

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 21: Euphoria - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 21: Euphoria

Chapter 21: Euphoria

When many people face death or any kind of crisis, they tend to develop a defense mechanism. For Jack, one that stood out and one he had relied on more than once was the ability to downplay the situation or behave as if it had never happened at all.

He had tried to use this tactic multiple times to overcome his fears, but no matter how often he tried in his past life, he always ended up falling into the abyss, a fear that came from thinking about it alone.

But now, as Raiden, he was going to give it one more shot. His fear wasn't real; it was a story he had been forced to believe. So he was going to create a new story, one that wouldn't hold him down, but help him rise.

He knew this wouldn't happen in a day, but as he sat calmly on his bed, eyes closed and the back of one palm resting in the other, he was willing to take all the time he needed to shape a story strong enough.

The mind is a playground of its own. It loves to analyze, summarize, and interpret anything that sparks its interest, and once it dives deep enough, that's when it finally finds peace.

So as he remained there, he let himself drift into random thoughts, giving his mind the freedom it needed to visualize. He moved from killing to killing, revenge to peace, Jobe to Jack.

This continued for a few hours as he sat silently on his bed like a monk. Before long, his mind began to find solace in the thoughts, and in that very instant, his heart started to rise.

But fear crept in, as every part of his body urged him to give up. There was no point in fighting a battle he was destined to lose.

Trembling from within, his breath growing heavier and his fingers twitching with anxiety, he hovered on the verge of surrendering to the story his fears were telling him. And then, in the midst of it all, his thoughts returned to killing once more.

His mind then shifted from solace to reconnecting with all the people he could remember killing—those who begged for their lives and those who accepted their fate. That was when he began to wonder: how exactly did he feel after spilling blood?

At that very moment, fear began to creep in again. He clenched his fists in frustration, but this time, he chose not to fight it.

He let the fear overwhelm him, his body shivering uncontrollably as a sudden sensation coursed through him, draining the color from his skin. His breathing grew uneven, broken by hiccups that even a bystander could have noticed.

After a while, he repeated the process, thinking again about all the people he had killed and what it had made him feel.

His kills weren't driven by happiness or some twisted obsession. He knew exactly what he wanted, and each kill was a step toward that goal. In the end, he reached a conclusion: warmth.

Each kill came with a sense of relief, purpose, and strength, and that was exactly where he wanted to be.

But once again, before he could fully process everything and shape a story his mind could accept, his thoughts froze, as if he'd been hit with a brain freeze.

His head spun in agony, like blades were being driven into his skull. He clenched his teeth, eyes squinting tightly, fists balled as he gripped his clothes in torment.

However, it didn't take long before everything began to settle, a wave of relief washing over him as his breathing slowed. In that moment, he steeled himself and sank into the warmth he felt after each kill.

The adrenaline rush—the thrill and excitement—he let it flood his body, and soon, he found himself trembling with a strange, rising laughter.

It was a feeling earned with purpose, like finally taking a cold bath after a long, stressful day. Still, what truly gave him goosebumps was the thought of facing someone stronger than himself. That feeling would be worth far more, enough to leave a smile on his face for days.

Still, at the moment of such a thrill, his body shook himself up, like getting out of a nightmare. His eyes were wide open in shock as he clenched his fist and slammed it into the bed in frustration.

He scoffed and began massaging his forehead, but his stomach didn't fail to send its signals as it began to rumble.

He had been in this processing state for nearly eight hours now, and he already knew it wasn't going to be easy. With an annoyed stretch, he rose to his feet and started making his way downstairs.

Before he could reach the living room, he saw Ash curled up on Leo's lap as they read a book, both fully engrossed. He smirked—not out of excitement, but at how determined Leo had been since he'd hired him. The moment Ash and Leo spotted him, Ash jumped up and ran toward him.

Raiden caught her in his arms with a smile.

"You're having fun, huh?"

[Yes, Papa...] she said, patting him on the back.

"I haven't seen you today... are you okay?"

Leo asked, leaning toward Raiden.

Raiden gave him a firm nod, his eyes beginning to dart around.

"Where are the others?"

"Levi and Aeris are training."

Raiden's eyes widened; he hadn't expected Aeris, of all people, to be training at that time of day. Still, he didn't dwell on it; there were other matters to attend to.

He quickened his steps toward the kitchen, took his time there, and shared a quiet meal with Ash, enjoying a few small moments together. Once he finished eating, Ash returned to Leo, and Raiden made his way back to his room.

He took his seat on the bed just as he had before and once again tuned into his thoughts. But this time, to avoid another panic attack, he skipped the entire buildup and went straight into the warmth of killing.

His imagination was vivid enough that the surge of adrenaline and dopamine—normally released during such moments—washed over him, allowing the warmth he felt after each kill to catch up with him, even through visualization alone.

And this was exactly what he wanted: to be driven by adrenaline even before the act itself. This wasn't something he had done before, because as Jack, the warmth that followed each kill had only been a bonus. But now, he needed it.

Even so, he needed to broaden his emotional range. As an assassin, the most effective way to kill, and to excel, was through a calm mind.

This had never been an issue when facing weaker or equal opponents, but it became a different story when standing before someone stronger.

To make the warmth and thrill work in those moments, he needed to learn how to fuse them with his calm.

From that thought alone, his head began to ache, a high-pitched ringing spreading through his brain. But this time, he had no intention of waiting for it to settle before moving forward.

With his teeth gritted and fists clenched in pain, he drew on everything he knew about finding peace in chaos.

He imagined the headache as the sound a gun makes, tuning into it, folding it into his process, and then searching for the silence that comes just before the firing pin strikes.

His fists clenched tighter as the headache intensified, but he kept searching for that silence. After a few minutes, he found it—calm spread through his body like a chill, and the high-pitched sound in his head began to fade into the distance.

Still, Raiden remained composed, letting his senses sink deeper into the quiet. He felt nothing physical; he could have been slapped across the face and wouldn't have noticed.

However, deep within him, a tingling sensation began to rise as he visualized himself killing everyone stronger than him, especially his parents.

It started as a faint stir, but before he knew it, every inch of his body was flooded with pleasure. His muscles twitched, his fingers and toes flickered, and a lustful smile crept across his lips.

This was exactly what he wanted, and he was living it. But the moment didn't last. The headache pulled him away from the sensation, dragging him out of it.

He tried to resist, but the pain and piercing sound grew unbearable. Before long, blood trickled from his nose, and moments later, he collapsed onto the bed.

[ALERT]

[NEW SKILL ACQUIRED: EUPHORIA-1%

—A rush of joy, warmth, and serenity floods when battling foes, and stronger foes alike. Tone: mad, beautiful, violence.]

Chapter 22: Compelled

It seemed like Raiden suddenly ceased to exist.

For almost three days he remained dormant. The others checked on him constantly—his breathing low, pulse moving steadily, yet he showed no response. Even pinching his skin hard wasn't enough to wake him.

However, all Raiden saw was absolute darkness within, but it made his nerves relax, freeing him from the sharp pain and high-pitched sound of his headache. So he slept.

It was sudden, but he began to feel something inside him—a startling pull, slowly at first, but before he knew it, it became abrupt. He pulled himself up in his seat and began panting heavily.

His bed was soaked in sweat as he stared at it, confused, before glancing at his body to see how pale and thin he had become. Blood stained his mouth and shirt as he tried to wipe it away.

Just as he sat there, he instinctively reached for his head, clutching it in agony, and then his stomach rumbled.

"How long was I out?" he muttered as he tried to get on his feet. He clutched his head even tighter. *"Aw..."* The sharp jolt of pain made him wince.

"It feels like I've slept for years..." he began making his way out of the room. *"Did I somehow die again?"* He smirked to himself.

"Leo?! Ash?!" Right at the top of the stairs, he began calling out names but got no response. Still, he shrugged and headed to the kitchen for some snacks.

"Levi?!... Aeris?!!"

No response.

He returned to the living room, headed down the pathway to his right, and checked the training room. There was no one, yet he took the initiative to examine the floor closely. The floor was slippery, hinting at drops of sweat or water. He knew someone had been training recently.

He left the room and began making his way to the entrance door. This should have been enough to scare him, but he remained calm, eating his snack with sluggish movements as he made his way out.

The moment he stepped outside, sunlight scorched directly into his eyes, like sharp blades piercing through them, and he quickly moved to block the rays.

[Papa!] Ash dashed toward him and lunged into Raiden's arms, forcing Raiden to stop blocking the sunlight but squint his eyes instead. He began laughing as Ash's nudges felt ticklish.

[I miss you, Papa.] Raiden began patting her as he turned to the others.

He narrowed his eyes, confused, as he saw them standing beside a lifeless body.

"What's going on?" he asked as he approached.

"An assassin," Leo said as he looked at him, while Levi and Aeris walked toward the fountain and perched beside it.

"He attacked this morning..."

Raiden smirked as he began to feel proud of his team. *"You all took him out?"* He finally closed in and took a good look.

The assassin was wrapped in blood, making his features hard to tell, but his crest was unmistakable. A yellow crest on his neck with the number 7.

"Ash detected him, but yeah, we worked together to defeat him."

"Impressive..." The moment he said it, however, his expression darkened.

"Do any of you know why a gold crest bearer would attack us?"

He narrowed his eyes slightly, his confusion plainly obvious.

"Or could they be from the Dawnbreaker house?" His head began to hurt again as he reached his hand up to massage it.

"I believe so..." Aeris spoke. For the first time, Raiden could see the sparks he always saw in her eyes before she betrayed him.

"Leo told us about it." She rose to her feet and began walking toward Raiden. "The gold crest bearers are unlikely to involve themselves in the book... they practically see themselves like gods."

*So that was their first strike after all—*Raiden thought, startled, as he walked past Aeris toward the fountain.

He turned back to Aeris and Leo. *"Mind burning the body for me?"*

Leo nodded firmly while Aeris shrugged, and they began dragging the body into the greenery, disappearing into it.

Raiden joined Levi and Ash instantly jumped to the floor, joining the others.

"Don't you think you should have been worried when you woke up and none of us were in there?" Levi asked, brushing his hand gently against his ponytailed hair.

Raiden giggled and turned to him. "You are here... I know nothing will happen to you guys with you here."

Levi laughed. "Did you trust my beauty or strength?"

Raiden gave him a lazy look. *"Don't get too cocky."*

Levi's expression darkened as he propped his elbows against his knees. "They are picking up, especially Leo." He paused and turned toward where Leo and Aeris headed. "He has this burning desire to excel as your apprentice..." he turned to Raiden. "I think you must make time for him. He trusts you."

Raiden smiled faintly, his eyes squinting slightly. *"You don't?"*

"Well, do I have a say?" He straightened up. "I am your slave after all... I am bound by oath."

Raiden didn't press the matter about Levi's words, but Leo was something he'd been thinking about. Right now, though, more pressing matters demanded attention.

"Who do you think sent this assassin? The Dawnbringers or the book hunters?"

"Hard to say, but I think this was one of my former colleagues... most of us were yellow crest bearers." He rubbed his nose. "With the palace traitor already giving away our location, it's difficult to distinguish between my old group and the Dawnbringers."

Raiden took a deep breath and rubbed his temples again. The headache wasn't letting up.

"What do you think about Aeris?"

"How long since we started training?" He searched his memories briefly. "Five days... She's been working hard, and she really knows her healing magic."

He glanced slightly at Raiden. "But I think it's solely because she wants to go home."

Raiden glanced back at him with an unreadable expression. He knew Aeris's effort wasn't solely because she wanted to go home.

It was the power structure—she felt the need to impress Levi, and in that way, once Levi put in enough good words for her, Raiden would allow her to go home.

At that moment he wondered: was this the power structure he wanted? A hierarchy or an equal power scale but with him at the top?

He sat there for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Then Leo and the others returned. He shrugged and glanced over.

"Hierarchy is better... as long as I stay at the top," he muttered to himself. *"Otherwise it's just chaos."*

Levi looked at him, confused. "What did you say?"

"..."

Levi exhaled in frustration. "Look, I know you don't want to deal with Aeris, but she should be allowed to investigate the elders." His expression turned grim. "Something tells me they're scheming."

Raiden met his gaze with understanding. The palace traitor remained elusive, which made Levi's counsel genuinely worthwhile. Even so, he felt compelled to exercise restraint—the moment for that move hadn't arrived yet.

Chapter 23: Pride of Persia

"I asked Levi how he managed to get to 7, but unfortunately, he's completely clueless," Leo said, leaning toward Raiden as they sat in the living room. "He doesn't even know what the 7th mana realm involves."

Raiden smirked, intrigued by the annoyance in Leo's voice. *"How did he get to 7 then?"*

He shrugged. "Who knows? He said he kept training until he finally went up in ranks."

Raiden stayed quiet, sensing Leo had more to say.

"I get how it happened, though," he continued, gesturing to the book in his hand. "The 8th mana realm is about mana gathering; absorbing, refining, expanding the mana pool... he probably stumbled into it without realizing."

He leaned in, his expression shifting. "I think King Hannes planted these books there on purpose. They're not available anywhere in the kingdom, not even the universities."

Raiden also leaned backward. From the moment he was told about every book in there containing magic information, the same thing had crossed his mind, but he wasn't expecting there to be none anywhere in the kingdom. He smirked though—this was a perfect opportunity to actually build a good relationship with his apprentice, Leo.

"What do you mean?"

He glanced toward Raiden, meeting his confused expression. "Don't tell me you don't know about your own history."

Leo raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. "You know, understanding mana realms and magic itself was banned centuries ago."

"I don't know..." he said, adjusting himself on the sofa. *"I only did numericals with you. I don't know anything about history or magic."*

Leo narrowed his eyes. "But you're a high-class noble." He shrugged. "I should have realized—even in school you seemed interested in everything except analytics and statistics."

Raiden shrugged, trying to remember what studying numericals had actually accomplished for him—or if he even remembered any of it.

"Many years ago, the kingdom flourished with magical expertise and powerful mages, and it was known as the Land of Knights."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he recalled the paintings in the palace. *"Are those portraits on the palace walls and ceilings from that time?"*

Leo smirked, nodding repeatedly and giving a thumbs-up. "Exactly... citizens had the privilege to learn, create, and build anything related to magic." His eyes lit up as Raiden smirked back. "But that freedom came with its own disasters."

"There was an organization called Sombra—the rulers of the night." Raiden leaned forward, suddenly invested as the name rang a bell.

"The Sombras weren't called rulers of the night just because they operated in darkness—they ruled over your family and are the reason your bloodline is nearly extinct."

That's when it all clicked for Raiden. He could suddenly remember everything his father, Tiago Night, had told him about them—the organization that had hunted their family for centuries, waging war on the entire kingdom just to get their hands on the Book of Ashes.

Raiden massaged his forehead. *"I remember now... they forced my family to produce the strongest bookkeepers for centuries, and when they couldn't control the Nights anymore, they created the devil's milk."*

Leo smirked, his voice filled with pride. "You do remember..."

Raiden scratched the back of his head in embarrassment. *"I don't remember anything beyond that, though..."* Leo's expression darkened. *"Why did they want the book?"*

Leo tapped his lip pensively. "Nobody knows the exact reason, but it was clearly for their own purposes." He sighed heavily.

Raiden's expression darkened as he wondered why nobody considered that the Sombra might be after him now. Were they really that confident they'd been defeated?

"What we do know is historic—for the first time ever, the kingdom's two most powerful families, the Nights and Dawnbringers, joined forces to destroy the Sombra."

Raiden's expression shifted to soft surprise; he hadn't known that. In fact, he wasn't sure his parents had ever mentioned it.

Leo's expression grew sad. "To me, the end of that war marked the end of this kingdom too."

Raiden stayed quiet, simply watching Leo speak. He wanted to hear everything.

"We loved magic—we learned it, understood it."

"Sure, some people used that knowledge to harm the kingdom... but others used it to save the kingdom as well."

His voice softened. "Out of fear, we transformed into the land of wisdom and knowledge—erasing everything we knew about mana realms and keeping only scraps of information to stop citizens from becoming too curious or envious."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, watching as Leo's gaze darted around the floor. *"What about other kingdoms? Do they have the same knowledge?"*

"The Kingdom of Noor has bigger concerns than magic—food, water, medicine, greenery. Magic matters to them, but it's not their daily priority." He leaned toward Raiden. "Only a handful understand it, and most of those have fled to other kingdoms."

"The Kingdom of Aurelia is 80% women, so it's very peaceful." He smirked. "They live up to their reputation as the land of beauty too—the kingdom looks absolutely stunning in books."

"Apart from Persia, Eldon is the only real threat. That kingdom runs on fear, ruled by a terrifying king who claims all their research and discoveries for himself."

His expression darkened again. "This is what I want to change... that was our pride ever since I was a child." His voice grew firm as his gaze dropped to the floor. "I want to restore our kingdom as the land of knights once more."

His voice grew steadier, etched with determination. "We were blessed by the gods, and we must use our gifts. At least, to show gratitude."

"And just as evil rises, so will good." He looked over at Raiden. "I haven't had the chance to thank you."

Nervousness washed over Raiden as he gritted his teeth, a soft smile forming on his lips as he met Leo's determined gaze.

"I'm grateful you gave me this chance—not just to learn about magic, but to serve my kingdom too." Raiden swallowed hard and nodded firmly.

"I'll do everything I can—not just to learn about magic, but to grow stronger and protect the book." He smirked. "I would've taken an oath if my apprenticeship were made official in front of everyone."

"I will take my oath," he said, bracing himself as he placed his right hand on his chest and raised the left. Raiden swallowed nervously; the uneasiness on his face made it clear, he hadn't expected things to escalate this far.

"I will do anything within my power and beyond to protect the book, and, when necessary, lay down my life for the bookkeeper." He lowered his hands and took a deep breath. A wave of relief surged through Raiden, and he smiled.

"I just want to do everything in my power and lay a strong foundation for the next generation." Raiden stepped closer and placed a hand on Leo's shoulder. This was an opportunity he wasn't going to miss.

"You can certainly make that come true. Learn everything you can, help me, and together, we'll grow stronger. The beauty of our strength alone will be enough to inspire the next generation."

Raiden smiled. However, in that very instant, it was as if something snapped within him, and he began to rush his words.

"About that... I'm still learning about the mana realms ahead. But as a Blue Crest bearer, the way you can expand your mana pool efficiently is different from the others."

Chapter 24: After the Duel

"Leo showed me the key to accessing the 7th mana realm's enhancement abilities," Levi said, smirking as he pushed up his sleeves. "Don't expect another loss from me..."

Raiden faced him, breathing slowly and steadily. Despite the massive grin painted across his face and the thrill of euphoria coursing through him from his newfound skill, fear still held him captive. His boots shook as he locked eyes with Levi.

"So you can enhance your physical strength with mana now." His smirk broadened, fueled not just by euphoria but by the knowledge of his 8th realm ability—absorbing his

contract's mana to amplify his own power. The stronger Levi became, the stronger he would become as well.

"Let's get this over with..." Levi muttered, his face growing dark before he disappeared entirely.

Raiden kept smirking, but panic crept in as he realized he couldn't move. His legs might as well have been glued to the ground.

"*Shit...*" he muttered, slamming his fist against the leg in frustration.

A fist drove into his stomach without warning. Before the agony could fully register, a second strike launched him into the ground with brutal force.

"This isn't even close to a fair fight," Levi taunted, becoming visible again. "Wouldn't you rather have me as your trainer?"

Frustration boiled over as Raiden clenched his jaw and hauled himself upright. The ache in his stomach somehow made his grin stretch even wider, though fear still proved to be his greatest adversary.

Raiden pushed through the pain and stared Levi down. "*Ha... you think so?*" Then it hit him—a realization that transformed his smirk into something truly wicked. He possessed the same invisibility power.

"*This will be fun.*" His expression shifted to mocking amusement as he watched Levi's confusion dawn.

Levi disappeared instantly, prompting Raiden to burst into laughter. He centered his focus, channeling his power to turn invisible, and succeeded.

His eyesight instantly adapted, displaying the world through heat detection. In this new spectrum, Levi's warm form stood out clearly to the left, advancing with calculated ease—no footsteps, no haste, just quiet certainty.

It was obvious Levi couldn't detect Raiden's invisibility, yet fear continued to root him to the spot. Exploiting Levi's unawareness, Raiden let out a sharp, empty cry of terror, the sound serving as both release and distraction from his overwhelming dread.

Acting on raw instinct and sheer will, Raiden spun through the air, his left leg driving downward to boost his rotational force. Levi's jaw dropped in startled confusion, but before his mind could process what was happening, Raiden's right leg crashed into his windpipe.

Knowing the strike wasn't sufficient to end the fight, Raiden landed and immediately forced out another violent scream. His fists were clenched to the point of trembling, his

throat scraping raw with the effort, while veins stood out like cords across his face, neck, and forearms.

Before Levi could even register the pain in his throat, Raiden drove two merciless punches into his gut. The rush of euphoria hit him like a drug, pulling a hollow laugh from his chest as he gathered every bit of power he possessed for one crushing final strike that sent Levi plummeting to the earth, shrieking in pain.

Instantly visible again, Raiden burst into laughter that sounded utterly deranged. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, tears of wild joy spilling from his eyes, yet beneath the euphoric high, fear still controlled his body—dropping him to the ground where he shivered with both terror and twisted excitement.

Levi hauled himself upright, confusion written across his features as he stared at Raiden's contradictory display.

Unable to tell if those were tears of anguish or euphoria, he asked, "Are you okay?" while holding his injured stomach.

Raiden offered no words, just the endless sound of his hysteria.

"How did you see me, though?"

Only laughter answered him.

[ALERT]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL- 20/100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 25

DRAGON MANA POOL: 210/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 180

STAMINA: 175

DRAGON AURA: 40

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 80%

—Euphoria: 7%

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: **6%**

—Invisibility

—Others Locked.]

As the system's voice ended, Raiden's hysterical laughter slowly died away. He repositioned himself to stare at the ceiling, taking in the small stars scattered across it while wearing a contented smile.

For the first time, he'd beaten someone who outclassed him. His smile grew wider as his body trembled with delighted giggles.

"I need this 100%."

Levi dropped down beside him, lying on the floor as well. "What are you talking about?"

"..."

Raiden met his gaze, his expression sobering completely. *"You need to take every opponent seriously, no matter how much stronger you think you are."*

Levi narrowed his gaze and reclined on the ground, reaching his hand up toward the ceiling. "Are you saying I lost because I underestimated you?"

Raiden started getting up from the floor. "Yes..." After reaching his full height, he began patting the dust from his garments. *"You thought I had no way to detect you, so you got cocky before securing your victory."*

He took Levi's hand and hauled him to his feet. *"Save the celebration for after you've completed the task."*

"You haven't worked as an assassin before, have you?"

A smirk crossed Raiden's face as he headed toward the entrance. *"Would you like to know?"*

Levi shrugged. "Of course!"

Though Raiden refused to be open about his real identity, with Levi enslaved to him and likely to stay until he left this world, he viewed this as a prime chance to forge him into something more formidable.

Turning toward him, he commanded, *"Follow me,"* before exiting the room. Levi fell into step behind him.

"Strength matters, but you need more than that."

He spoke while they walked out of the house. His expression darkened suddenly as a warning tingle shot through his mind—danger detection triggering. The sensation felt too far off to be immediate, so he chose to ignore it.

"What matters then?" Levi's question cut through his distraction as they passed the living room on their way to the entrance.

"Oh yeah..." He glanced back at Levi trailing behind him. *"An assassin is coming here."*

Levi's expression grew serious. "Want me to track them down or something?"

"Oh no, not now..." The instant Raiden stepped into the open, he stretched his body out of frustration.

He could never adjust to the intense brightness—the light felt like spotlights burning into him, creating an uncomfortable sensation he couldn't shake.

He pushed his hands into his pockets and went completely still, his face turned slightly skyward as he attempted to calm his racing thoughts before the assassin reached them. Levi came to a stop next to him, fussing with his ponytail.

"Strength must be balanced with discipline." He spoke more softly now. *"You need vigilance, caution, thoughtfulness, and above everything else—sharp instincts."*

"Aren't you worried about the assassin?"

Raiden faced the fountain as he felt the assassin's approach, ignoring Levi's concern entirely. *"If you want to develop true discipline, forget about humans—animals are your real teachers."*

With his face still turned toward the sky, he recalled his very first kill when he was three years old: a goat. Despite having a knife as his weapon, the creature had fought for hours before he could finish it.

Its survival instincts, alertness, and quick reactions had been extraordinary. After progressing to animals with even keener reflexes and raw power like deer and bears, human targets seemed laughably simple by comparison.

"Once you've mastered the kind of discipline you see in animals—tigers, lions, true predators," he looked at Levi with that familiar smirk, "trust me, you'll never struggle with discipline during a fight."

Levi turned toward him, energized by the prospect. "Then let's hunt down some ogres and beasts for practice."

The tingling in Raiden's head reached its peak. *"The assassin has arrived."*

His pulse quickened with alarm. *"There are two of them,"* he whispered, rubbing his mouth as anxiety crept in.

Chapter 25: Before Tragedy

Two individuals approached the fountain from the left. The one in cream with silver hair moved with such calm confidence that even from a distance, Raiden knew it was Mack. The other one, though—that one looked different—he was around Raiden's age.

A skeletal black mask covered half of his face, leaving his eyes and forehead exposed, so thin it seemed fused to his skin, making it impossible to distinguish where the mask ended and the flesh began. Sharp, exaggerated teeth curved outward from it like a predator's maw.

His eyes were golden with cat-like slit pupils. His dark hair looked a bit messy—slightly messier than Raiden's—and he wore multiple earrings, including a black dangling one. He wore a black high-collared turtleneck.

Raiden swallowed nervously as he stared at him. *"He survived that strike?"* he muttered to himself as his body began shivering from within, a faint grin forming on his lips.

The person with Mack had a white aura radiating from him, but his appearance didn't suggest he was just a supporter—he looked like an experienced fighter.

He turned left just as Levi vanished from sight. One moment later, Mack's strike connected, and Levi crashed into the ground. Raiden gave him a lazy look, touched his own forehead, and shook his head in disappointment.

"You're surprised to see me alive, huh?" He struck a confident pose. "It's hard to kill beautiful people like me, you know?" He let out a sigh.

"I'm not here to fight..." Mack said with a cocky expression, smirking. "But at least he is."

Levi finally rose to his feet, clutching his gut. "What's this arrogance?" he muttered as he moved closer to Raiden.

Raiden shot him a confused look. The question was so perplexing it actually made him tear his gaze away from their opponents.

"That old man is literally like your father..." His voice carried obvious confusion.

Irritation flashed across Mack's face. "I already told you, I'm not an old man... I'm just 24." He turned to the person beside him, who had been silent all this while. "Get them, Speed," he said with a smirk.

Before Raiden could even register what Mack said, Speed was there. Raiden's eyes widened, a huge grin spreading across his face as wind from Speed's movement whipped his hair and kicked up clouds of dirt. Through the swirling haze, Speed struck.

Everything happened too quickly for Raiden to process, but his body moved on pure instinct—dodging the strike entirely and countering with a blow to Speed's windpipe.

Speed crashed into the ground while Raiden stood over him, panting and wearing a psychotic grin.

"How strong is he?" Raiden muttered as he approached while Levi watched, perplexed.

Uncertainty filled Raiden as he stared at Speed. The black shirt concealed whatever number marked his neck, hiding his true strength. But Raiden's grin only widened—he'd discover it through combat.

"Levi..." Levi turned toward him while keeping an eye on Speed as he slowly rose. *"Go invisible, but wait to strike until he's trapped or committed to a move."*

Levi nodded firmly and turned invisible. Just then, Ash, Leo, and Aeris came outside, but Raiden ignored them completely. The thrill racing through his veins had eyes only for Speed.

Without waiting another second, Raiden dashed toward Speed, who was kneeling and clutching his throat. He leaped into the air, striking toward his neck, but before the blow could connect, Speed vanished.

In that same instant, Raiden tilted his head left to find Speed right beside him, fist already driving toward his face. Too fast, too sudden to avoid.

He steeled himself for the incoming strike, but before Speed could connect, Levi attacked, sending him crashing into the ground.

Euphoria coursed through Raiden's body, a tingling hunger for more thrills. He didn't wait for Speed to stand—he rushed forward and drove his foot into Speed's neck while he lay on the ground, nearly snapping it. Speed spun helplessly, but showed no pain. No screams. No tears. Nothing.

Despite everything, Speed lunged to his feet. Mack smirked from the sidelines. "As I expected from the bookkeeper... no mercy." He stepped backward, pulling a cigar and a white potion from his pocket.

"Now, Speed," he said, tossing him the potion.

Speed nodded and drank the potion. Instantly, he cried out in agony—the first sound of pain he'd made. His voice was hollow and detached as he clutched his head.

"You better deal with him, Bookkeeper, before it's too late." Mack turned and gave Raiden a casual wave, though Raiden seemed confused about what was happening.

"You're not going anywhere!" Leo yelled as soon as he saw Mack retreating. Ash instantly expanded in size, and together they charged toward Mack before he could vanish into the forest.

At the same time, Speed's agonized screams filled the air as he desperately tried to tear the mask from his face. The sight of him writhing alone made Raiden's smile fade. Still, he had no intention of waiting to see what Speed would become.

"Levi! Strike him now!" Raiden yelled. Levi responded instantly, connecting with Speed's jaw. Raiden's euphoria surged as he rushed forward.

Within striking distance, he unleashed rapid jabs to Speed's gut before channeling all his power into one final blow—a devastating strike to the same spot on Speed's jaw that sent him crashing down.

Just then, Leo and Ash came sprinting back. "Everyone get back!" Leo yelled.

Raiden barely heard the warning, but his body instinctively flipped backward, putting distance between himself and Speed.

When they reached Speed, Ash's mouth opened and her eyes went pitch black. Dark shadows swirled around Speed in a circle before solidifying into chains that bound him tightly, stopping his desperate attempts to claw at his head.

Raiden's expression shifted to pure confusion. He glanced between Speed's continued agony and Ash's mysterious new ability. *"What's going on?"* he demanded, confusion clear in his voice.

Leo walked toward Speed. "That potion was devil's milk, and based on the pain he's experiencing, he's becoming a corrupt crest."

Raiden shook his head in confusion as Ash shrank down and dashed toward him. *"No, no... I mean, Ash—how?"*

[Papa...] Ash whispered, throwing herself into Raiden's arms and nestling against him with gentle nudges.

Leo's expression darkened as he turned to Raiden. "You didn't know?" One look at Raiden's face was enough to make Leo shake his head in disappointment. "I'll tell you later." He nodded toward Speed. "What do we do with him?"

Raiden absently patted Ash as his thoughts spiraled. What exactly was she? Could she really take him back to his past after all? The questions made his heartbeat quicken, anxiety and confusion washing over him.

Levi materialized and crouched beside Speed next to Leo. "We have to kill him, obviously."

Leo's face darkened. "No, Raiden needs contracts to build his mana reserves effectively. He should form one with Speed... and also we need allies."

Levi turned to Raiden, who was still lost in his mind. "What do you think?"

Levi's words snapped Raiden out of his thoughts. His eyes darted around in confusion.

"Yes, sure," he blurted, not knowing what they were even talking about.

Levi and Leo gave him a nod and started carrying Speed toward the house. But as they turned, confusion crossed Leo's face. "Where's Aeris?"

[ALERT]

[FAMILIAR TRUST +20%

SOUL OF DRAGON +2%

MANA CONTROL +5

DRAGON MANA POOL: 212/5000

STAMINA +5

PHYSICAL STRENGTH +5

EUPHORIA +5%]

Chapter 26: Dragons

She was gone. Her luggage was gone. Aeris was gone.

Leo was confused about her decision, and kept asking what would prompt Aeris to leave. Raiden, however, remained untouched by her betrayal, but one question lingered in his mind—why now?

Leo and Levi dropped Speed's chained body into one of the rooms downstairs. No lanterns, no furniture—just pitch-black emptiness. The room felt designed for torture alone. They stood watching him writhe and scream in agony as the devil milk continued its transformation from within.

"Ash's chains can bind him for quite a while," Leo said, turning toward Raiden on his right. "You must hurry with the contract."

He turned toward Speed with a confused expression. "How, though?"

Raiden gave him a puzzled look, trying to figure out why Leo was speaking of a contract, but it only left him more bewildered. *"What do you mean by a contract?"*

Levi turned to Raiden, his expression showing even more confusion than Raiden's. "How can you forget? You're supposed to get more contracts to build your mana reserve."

"Is that necessary?"

Leo gave him a firm nod. "You need contracts at the 8th realm to increase your mana pool. Refine them by using them effectively, and you'll be able to advance to the 7th realm."

"The exact amount varies by person, but I'd say two should do it."

Raiden smirked and placed Ash on his shoulder before kneeling beside Speed. Contracting Speed wouldn't be a bad idea—with Aeris already showing signs of betrayal, he needed more allies alongside Leo and Levi. He pulled down Speed's turtleneck and examined his crest. It was still white with a seven, but the crest was starting to fade.

"You need to contract him before he goes completely corrupt. It might take a while, though." Raiden rose to his feet. "Once you're done with him, you can rest and make a contract with me next."

Raiden turned to him with both confusion and admiration. He hadn't expected such a bold recommendation from Leo, even with his devotion as his apprentice.

"You know that will make you my slave, right?"

"Yes, but you need to climb the ranks and protect the book." Leo said it without a hint of regret.

Raiden smirked as Levi excused himself and left the room. However, the moment he was gone, Raiden's expression darkened.

He turned to the shadowy chains binding Speed, his desire to understand how Ash had produced them still burning.

"Tell me about Ash. What do you know?" His voice was calm yet commanding.

"I wasn't sure about her, but ever since I saw her increase in size during our first encounter with Mack..." Leo took a few steps closer to Raiden.

"I became interested in how a white dragon could do such a thing."

Raiden glanced at Ash, still sleeping, as he listened to Leo speak, his mind hungry for more. Something worth hearing.

"I started reading random books, but since they all had the same covers and titles, it was difficult." He smirked.

"During the times you were unconscious and I couldn't ask questions, I bothered Aeris instead. That's when she told me something that gave me a clue."

He gestured to Raiden. "Come, let me show you something." Raiden turned to him and, without a word, followed Leo's lead as they headed to the training room.

"Aeris said Ash's flames were extremely hot—at one point they even turned into dark flames."

Raiden's expression darkened. *"Did you tell anything to Aeris?"*

Leo turned back to him and opened the door to the training room. Once inside, he flipped a switch to transform the bookshelves on the wall into weaponry shelves.

"No, I thought you didn't want anyone knowing, so I told no one."

Raiden said nothing and simply entered the room, standing at the center while Leo reached for a book on a shelf.

"Do you remember the Sombra?"

Raiden's nod was purely sarcastic.

"Their leader was one of the few people in recorded history to get the number 2—and he had a dragon like Ash." Leo walked toward Raiden, whose expression clearly demanded more.

"And aside from him, there are two other records of dragons with similar summoning abilities to Ash's who could also shapeshift—but theirs were black dragons."

Raiden grinned. There being so few meant they were either important or powerful. *"Are they powerful?"*

Leo opened the book and showed him a portrait of seven distinctive giant dragons. One black dragon had a single horn, three black dragons had two horns each, and three red dragons had three horns each.

"These are the primordial dragons, and two of these dragons have already been summoned in the past. The leader of the Sombra was the one who summoned one of the reds, the dragon of violence."

Raiden's expression darkened as he studied the portraits thoroughly. The black dragon with a single horn was labeled the dragon of flames, while the others were Ice, Lightning, and Lava.

The red dragons were Violence, Decay, and Poison, each with distinctive features corresponding to their names. However, there was no white dragon. No Ash.

"Where's Ash?"

Leo closed the book and returned it to the shelves. "That's when things get complicated..." Raiden stared at him, mouth slightly parted in disappointment.

"There's no Ash." He paused for a moment to let his words settle in. "That's what made me believe she is somehow connected to one of the primordial dragons—perhaps their child or an entirely different species yet to be discovered."

Leo paused for a moment. "The book says that when a dragon fully trusts their summoner, they can transfer their will and essence by biting the summoner's hand."

Raiden's expression darkened as he stared at Leo, piecing together why Ash might have bitten him. But something didn't add up—she'd bitten him twice, not once.

"Once she bites you, you might get to know what she truly is."

"Once or twice?"

"The book says once... have you already been bitten?"

"..."

Raiden didn't know what to think at that point. It would have been perfect if Ash was actually a primordial dragon—in that case, all he had to do was make sure she got stronger and send him back to his world. But now he was only disappointed. Still, he couldn't shake off the feeling that there might be more.

After all, he now shared the same soul with Ash, not something he believed any ordinary dragon could do.

And again, Ash's constant requests for him to get stronger meant there was more than met the eye about her. He was disappointed, but not completely dissatisfied with Ash.

"In that case, what do you think Ash could do?"

Leo shrugged. "The leader of Sombra killed his dragon, and used it to create the first and most prestigious devil milk ever made—even to this day. After that, he summoned it as a shadow."

Leo glanced at Ash. "And though most of our histories have been erased and I don't know much about the other kingdoms, he was one of the few people who actually got to number 2."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he watched Leo walk toward the entrance to flip the switch. *"How did you know she could produce shadowy chains, though?"*

Leo wore an awkward smile and began scratching the back of his head. "I didn't know..." He relied on his smile to carry the moment.

"When we went after Mack, he activated his Domain of Silence, and we couldn't get near him." He began to brush his white hair back. "That's when I asked Ash if she could do something about Speed, and she nodded."

He shrugged. "So I simply asked what seemed most logical at that moment."

Raiden slapped his forehead in disbelief. He'd actually been hoping for something—something worth knowing.

Suddenly, a hollow and blunt scream echoed through the building. They both spun toward the sound in panic.

"Speed?!"

Chapter 27: Traitor

Raiden and Leo burst into Speed's room to find Levi beside him, pressing a knife toward his eye.

"What are you doing, Levi?" Leo demanded, quickly moving to strike the blade from his hand.

Levi wore an unbothered expression as he stared at them both. "I asked him about the contract, and he said nothing." He raised an eyebrow. "This is our only option."

He turned to Raiden. "Am I lying? Those were your words, weren't they? We must earn our requests as assassins."

Raiden gave him a big grin. *"That's right."*

Leo shook his head in disappointment. "What's the point of signing a contract with a disabled person?"

Levi looked back at Speed, reassessing. "So how are we going to do this then?"

There wasn't much any of them could do. Speed hadn't been the cooperative type even before taking the devil milk. But Raiden knew if anything would work, it would be psychological torture. The question was what.

He approached Speed and knelt beside him. He reached out and tilted Speed's face to look into his dark eyes, then let out a sigh. Despite his body being drenched in sweat and his skin running pale, there was no fear in his eyes. None.

He rose to his feet. *"I don't think there's anything we could do..."* He turned to the others.

"Just kill him," he said without any hint of hesitation.

"There is something, though," Levi said, brushing his hair back. "The book of Aaron."

"Huh?" Raiden asked, confused.

"Yeah, I've heard of the book of Aaron, the book of contracts," Leo said, turning to Levi with a puzzled look. "Do you know where we could get one?"

Raiden remained motionless with only his eyes darting at their faces, itching for clarification, until Levi finally offered an explanation.

"I already gave Raiden a copy."

Raiden's eyes widened. *"Oh, that's the book?"*

"Not exactly... I'm sure you already noticed some pages were missing." Raiden gave him a firm nod. "To force someone into a contract, you'd need those missing pages."

"They cost a lot, and they're very hard to find on the black market... we might have to travel to the other cities," he added.

Raiden's expression darkened. Considering their current situation, even a single one of them leaving the hideout could spell disaster. He couldn't shake the feeling that Aeris's betrayal was just the beginning of something more sinister.

"No... we can't leave to go in pursuit of the book." His voice dropped even lower. *"We must find another way or kill him before he turns."*

"He seems to be a good option though," Leo replied

.

Raiden shifted toward him, massaging his aching shoulders. *"You seem awfully interested in Speed. Why so?"* His expression turned skeptical.

He knew Leo wanted what was best for them. Even if Leo had ulterior motives, contracting Speed wouldn't necessarily work against him. But he wouldn't abandon his duty just because Speed might prove a better ally. Seeing Leo struggle for words, he shrugged.

"It's getting late... let's rest and continue this tomorrow," he said and, without waiting for a response, turned and walked out.

He was tired from training and the fight with Speed, but he wanted answers about Ash. In his room, he placed her on the bed and sat beside her. Just as he'd done in the 9th realm—if that realm let them infuse mana with their familiars, then he should be able to do it again.

He closed his eyes and drew slow, steady breaths, seeking the silence within. A quick check of his mana core showed it had increased in size. Good—this would be easier than before.

However, the moment he poured his mana into Ash, she shot awake. Instantly, Raiden felt dizzy. The silence pressed against him like a cage closing in from all sides.

Trapped in nothingness, he opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came—his voice had been stolen. He collapsed to his left, consciousness slipping away as darkness pulled him under.

Ash stood over him, whispering in somber tones, before gently lying down beside him.

Raiden slept deeply, dreamlessly—no stress, no nightmares. It felt like eternal slumber, though it lasted only a few hours. When he woke, he found Ash standing on the bed beside him.

He massaged his temples, confused about what had happened. All he remembered was attempting to channel his mana into Ash.

Ash jumped into his arms and began nudging him with affection. [Not now, Papa.]

Raiden's expression shifted to amusement. *"Not now, huh?"* He smirked.

"I hope you grow out of calling me Papa one day."

At that very moment, the door burst open. Leo.

"King Hannes wants to speak with us."

Raiden narrowed his eyes slightly, wondering what the King could possibly be doing there. Then he immediately sprang to his feet as it hit him. Maybe Aeris had finally done something that could really harm them.

He rushed out, Ash and Leo following. *"Where is he?"* Raiden paused at the top of the stairs, scanning the living room below. Empty.

"The training room... it's a crown's call," Leo said, brushing past Raiden with Ash in tow as they headed toward the training room.

Raiden simply followed. He remembered the King using the crown's call during his father's reign as bookkeeper. It was always used to address the entire kingdom. He hadn't known it could be directed at just one person.

As soon as he entered the training room, he saw a projection floating in midair. Within it, the King sat on his throne, patiently awaiting Raiden's arrival, his crown positioned regally on his head.

As soon as they entered, Leo bowed his head. "The bookkeeper is here, my king."

King Hannes locked eyes with Raiden's unwavering gaze, smirked, and cleared his throat. At that moment, his entire demeanor transformed. His presence radiated true royal authority.

"Raiden Night!" His voice was steady and gentle. Raiden nodded, waiting for more.

"It has come to our attention that you have a traitor—an assassin among you, serving under you."

Raiden shook his head with a disbelieving smile. His disappointment in Aeris was crushing. Of all the secrets she could have sold, why that one? And who would even want such information?

"Given this information, the kingdom has no choice but to brand you as a traitor."

Raiden's face darkened immediately, confusion and shock mirrored by Leo and even Ash.

"What?!" All three said at once.

"Right now, I'm speaking to you of my own accord..." He paused and sighed. "I tried to defend you, but when I slammed my fist on the council table, none of the elders supported me."

Raiden clenched his fists and gritted his teeth in frustration. One thing was certain—when he next saw Aeris, he would kill her.

"You're guilty until proven innocent... So I'm warning you. Stay vigilant, and everything you need to grow stronger can be found in the books around you."

"Including the book of Aaron?" Leo rushed to ask.

"Yes... just find them." The King narrowed his eyes, locking onto Raiden's gaze as he seethed over Aeris's betrayal.

King Hannes's voice grew tender, yet carried a warning. "If you do exactly as I've asked, you will be able to escape this fate."

With that, he disconnected the call without waiting for a response.

"I will kill that piece of shit," Raiden muttered coldly, his voice devoid of fear.

An overwhelming sense of danger crashed over him. Fear seized him initially, his body shaking, but then euphoria coursed through his veins. A manic smile split his face as mad laughter bubbled from his throat.

Chapter 28: Attack by a Star

Raiden dragged his sword as he and the others made their way out of the house. There, before the fountain, stood a black grand piano. Behind it sat a girl dressed in a black suit, her long black hair cascading gently down her back, flickering in the wind.

Her eyes caught their attention immediately—she wore star-shaped contact lenses on both eyes, making them glow yellow in correspondence with her mana crest, which bore the number 7.

"A star?" Leo asked, startled. "Even a couple of knights would be preferable... they're hot on our trail now."

Raiden clutched the hilt of his sword tightly as he watched a soft smile spread across the girl's lips, growing more pronounced by the second.

"Levi, turn invisible and get closer." His voice cracked with excitement. *"Strike when you get the chance."*

Levi gave him a nod and vanished. However, within seconds, the girl pressed a minor key, and a blade of sound shot toward them in a flash. Too fast to avoid, Raiden threw up his sword to block it, but the force sent him skidding backward on his feet.

"I think she can manipulate sounds into blades..." Leo said and held his stance.

Raiden began laughing out loud, his body shaking, and before he could stop himself, he was sprinting toward the girl. Every step sent thrills through him, yet his heart hammered like never before. Ash expanded and gave chase while Leo remained paralyzed, unsure how to act.

Before Raiden and Ash could close the distance, the girl's playing quickened, unleashing dozens of sound blades. Raiden deflected them while grinning, yet the more exhilarated he grew, the more it felt like his very soul was abandoning him out of terror.

The girl's piano playing intensified. Raiden braced himself within the storm of blades and kept blocking, his body moving with inhuman speed. But the strikes were too relentless and powerful—he couldn't parry them all. Soon he found himself skidding backward, his limbs weakening until he could no longer lift his hands.

Pain tore through his body as the strikes began to split his skin, but caught in euphoria, he could only respond with hollow, breathless laughter.

His mind reeled in the chaos, desperately seeking a way to turn the tide against the girl. To his left, Ash deflected strikes with her wings, visibly struggling but unable to retreat—without her shield, the blades would tear straight through Leo, who stood defenseless.

"Ash, do that smoky thing you did with Speed!" he yelled.

Ash nodded, her eyes turning pitch black as she opened her mouth. In an instant, dark shadows erupted around her, forcing the girl from her seat. Raiden didn't hesitate—he charged forward immediately.

But before he could reach her, the girl smoothly took her seat again and closed her eyes. She shifted from minor to sharp keys, and razor-thin, elongated blades erupted from the piano, slicing through the smoke and streaking toward Raiden.

His eyes went wide as a blade streaked toward him. His grin spread even as his terror deepened—he managed to block it, but the impact was overwhelming, slamming him into the ground.

Euphoria coursed through him, the thrill refusing to let him remain down. He forced himself up on shaking legs without pause. Four blades appeared in his vision, streaking his way. He tried to raise his guard, but his arms had gone completely lifeless.

His fear suddenly overwhelmed the euphoria as he watched the blades closing in. But just before they could strike, Ash rushed over and kicked him clear into the grass field.

She offered Raiden a weak smile as the blades pierced her abdomen, and she crumpled to the ground instantly. At that moment, Levi appeared behind the girl, striking her neck and rendering her unconscious. He too collapsed, a deep wound slashed across his chest, his shirt drenched in blood.

"No..." Raiden whispered, grief thick in his voice as he stared at Ash soaked in blood. Yet his eyes lit up with hope when she began to shrink, struggling to stand only to fall back down.

Raiden attempted to stand, but his battered body refused to obey—too broken and weak to even crawl toward Ash. His own agony meant nothing; all that mattered was whether she would survive. But he couldn't defy fate, and darkness overtook him.

[ALERT]

[SOUL OF DRAGON +3%

MANA CONTROL +5

STAMINA +5

PHYSICAL STRENGTH +5

EUPHORIA +7%]

Leo remained frozen, uncertain how to act. His gaze shifted frantically between his fallen companions.

"Pull yourself together, Leo," he muttered and struck himself across the face.

He rushed to carry Ash inside and made her drink some healing potion. After that, he brought in the others, including the star girl, but made sure to bind her first.

Leo paced frantically, consumed with self-blame for his uselessness. He muttered harsh words against himself, tears streaming down his face.

The shame was overwhelming—seeing them all barely clinging to life while he remained unharmed made him want to quit being the bookkeeper's apprentice entirely. Yet despite everything, he refused to give up.

"Who will restore the pride of Persians if I give up?" he muttered to himself. "I have to get stronger."

He spent hours in meditation, working to expand his mana reserves, though he never failed to tend to his injured friends.

After nearly a day, Raiden was the first to regain consciousness. He woke to find himself covered in bandages, lying in his bed. When he looked left and saw Ash next to him, equally bandaged, his eyes went wide, and he quickly moved to check on her.

Relief flooded through him when he saw she was still breathing. He gently stroked her head. Her condition looked serious, but he felt grateful knowing she would recover.

He exhaled deeply and got to his feet, stretching out his aching limbs. If Ash had died, it would have been disastrous—not just because she reminded him of his brother Jobe or because she'd thrown herself in harm's way to protect him, but because she represented his sole chance of returning to his world.

"Where's everybody? I'm starving..." he said, patting his stomach as he left the room. Seeing no one around, he went to the kitchen to grab some snacks before heading to the training room.

And there in the center sat Leo, drenched in sweat, doing what appeared to be meditation—at least, that's what Raiden thought at first. But Leo was constantly fanning himself from the heat, which seemed odd for someone supposedly meditating.

He stepped inside, and that alone was enough to snap Leo out of his meditation.

"Raiden, you're awake," Leo said, quickly getting to his feet.

But something in the distant corner drew his attention. The girl sat there, her mouth sealed with tape, fighting against her restraints.

"I was hoping you could help me train, bookkeeper." Leo's tone carried newfound confidence and determination.

Raiden heard Leo's request, but his mind was on the captive girl. What were their options? Killing her might make things worse, but keeping her indefinitely wasn't viable either.

"What do you think we should do with her?"

Leo's gaze shifted to the girl. "I've had the same thought."

"Killing her could lead the elders to petition the king for the Makers to hunt us down—or even the Judges. The murder of a Star, a prodigious knight, would be an extremely serious crime."

Raiden scoffed with irritation. *"Fighting a Star was bad enough."* He approached her slowly.

"The Makers would be merciful compared to what they'll actually do—they'll send a Judge to make sure we face proper judgment."

He crouched down beside her and met her gaze directly. Her eyes blazed with fury as she glared back at him.

"I'm sure killing her is exactly what the elders want."

A smirk crossed Raiden's face as he gripped her collar and started dragging her across the floor. Leo followed, watching as Raiden pulled her toward the teleportation room.

He shoved her in front of the portal and observed her futile attempts to escape her bonds.

"But how did she get the piano here?"

"The elders probably teleported her with it using a magic circle."

He shook his head. *"Do they really hate me that much?"*

Raiden gripped her collar and pulled her upright, his tone turning cold and intimidating. *"When you get back, tell them the bookkeeper deserves respect..."*

An irritated sneer crossed the girl's face, clear despite the tape sealed over her lips.

"Next time, there won't be any mercy." His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper, his face hardening. "Count on it."

Sweat beaded on the girl's forehead, but Raiden's expression suddenly shifted to a soft, almost friendly smile—deliberately meant to disorient her. Then, without missing a beat, he shoved her through the portal.

"It doesn't matter what she says—they'll come for us anyway... with a more dangerous Star, most likely."

Raiden spun toward Leo with an enormous grin, the idea making his euphoria surge even higher. "Then we prepare ourselves."

Chapter 29: Impact

"I can't say how many were in your kingdom, but Persia has five Stars total. We just faced one, which means four are still out there." Leo said, dropping to the floor as sweat dripped from his frame.

"Noor has just two, since few have the strength required to seek that kind of power." Levi said, coming to rest next to him as he pressed his hand against the bandages around his torso.

"The Makers serve as enforcers in my kingdom—only two exist... they're essentially gods, not merely through strength but through their possessions." Levi added.

"Makers are enforcers in Persia as well—four of them. They're numbered 6 and 5, with the judges ranking above them." Leo turned to Levi.

"Three judges exist, each numbered 4... by title alone, they stand as the strongest in the entirety of Persia."

His voice fell to a whisper. "They judge to condemn... if we ever come under their scrutiny, we're finished."

"Finished, huh?" Levi smirked, letting his head fall back toward the ceiling.

"I had no idea our kingdoms shared such similar hierarchies, given that the other two have entirely different structures." Leo said as he stood up.

"Me neither." Levi said, following suit.

Raiden entered with a vacant expression, mechanically shoving cake into his mouth. The second the others caught sight of him, they snapped into action, throwing precise punches into the air.

Raiden walked to the far right corner and sank to the floor, observing their training session while absently consuming his cake. Ash's condition weighed heavily on his thoughts. She'd appeared stable when he woke the day before, but her fever was climbing rapidly and her wound had worsened through the night.

The situation ate at him, though he felt powerless to change it. He'd attempted to pour his mana into her once more, ignoring Ash's earlier warning that the timing wasn't right—but he needed to try. For the slim chance it might help. It didn't.

And here he sat, torn between continuing to worry about her or dedicating himself solely to getting stronger.

A few minutes later, he refilled his plate and settled back into position, observing as they copied his exact shadowboxing form. But when his eyes dropped to the plate, his expression changed.

He had his own training to focus on, and more importantly, they needed to forge their own fighting styles—something distinctive that would keep the trio unpredictable.

He lowered the plate to the floor with care, yet the contact rang out sharply across the room. Then he stood and cracked his knuckles.

"*Stop!*" he ordered, moving closer. They froze and pivoted toward him.

Clearing his throat, he took his place in front of them as they stared back at him, sweat-soaked and breathing hard from their training.

"Training isn't supposed to be a perfect imitation of what you're shown." His gaze shifted to Levi. *"Did you bother training him?"*

He smacked his palm against his forehead. *"What am I saying... you're making the same mistakes."*

Levi shrugged, but wore an abrupt dark expression. "So you're calling me pathetic?" He sneered. "Don't let this get to your head."

Raiden exhaled deeply. *"We're starting fresh."*

"What I've shown you is all me—my approach to training and the foundation of how I fight."

He started a slow pace back and forth, his hands folded behind him.

"What I'm teaching you is valuable, but you have to take it... and blend it with yourself." He stopped mid-step, gathering his thoughts. *"Shape it into something that fits you better."*

"Make sense?"

They nodded in sync.

"Right. Now that that's settled, I'll leave you with one last bit of information."

He sat cross-legged on the floor and waved them down beside him. After teaching them how to meditate properly, he'd finally be free to go train by himself.

They sat with eyes closed, trying to mirror Raiden's movements and posture.

"To me, meditation means uniting with my body, finding harmony within myself, and building strength from within," he explained while sinking into his meditative state.

"You have to create your own definition of meditation, naturally, but that will develop from the sensations you find within."

Opening his eyes at last, he watched as they both worked to find their meditative rhythm. He couldn't help but smirk, never having pictured himself teaching others how to meditate.

"To meditate effectively, you have to locate peace inside yourself. How you access it depends on the type of peace you need—through your heartbeat, internal silence, or perhaps by focusing on your pulse."

He remained seated, watching them disappear into their inner worlds. The silence stretched on—no words, no movement, just pure obedience to his teaching. Then Leo's eyes opened, cutting through the meditation.

"And our mana core? I glimpsed it when I awakened, but how do I connect with it properly?"

A look of surprise crossed Raiden's face as his eyebrow arched upward. He hadn't anticipated Leo being able to perceive his mana core, not when he could barely focus during meditation.

"Master meditation first... we'll make it a gradual process."

Leo gave him a nod and shut his eyes once more. Raiden, however, stood up. He had to find something worthwhile to work on, something that would sharpen his abilities.

"I'll be back..." he announced, walking toward the training room exit. *"Keep your concentration—no distractions."*

He snatched his sword from its place by the entrance and headed out. He had to hone his reflexes and instincts; maybe improving those would strengthen his bond with Ash's soul, given that the dragon soul fusion was still under 10%.

Thinking of Ash, he made his way through the living room and up the stairs to her side. She remained still, her breathing shallow but steady, while her temperature rose dangerously and her wounds expanded beneath blood-soaked bandages.

Raiden sank onto the bed, his hand moving absently through his hair. There was only one other person who had saved him as Ash had, and it was the same person she reminded him of: Jobe, his twin brother.

After sitting there for several minutes, Raiden became overwhelmed—nostalgia mixing with deeper emotions. He got up and exited the room.

Seeing Ash's worsening state fueled his bloodlust. He stepped outside and positioned himself at the entrance, his gaze fixed on the endless forest beyond.

Without a moment's hesitation, he headed toward the treeline, his fingers wrapped tightly around his sword's hilt—he needed monsters to kill.

The instant he crossed into the forest, his expression altered at the sight of white slimes—squishy creatures that bounced along the ground. It was his first time witnessing monsters firsthand, as Raiden's memories were void of such encounters.

Despite their harmless appearance, he drew his sword and began cleaving them in two. Most bounced away from his initial strikes, but he gave chase, slashing at them repeatedly—his need for violence wouldn't let any survive.

After pushing further into the forest while chasing down every slime, his anger detection ability sparked to life. The reading was incredibly light, practically undetectable to anyone without his heightened senses, but he felt it nonetheless. It couldn't be an assassin with such weak anger—but what else could it be?

His head whipped around as he searched for danger. Within seconds, he spotted them—dozens of green-skinned beings with sharp fangs, pointed ears, and sinister grins. Goblins. They lounged in a distant clearing, a few clutching wooden sticks as crude weapons.

Raiden remained frozen, debating if these monsters would serve as superior training opponents for Levi and Leo. Either way, he planned to kill several first to quench his need for violence before taking any back alive. A cruel grin spread across his lips as he activated his invisibility and gripped his blade firmly.

Chapter 30: Threat on Speed

It was a warm and gentle afternoon, utterly ordinary, as Levi and Leo remained seated on the training room floor, awaiting Raiden's instructions on meditation.

Raiden started, legs crossed before them as their bodies glistened with sweat, his mind wondering how to explain things to them effectively. In just two days, they had managed to get a hang of meditation—not particularly impressive, considering he had mastered it at age two within five hours—but they had done well for adults, especially given how much their minds wandered and all they had to think about.

It didn't take long before he finally got a handle on what he wanted to explain and how to break it down for them.

He cleared his throat. *"You might lose the ability to hear me once you're doing this correctly, so I need you to open your eyes and really understand what I'm explaining before you apply it."*

They opened their eyes and met Raiden's gaze. Sweat dripped from their hair as Levi untied his ponytail, his long dark hair spilling across his shoulder as he shook it out to rid it of sweat.

"You said that besides blue crest bearers, the other bearers only need effective meditation to build their mana reserve at the 8th realm, right?" Leo gave him a nod.

"And all Levi needs to do at the 7th realm is use his mana to enhance his physical strength, and once done properly, he moves to the 6th realm?" They both nodded in agreement.

"There is a better way to help you both, then." He paused for a moment. *"From the moment you begin to meditate, I'd like you both to do something."*

"Listen to only your heartbeat until you hear nothing... when you start to feel lost from within."

"How exactly will we know we're getting lost and not just sleepy?" Leo asked, wiping the sweat off his face.

"The difference between this and sleep is that you can still think and reason... you can think of it like a lucid dream if you want."

He gave Raiden a firm nod.

"Once that happens, you look for your mana core within the silence..." He paused for a moment.

"I'm sure you've both heard the saying that the mana core is the heart of our magical selves."

They responded with nods.

"Great... then finding it shouldn't be a problem."

"Now for the most important part... how you build your mana and how you use it to your liking."

Leo leaned forward slightly, hanging on Raiden's every word, while Levi remained silent, stifling a lazy yawn.

"Once you see your core, view it as a torch."

Raiden glanced at their faces to see if the words he was saying truly made sense to them, then let out a sigh.

"You are the only one on a dark and remote planet, and your only source of light is your core." He raised an eyebrow. "As the sole inhabitant, how will you survive the darkness?"

The room fell into an awkward silence for a brief moment. "Is that a question for us?" Levi asked, his eyes widening in confusion.

Raiden gave them a faint smile and a nod. He was practically ready to give up on them, but he knew their strength mattered. Still, his pride lingered.

"I would try to keep the torch alive by lighting multiple torches before the one I'm holding goes out," Leo said, rushing his words.

Raiden's smile finally became genuine as Leo's answer lifted his spirits.

"Correct." His grin widened. "The same applies to your body."

"Using your imagination, connect your mana to every part of your body until you can actually feel it rather than just imagining it."

"Am I making sense?"

"You mean we should split our core into multiple parts and spread them throughout our body?" Levi asked with an unreadable expression.

Raiden nodded. *"And I believe our entire magical bodies are made of mana, just like how our physical bodies have blood."*

He rose to his feet. *"Once you do it that way, I believe it will grow in size... and from there, all you need is strong imagination and discipline."*

He turned to Levi. *"With that, you can strengthen your body from within and even use it as a shield on the outside."*

His expression darkened, and he gestured at his brain, his tone turning serious. *"Remember, everything needs a strong imagination."*

They nodded, and he walked out of the room. It had been almost a week since the star girl attacked, and ever since, there hadn't been a single attack. Not from the assassins, the Dawnbringers, or even the kingdom.

This didn't sit right with Raiden, but all they could do was ensure they'd grown stronger before the next attack came.

And watching his subordinates train that intensely bruised his pride—though even setting pride aside, Ash still wasn't feeling well, and no matter how many times they searched for the book of Arron, it remained elusive.

Leo's words to Raiden: "Primordial dragons heal themselves, so if she's really related to them, then it means you need to level up to where she can heal herself."

He knew he had to increase in rank—whether it would help Ash remained to be seen, but everything had to start with Speed. With burning rage and desire, tinged with frustration, he made his way to Speed's room.

He still hadn't turned corrupt, and according to Leo and Levi, that wasn't normal. This meant Ash's shadowy chains had stopped the process.

The moment Raiden got to the room, he picked Speed up and placed him on a chair, then sat beside him, his back leaning against the wall.

"I'm going to kill you." The words came out daunting and hollow, stripped of all emotion—like death itself speaking. Speed's golden eyes shifted toward Raiden, simply smiling as he stared into nothing.

Raiden didn't know if he would kill him for real, but he did know that if he didn't agree to sign the contract in the next few minutes, it would be his end.

After allowing his words to settle in, Raiden sighed and stood up. Without so much as a glance, he grabbed Speed by the hair and began dragging him out of the house. Speed made no sound of pain, as if having his hair pulled didn't affect him at all.

The moment he got outside, the goblins he had captured lay tied up on the grassy field to their left, struggling to break free.

But Raiden paid them no mind—he simply dragged Speed with nothing on his mind but how he would find another person for a contract after he killed Speed.

The moment they got near the fountain, he dropped him on the floor, used some of the water to wash his face, sat down, and let out a sigh.

"I'd rather you agreed to serve me of your own accord." He tilted his head upward. "This isn't me..."

He knew Speed was listening to him, but he had little interest in that—he was simply speaking to himself.

"I've grown a little soft since I got here..."

"I was never the kind to work with others after I lost Jobe... but here I am, trying to make someone my slave just so I can get stronger."

He rose to his feet and cracked his knuckles. *"Your partner left you here to die anyway, and you were fine with it... so I don't think survival is what you want."*

He dropped to his knees and grabbed Speed by the neck. Both of them stared directly into each other's soulless eyes. Euphoria kicked in, and Raiden wore a devilish smile.