around Raiden's windpipe with crushing force. His vision blurred as oxygen became a memory, legs thrashing uselessly while his hands made feeble grabs at the infiltrator's arm.

His struggles were laughably weak, like a butterfly beating against steel—utterly insignificant.

"Never imagined a simple bookkeeper would prove so utterly helpless." The figure materialized before him like smoke taking shape.

"Before I end your miserable existence, allow me the courtesy of an introduction. Perhaps we'll encounter each other in the depths below. The name is Levi—Levi, Shadow of Noor."

Levi's eyes lit up with triumph the instant he spotted the key. A wicked grin spread across his face as he reached for it, but a powerful tail whipped through the air without warning, launching him straight into the towering shelves with bone-jarring force.

Raiden collapsed to the ground, gasping and clutching his bruised throat, but what loomed before him made him forget his pain entirely.

Ash had undergone an impossible metamorphosis—now towering at nearly ten times his original size, with a fierce intensity burning in his gaze as his lips pulled back in a menacing snarl.

Raiden watched Levi drop to the floor. In an instant, Ash rushed over and smacked him straight through the window before turning small again and hurrying back to Raiden, who felt more confused than grateful.

**[ALERT]**

**[SUMMON KEPT ALIVE IN BATTLE.]**

**[+10 XP]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 9: LEVEL- 60/100 XP.**

**MANA CONTROL: 10**

**MANA POOL: 20/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 15**

**STAMINA: 10**

**AURA: 0**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: NONE**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 52%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 1.**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**NEW ABILITIES: LOCKED.]**

*"What just happened?"*

Ash became affectionate as it brushed against him. Raiden brushed his hand over it as his soul began to sink slowly. The feeling he had always despised was finally catching up to him.

*"I am pathetic, aren't I?... but I don't want to end up like Jobe."* He shook his head in disapproval like a kid. *"I don't."*

Ash's eyes narrowed as it stared into Raiden's sombering eyes, its own expression softening as if it didn't want to see him sad.

It immediately bit Raiden in the left hand, its eyes widening with excitement once more. Raiden let out a light cry of pain. The sensation was more intense than a small bite should be, and his hand somehow began to feel numb.

**[ALERT]**

**[FAMILIAR TRUST: +20%]**

*"That isn't very nice, Ash..."*

The damage from the fight immediately began to catch up with him as blood trickled down his nose. In that instant, the knights finally burst in. Raiden rose to his feet as he prepared to confront them.

*"What took you so lon—"*

Before he could finish his sentence, everything began to feel fuzzy, and distant. Before he knew it, his body was seamlessly collapsing to the floor. Confused, he took a few heavy blinks, and then everything went black.

He was out for nearly a day. When he woke up, he narrowed his eyes against the brightness of the room. Above him was an oval mezzanine with ornate gold balustrades, a sparkling crystal chandelier hanging from its elaborately molded ceiling. To his left sat a semicircle of plush sofas and armchairs arranged in a conversation area. He was in his room.

"How did I get here?" he muttered, confused, as he turned to his right to see Ash peacefully sleeping.

He rubbed his eyes as he climbed out of bed. The room was too bright—he had always hated bright rooms. He'd always liked them dimmed or, if possible, completely dark.

He headed to the washroom and cleaned himself up a bit, refusing to make contact with the mirror. Not only was he unused to his new face, but he had that same intuition about Jack—he didn't want to see Jobe.

The moment he finished, he grabbed Ash, who was still sleeping, and placed him on his shoulder as he began to leave the house.

He descended the stairs into the living room. It had the same plush sofas and an even bigger chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Raiden didn't bother looking for his mother as he headed for the exit. Before he could leave, she came out of nowhere and spoke up.

"Are you leaving already?" Yara asked with a tinge of concern in her voice.

Raiden paused, turned to his left, and gave a firm nod, his hand still resting on the door handle.

"Are you okay, Raiden? What is going on?" She walked closer and moved in on Raiden, lost and uncertain about what exactly to do.

Raiden gave her a lazy look at first but quickly shifted his expression. He had to at least give her some solace before she also started making claims about him not being Raiden.

He approached her as well, with a warm smile, and held both of her hands in his. He reflected the sadness in Yara's eyes.

*"I need to be strong, Mother... I need to put all my fear aside and become stronger to keep our family's legacy."*

Yara tried to say something, but Raiden brushed her off. *"I can't end up like Father, and I know you can understand."*

Raiden then pulled her into a hug. *"Things are going to be different, Mother, but trust me, I will always protect you."*

He immediately pulled away from the hug, and somehow Yara stood frozen as Raiden walked toward the door without waiting for her to say a word.

"Just be careful, okay?... and visit more."

Raiden turned to her and gave her a confident smile. He turned the door handle and made his way out. Once outside, he saw a staircase to his left beside the walkway, leading directly upstairs near the library. He began to climb.

"Did I seriously black-out from those shabby strikes?" he muttered, slapping his forehead.

*"I think I'll need to train this body... Levi, the shadow of Noor. Noor?"*

His eyes immediately widened after recalling Levi's title. The Kingdom of Noor was the city of the sun, the first city to lose their book—the Book of Echoes, the Devourer's Mind. It existed in a desert somewhere far from Persia, probably a month or two away by the fastest carriage.

That someone like him was here was perplexing, and he had spoken Persian fluently, which demonstrated his education. What puzzled Raiden most was why someone of that caliber would work as an assassin.

He shrugged it off. It wouldn't matter once he was gone. He made his way to the library, where a few knights stood guard. He asked them to leave and entered. The place was renovated, keeping that eerie feeling alive.

Raiden placed Ash on the desk and stood there for quite a while, his eyes darting around. He then sat down with the night looming behind him and went through all of Raiden's notes, looking for anything concerning white dragons and what exactly happened to Ash when it grew larger.

Unfortunately, there was nothing. He remained seated for quite a while, his mind filled with confusion and that hollow feeling, 'What should I do?' echoing in his thoughts over and over.

He turned to his right, toward the wall in front of the shelves. He reached for the key around his neck and gripped it tightly, feeling the coldness of it.

He rose to his feet and headed to the wall. As he brushed his hand along the edge, searching for a button, he felt something tugging at his trousers. He turned to see Ash deliberately pulling him away, as if it didn't want him to go in there.

Raiden knelt beside it with a smirk, gently brushing his hand against it before picking it up. "I need to go home, Ash... I really do. I need to avenge someone, you know?"

Ash began to make low, rumble squeaks with a nudge. Raiden took a careful look at Ash before glancing back at the wall. *"Okay, I won't go in."*

He returned to the desk instead, placed Ash on it, and removed his shirt as he started doing push-ups.

*I cannot be doing this... I need to go back.*



Ash leaped down, bit Raiden's right hand, and began running in circles. Raiden smirked, but a jolt of electricity immediately through his hand as he gritted his teeth in agony, collapsed as his hand grew numb.

**[ALERT]**

**[FAMILIAR TRUST: +20%]**

[You need to get stronger...papa.] a voice different from the previous—childish and calm—echoed in Raiden's head.

*"Huh? ...Did you just speak to me?"* He muttered.

*Chapter 8: Epiphany*

**[ALERT]**

**[HARMONY BETWEEN SUMMONED CREATURE COMPLETED.]**

**[+5 XP]**

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

**MANA CONTROL: 10**

**MANA POOL: 20/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 15**

**STAMINA: 10**

**AURA: 0**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: NONE**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 92%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 1.**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**NEW ABILITIES: LOCKED.]**

It was seven in the morning when Raiden and Ash both stepped into the center of the renovated training room. Raiden remained confused about how Ash could suddenly talk, and unfortunately, Ash had no idea how it happened either—though she knew it would be in Raiden's best interest to grow stronger. Even worse, the number of words she could manage was limited.

Raiden took a glance at Ash as she rested on his shoulder. *"Maybe climbing the ranks will help her speak more freely... because I think she trusts me enough."*

His daily life as an assassin involved enduring extremely cold or scorching hot rooms for two hours, but if he wanted to get stronger, that timeframe—or more—was his epiphany of what it meant to be the strongest.

He gently bent his waist in silence and placed Ash on the floor, sat down beside her, and began taking slow but steady breaths.

*"If the target is above your rank, patience is the only knife that cuts. I start with balance training. The best killers are ghosts, not beasts."* He muttered and began meditating.

He followed his heart for a while before finally syncing with the silence deep within.

To his surprise, his mana core had grown more spherical and quadrupled in size. Fire needs wind to burn brighter, just as the heart needs blood to pump.

Feeling the silence in the darkness and materializing it through imagination, he began creating white veins of sensation. He believed even a pretend smile could make someone's day—if he could maintain the illusion that his core was being fed, he would grow stronger still.

Surprisingly, everything came easier than the previous time. It was as if a curtain was lifted.

Before long, he was done with meditation and moved on to his actual workout. At first, he'd assumed his left hand healed from Ash's bite thanks to a healer, but after the second bite, the pain faded within moments. Now he felt more energetic than before she'd even bitten him.

He went into pushups, each one becoming lighter than the previous. While this wasn't anywhere close to his strength as Jack, he was able to complete 70 pushups. It was clearly a milestone for Raiden's body, though his muscles began trembling at the 60th count, forcing him to stop immediately after reaching 70.

**[ALERT]**

**[MANA POOL: 30/5000]**

**MANA CONTROL: +20%**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +10**

**STAMINA: +10**

**AURA: +1]**

[You need to get powerful, papa.] Ash stirred from her slumber and nudged Raiden.

*"I already told you... I'm not your Papa."*

"Don't you think it would be nice to address your bond appropriately?"

Raiden turned to see Aeris standing there with a confident smile, hip jutted to one side and hand resting on her waist. Ash immediately began hissing at her.

*"Stop, Ash. She's not a threat."* He carried her and walked past Aeris to the entrance leading to the switch.

"I heard you fought off a spy. Though he escaped, the book is fine." He paused for a minute.

"You have to understand me, Raiden." Her voice was etched with what seemed like guilt, but Raiden wasn't buying any of it. He simply flipped the switch, and the walls flipped.

"Can you say something?... I really need the payment; otherwise, I can't feed my family."

Raiden turned to her and pointed at Ash. *"Do you kno—*

*[No.]*

He paused and turned to Ash as she stared at him with a skeptical expression. Raiden returned the look and simply turned toward where the swords were decorated. He wasn't certain, but clearly, Ash didn't want him revealing anything about her.

"Were you going to say something?" She began walking toward Raiden. "Please, can you say something?"

Raiden let out a sigh. *"I don't really care about your decisions... they're yours to make, not mine."*

"So can I become your tutor again?" she asked, a tinge of excitement in her voice.

Raiden said nothing and simply grabbed an Odachi sword with a white and golden hilt. The blade was thicker than what he was used to, but he found himself smiling as he admired it.

**[ALERT]**

**[ITEM IDENTIFYING...]**

The screen became scanning the sword.

**[ITEM IDENTIFIED] : ODACHI SWORD**

**[RANK] : ORDINARY**

**[MATERIAL] : STEEL**

"Can I?"

Raiden turned to her with a confused expression. He had completely forgotten that she was there, just from the sight of the sword.

*"Sure... suit yourself, but don't interfere with my work."*

Aeris's expression turned even more pained as she watched Raiden stand motionless, eyes closed.

Jack's voice began to ring in his head, cold but precise. *"Kill the old self's fear. Break the chains. Kill the weakness."*

Everything Raiden intended to do now was exactly as his parents had trained him, and he wouldn't need anyone—especially not someone stronger than him. He began swinging the sword through the air with precision. The weight was enough to break his grip if he wasn't careful, but that's exactly what he wanted.

[Papa, get stronger.] Ash said as she ran around, while Aeris remained motionless.

"So, can I tutor you?"

With no response from Raiden, she walked to the wall and sat down, leaning her back against it as she watched him train fiercely.

Whatever needed to be slashed—vegetable, meat, or even a killing strike—the blade performed only a small part of the work, albeit the most crucial part. Each swing must be delivered with precision, aimed at the exact angle, and timed perfectly to strike at the right moment.

"Without skilled delivery, the edge can't shine." Those were Jane Grim's words when she taught Jack swordsmanship, and that was exactly the principle Raiden was following.

He slashed through the air with precision, visualizing the easiest creature he'd ever killed with a sword: a human. His sword always aimed directly at the neck, delivered with exact force, angle, and timing. He practiced this motion repeatedly until his hands began to fail him, sweat cascading down like a waterfall.

Soon enough, he dropped the sword as his hands began shaking uncontrollably. He rested his arms on the floor, panting heavily as his palms and hands turned a deeper shade of red.

[Papa, tired.] Ash said, climbing up onto Raiden. He smiled, giggling at her gentle nudges.

"If you really want to train, then I can make a proposal on your behalf."

Raiden tilted his head slightly toward her as she stood up. "No." He said it without even looking at her again.

"No, listen. You go out there—fight goblins, ogres, even slimes." The words tumbled from her mouth. "You'll get strong quickly that way."

Raiden remained silent, continuing to lie on the floor with Ash resting on his chest, his hands finally relaxing.

**[ALERT]**

**[STAMINA: +10**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +15**

**AURA:+2]**

**[NEW SKILL PROFICIENCY ACQUIRED]**

**[SWORDSMASHIP: +5%]**

"Please, give me something to do... anything." Her voice cracked with desperation.

If he was going to get stronger, he would eventually need something more challenging to push his boundaries—and he already knew that training alone wouldn't be enough. He turned to her with a smirk, ready to stir up some drama.

*"If you say so, then I have a few tasks for you."*

Aeris stepped closer, her eyes bright with hope. "Yes, anything."

*"I don't normally deal with traitors. I prefer them dead."* Aeris's expression darkened.

*"I want you to find out why Captain Kai and the elders want the Night family out of power. Then you fetch me every detail about the assassins. Finally, you get everything there is to know about blue crest bearers... especially those with dragon familiars."*

His voice grew darker, denser, and colder. *"Cross me again, and this time I will kill you."*

His words sent chills through Aeris. She trembled and stood frozen for a moment. "After that, you will pay me 2000 Persa per month."

Raiden smirked. *"Just get it done."*

Aeris managed a grin before leaving the room.

Everything Raiden said was a pure bluff. Without knowing exactly how strong Aeris was or outranking her significantly, he wouldn't stand a chance if it came to a real confrontation—he wouldn't move a muscle.

But he knew it wouldn't reach that point—her willingness to walk in and plead for so long revealed a desperation he could exploit.

*"Hell might be fun after all."* He smirked.

[No.]

*"No? What do you mean?"*

#### *Chapter 9: Assassin Deal*

Everything was going smoothly until it wasn't.

Late in the night, with only Raiden and Ash left in the library, the sword moved in practiced arcs. Each swoosh pierced the silence until the inevitable happened.

A dead silence settled. The wind grew still.

Raiden stepped back from the windows, both hands finding the hilt of his sword as his heart began to quicken. Something stirred uneasily in his chest. Ash crouched before him, back legs bent, a low growl rumbling from her throat as she fixed her gaze on the window.

A figure stepped from the shadows. That smirk, that presence—Levi. The shadow of Noor had found them again.

"You know you can't win... just put down the sword." He rested a hand on his waist while Raiden narrowed his eyes, staring coldly at that unbothered expression.

*"How sure are you about that?..."*

"Stupid as ever," he scoffed. "I didn't come to fight this time." Both hands went up in mock surrender.

*"Shame. I was looking forward to returning the favor."* Raiden's knuckles whitened around the hilt.

"I came for the creature." His gaze shifted to Ash with cold interest while she growled at him. "That thing isn't ordinary. I want it—and the book."

Raiden's smirk was razor-thin. *"Such bold claims for someone who couldn't defeat a number 9."* The humor died from his face, voice dropping to ice. *"You don't touch Ash."*

"Oh, I won't. Not yet. I'm proposing a deal."

*"... a deal?"*

"We fight. Clean. No tricks, no interference from your dragon. When I win..." He stepped closer, his voice turned cold. "The dragon comes with me."

"Since you are his bonded, you follow. You'd serve me, speak for me, and spy for me."

Raiden giggled for a moment. It grew into light chuckles, then laughter. *"You think I'd serve someone like you?"*

"You won't win, but if you do... I serve you. My blade becomes yours. My knowledge, my network—everything handed over. You'd gain the secrets of those haunting you. Levi, the shadow of Noor, yours to command."

Ash growled louder, stepping forward, but Levi held up a hand.

"If the dragon tries to interfere, the deal's void."

Raiden's expression darkened. *"I'm a blue crest bearer; how the fuck do you expect me to fight?"*

Levi settled into Raiden's chair, feet up on the desk. "Mana Crests aren't allowed. Just brute strength and steel." A careless shrug. "We're going to fight eventually—might as well make it worth something."

"Wager accepted?"

Raiden's guard finally dropped as Ash turned to him with those poppy eyes. He smirked, lifting her up.

"With you, losing isn't an option." His hand found her head, rubbing gently.

Raiden turned to Levi, who remained seated with that smirk, staring lustfully at Ash.

*"And why should I believe an assassin's word? What proof do I have that you'll honor it?"*

Levi smirked and reached into his pocket, tossing a small handbook over. Raiden caught it and flipped through a page, but the darkness made it impossible to read.

"I already suspected this. That book details techniques blue crest bearers used in the other kingdoms."

He stood. "Read it, and you'll understand how to make this duel worth your while." The smirk lingered as he faded from sight. "Two weeks from today. Nine in the morning. The border between Persia City and Nyx City."

He was gone. No windows had opened, no footsteps, no sound. Nothing but empty air where he'd stood.

Raiden and Ash returned to the desk, sitting through the silence as they began reading. It detailed things blue crest bearers could do and how: contracting, bonding, interaction, and communication.

Many things didn't add up since pages were missing, but to perform each to the fullest, he would need considerable physical strength, mana, and a higher rank.

Raiden leaned back into the seat and let out a deep sigh. As a blue crest bearer, he could make contracts with literally anything—beasts, monsters—so long as he had the mana for it.

*"He'd be useful, wouldn't he?"*

Ash offered no response, just nudged him gently before settling on his lap.

*"He might know things I don't, things others don't. Maybe there's something out there that can get me back home. I have to win."* His head fell back against the chair.

He sat there for what felt like hours, eyes fixed on the ceiling, breath misting faintly in the cold air as he considered Levi—the potential help, the inevitable threat.



*"I must show him how dangerous I can be then."* He muttered and lifted Ash, who remained asleep on his lap. Moving his hands slowly against the silence, he placed her on the desk before rising to his feet.

He took up his sword and began training.

Jack's voice began to ring in his head once more, cold but precise. *"Kill the old self's fear. Break the chains. Kill the weakness."*

The chances of returning home were slimmer than he'd ever imagined, but before he could even hope for that, he needed power. Real power—the kind that carried the force of an entire army.

He continued to train, weaving footwork into his swings for better flexibility, each strike cutting through the air with swift precision.

He trained until dawn broke, then switched to shadowboxing. His fists cut through the air with calculated precision, droplets of sweat shaking loose from his movements to hit the floor.

His legs were tired and trembling, but he refused to stop. Strike after strike. His limbs began to crack and pop, working out the stiffness he'd allowed to build up.

Before long, he dropped to his knees, panting as he couldn't hold on any longer.

*"This body is doing quite well, though... It's impressive."* He muttered.

**[ALERT]**

**[STAMINA: +20]**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +30**

**AURA: +3]**

**[SWORDSMANSHIP: +20]**

At that instant, there was a knock on the door—it was Aeris. She entered with a calm expression and leaned against a shelf. Raiden turned toward her and gestured as she stepped away from the shelf.

He rose to his feet trembling like an old man, cracked his back, and took his seat as Aeris stood before him. Without so much as a word, he raised an eyebrow.

She cleared her throat. "I don't have anything concerning why Captain Kai and the Elders are after your family, nor do I have anything concerning the assassins." She paused. "But I do know something about blue crest abilities."

Raiden gave her a lazy look as his eyes began to zone out.

"There are heavy limitations placed on blue crest bearers in Persia due to their history with black crest bearers."

Raiden leaned forward with his elbows on the desk, chin propped on his fists, eyes nearly rolled back from exhaustion.

"Blue crest bearers can only summon and interact with animals. Animals are naturally drawn to you, which lets you bond with them. With mutual agreement, you can form contracts—it's similar to summoning."

Just then, Raiden's head dropped to the desk as exhaustion finally won.

Aeris blinked in confusion. "Are you satisfied with just that?" Her expression turned skeptical.

"There is something else, though."

Raiden simply gave her a thumbs-up and gestured that she should leave.

After a moment of silence, she nodded with a smile and slipped away.

Raiden then slowly succumbed to sleep.

*Chapter 10: Mana Realm*

**[ALERT]**

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

**MANA CONTROL: 40**

**MANA POOL: 50/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 95**

**STAMINA: 80**

**AURA: 10**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 1**

**—Swordsmanship: 20%**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 92%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 1.**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

**NEW ABILITIES: LOCKED.]**

"Once a familiar and master share a bond deep enough to create a contract, the familiar's abilities gradually become the master's as well," Aeris noted, her gaze fixed on Raiden as he threw himself into his shadowboxing, sweat flying with each exerted breath and strike.

"However, you summon what your strength attracts, but they only reach their full potential as their summoner climbs the ranks..." she paused for a moment.

"So someone with a red dragon would see their abilities grow from basic physical enhancement to flames and draconic traits over time. The same applies to a black dragon, but white dragons..." she trailed off, "they offer nothing."

Raiden immediately halted his routine and started stretching. *"How can a dragon have no ability? Something about that doesn't sit right with me,"* he muttered.

"White dragons serve as the balance among all dragonkind in Dhrathopia. They're gentle by nature, showing little aggression unless their bonded master faces danger, and even then they merely hiss or growl in warning. Beyond that, they possess nothing of value."

A smirk crossed Raiden's face as he considered what Ash was capable of versus what Aeris claimed—it felt like they truly knew nothing about white dragons.

*"Have any of you ever set foot in Dhrathopia?"*

Aeris' face grew stern. "No. It exists in another world entirely, and no one has ever seen what lies there."

Raiden gave a firm nod and indicated she should go as he approached the entrance, clicking off the crystal lantern.

"Your mother wants to see you."

"..."

"You've gotten stronger..." Aeris said, attempting a smile, but Raiden's silence was her only response once more. "Right then, I'll see myself out."

Four days had passed since Raiden's agreement with Levi, and he'd thrown himself into training without rest. His body was responding admirably to the punishment, allowing him to breeze through a hundred push-ups, sit-ups, and squats. Despite the progress, he still felt hopelessly outmatched against Levi.

To remedy this, he dedicated himself to meditating three times a day, working to increase his mana pool.

He settled into the room's center, remaining motionless briefly to allow his muscles to unwind and his mind to focus. With a deep breath, he began his meditation.

Well, he had been trying to overcome the fear of facing Levi and just train, and as it stood now, he was only pretending to be doing well.

The handbook from Levi outlined methods for ascending ranks 8 and 7. Though each rank followed its own subjective guidelines, mastering mana realms appeared to be the clearest path forward.

But regardless of his relentless physical training and mana cultivation, his experience points refused to budge.

Determined to understand why, he resolved to head back to the city for proper answers about these mysterious mana realms.

He stayed in position, breath controlled and low, his heartbeat aligning with the rhythm of his mana as it flowed inward.

**[ALERT]**

**[MANA CONTROL: +20**

**MANA POOL: 55/5000**

**AURA: +1]**

With a deep sigh, Raiden pushed himself to his feet, cracked his knuckles, and moved toward the recently constructed washroom on his left. His muscles protested with each step, but he'd learned to embrace this type of pain—sharper than what his former body had known, yet nothing he couldn't handle.

Upon his return, he navigated the silent room with careful movements, the crack of his joints echoing as he reached down to lift Ash onto his shoulder.

He headed for the palace doors. The old adage held true—confidence was everything. Someone might tell a blatant lie, but delivered with enough certainty, it could make even those who knew better second-guess themselves. This was a lesson Raiden had thoroughly internalized.

He walked through the palace without a trace of guilt or hesitation. One could argue it was simply because he didn't care about seeking permission before leaving the premises. But he knew full well that being caught would bring consequences.

Still, he carried himself with the confidence of a king, casually instructing guards to watch the library as he made his way outside, leaving no room for questions.

As soon as he emerged from the palace, he set course for the shop he'd been to earlier—the Odin shop. Nothing had changed in the city since his last visit; each passerby looked as busy and unapproachable as before.

Yet from where he stood, the Odin shop seemed dimmer than before. Concerned they might be absent, he increased his speed to examine it more closely.

As soon as he got near, he released a sigh of relief and pulled the door open.

"Hey there, Raiden," Leo said warmly, his eyes soft as he waved, though Raiden offered just a faint smile in return as he approached.

*"Where's the old man?"* he said matter-of-factly, settling his hands on the counter's surface.

"You mean my father? He's made a trip to Nyx city for supplies... should be back within the week." Leo's soft expression grew concerned as he noticed Raiden's obvious disappointment. "What did you need?"

Raiden's gaze sharpened as he studied Leo's crest once more. He had no intention of returning without answers, despite finding Leo's laid-back personality annoying.

After staring into those gentle eyes for a long moment, he rolled his eyes and forced himself to abandon his pride.

He exhaled deeply and cleared his throat. *"Do you know anything about the Mana Realm?"*

"Well..." Leo began, his finger tapping against his bottom lip. "You mean the ranks, right?"

Raiden gave a decisive nod.

Leo's face brightened. "Ah, yes." He paused briefly. "I don't know everything, but I have some knowledge."

"Then tell me what you know."

Leo's grin grew wider despite Raiden's blank stare. "Number 9 focuses entirely on mana application... since my power is weight nullification, I had to build up sufficient mana to cancel out the weight of 50 kilograms of metal."

Raiden's mood visibly soured. *"So you had a voice telling you what to do? Because mine isn't offering any help whatsoever."*

Leo looked confused, forcing Raiden to raise an eyebrow. *"The voice with the screen?"* He said with a skeptical expression.

Leo's face immediately scrunched further in confusion. "You... hear something?" He gave him a creepy look. "I don't have any voice..."

He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Oh wait... I do have thoughts, I suppose."

Everything felt increasingly bewildering to Raiden as he pondered the voice's significance when Leo apparently had none.

*"Could it be specific to blue crest users?... the strength-oriented ones and that sort of thing."*

Leo's confusion deepened as he stared at Raiden intently. "Besides our own thinking, no one has voices speaking to them."

Suddenly his expression brightened as he hit the counter with enthusiasm. "Wait a minute—could you be talking about Devil Milk?"

"You've heard that, right?"

Raiden let out a disappointed sigh as he observed Leo's animated demeanor, as though he'd been dying to discuss this topic with someone.

"You get devil milk by killing familiars, but only if you're a blue crest bearer. And not all familiars work—just the evil ones like black dragons, curse dolls, shadows, and those kinds of beings..."

Raiden continued watching him through tired eyes, despite being genuinely intrigued by what he was hearing. Killing Ash was out of the question, but maybe there was an alternative route.

"When they kill their familiars, they collect the milk, and the familiar's strength determines whether their crest becomes grey, silver, or black... I've been told there's a voice that encourages the killing." Leo paused, studying Raiden carefully. "You haven't had devil milk, have you?"

Raiden just stared at him for a moment, then looked down at Ash as she slept peacefully on his shoulder.

"Stop staring at your familiar..." he fixed Raiden with a furious expression. "Lots of folks sell theirs off, which means devil milk is all over the black market."

"Have you taken any?"

Raiden grinned as he studied him. *"You know what? I like you... you might actually be helpful."*

"Huh?..."

Raiden's expression turned cold once more. *"Now tell me—how do I learn what's required to move from number 9 to 8?"*

"From 9 to 8 is about sensing mana and mana usage."

Leo's demeanor lifted again. "Uh... experimentation, really. Play around with different ways of using your mana alongside your familiar."

Raiden smiled smugly as he approached the exit, yet stopped mid-stride, his hand settling on the door handle as he turned to face Leo.

*"You'll serve as my apprentice... I'll send for you in the next week or two."*

He didn't bother waiting for Leo's expression or reply, pulling the door open sharply and stepping outside.

His mind was occupied during the return journey. Beyond his confusion about the requirements for each realm, there was the matter of the voice in his head. What made him different from everyone else?