

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 31: Probability - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 31: Probability

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Raiden's lips stretched from ear to ear as he stared into Speed's golden eyes. Without hesitation, he slammed his fist into Speed's gut. Speed flinched—the pain caught him off guard—but Raiden couldn't care less. All he wanted in that moment were the thrills, the raw excitement coursing through his veins.

He sent another strike. This time Speed didn't flinch, but Raiden was completely unbothered. He began to laugh like a psycho, unleashing strike after relentless strike.

But Raiden's face fell at Speed's indifference. He instantly drove him down to the ground.

Raiden's frame quivered with gleeful laughter while Speed remained stone-faced. He approached slowly, sat on him, and drove his fist into Speed's face. Before the first strike could even register, the second was already coming.

Each strike brought waves of exhilaration, driving his need for more, but Speed stayed utterly motionless.

But Speed's relentless disrespect finally broke through Raiden's excitement, twisting his laughter into a bitter sneer. His face darkened immediately. The complete lack of reaction to his blows ignited something darker.

He narrowed his eyes and locked onto Speed's collar. No euphoria remained—just burning rage at being so thoroughly dismissed. This ends now.

He hoisted Speed up and channeled every ounce of his strength into one final blow, slamming his head against the fountain's edge with crushing force. The stone crumbled on impact.

Blood erupted from Speed's cracked skull, flooding the water and splattering Raiden's clothes. He let the body fall without ceremony, feeling no guilt or remorse—only a peaceful calm as he looked skyward.

"I don't like being disrespected..." he said quietly, his voice heavy and gravelly. He cupped clean water from the fountain and washed his face.

He released a long breath and looked down at Speed. *"Still alive, are you... impressive."*

"He knelt beside Speed, whose face was completely covered in blood, eyes barely visible through the crimson coating. Still, no sound escaped him. Raiden felt no concern about Speed's silence now—death was inevitable regardless."

"I'm not sure what compels me, but I enjoy these final moments with my victims." A dark smirk crossed his face. *"Maybe I just need to witness your last breath."*

He let out a quiet giggle. *"It's entertaining."*

His face grew cold as Speed's heartbeat weakened. *"I can't stand people who won't acknowledge their opponents... If you're ever fortunate enough to survive like I did, show respect. Your status and excuses mean nothing."*

He faced Speed directly, delivering a sharp slap before clenching his jaw in his hands. *"Do you understand?"* Suddenly, movement in his peripheral vision drew his focus elsewhere.

Speed struggled to reach something in his pocket, his hand shaking uncontrollably. Raiden's smirk widened. *"Afraid of dying after all, aren't you?"*

Raiden pushed his hands past the chains and slipped them into Speed's pocket. "Don't... touch it," Speed whispered through his mask, voice shaking.

The plea caught Raiden's attention. *"What was that?"*

"Don't... touch it," he whispered again.

Raiden hesitated briefly but then gave a dismissive shrug. What did it matter when the man was dying regardless? He reached deep into the pocket and withdrew a necklace.

Speed thrashed against his restraints. "If you touch her, I will kill you." The threat held surprising force for someone so close to death, drawing Raiden's curiosity even deeper. He studied the necklace with greater attention.

The necklace held a portrait of a young girl—about twelve—with the same golden eyes and dark hair as Speed, her face lit with a gentle smile. Clearly his sister. Raiden's expression turned predatory as he looked back at Speed's frantic struggles, then crouched down beside him again.

"Let me guess, the Dawnbringers took your sister?" Speed's movements grew weaker at the question, yet the flash of recognition in his eyes revealed the truth to Raiden. He was dying at last, and his sister had likely been the only thing keeping him alive until now. Even that wasn't sustaining him any longer.

Raiden watched him quietly, considering whether he should simply let death take its course or offer him a deal.

He kept watching as Speed's eyes started to drift shut, though Speed struggled to keep them open, his lids fluttering with the effort. Still, Raiden wondered.

If he refuses, I'll simply kill him,—Raiden decided. He let out a weary sigh, hoisted Speed onto his shoulder, and made his way quickly to the training room.

As soon as he pushed the door open, Leo and Levi came into view—both seated on the floor with their yellow aura blazing stronger than ever.

He set Speed down carefully and rushed to grab a potion. He had no idea if it would work, but he had to try something. In his world, a simple injection of the right drugs would have been enough to stabilize him, but in this place, he was completely out of his depth.

He attempted to pull off the mask, but it was stuck fast. So he pried Speed's jaws apart through the mask's sharp teeth, and they parted easily. He forced the potion between his lips and hit his throat to make him swallow every drop.

Low coughs started escaping from Speed, giving Raiden a sign that the potion might actually work. He stood up and gave him two additional potions. He settled back down and waited for some words, or at least another indication that he was conscious, but none came.

"Did he die anyway?" Raiden whispered, but he had to know for certain. He pressed his fingers to Speed's neck, searching for a pulse. It was there.

Raiden sighed and lowered himself to the floor next to Speed, staring up at the ceiling while his thoughts drifted. In his world, his red handgun loaded with custom golden bullets meant for the Grim family ensured a 90% success rate. The only uncertainty was that final 10%—getting out alive and unharmed.

But this world had something that transcended his skills entirely: magic. He found himself questioning whether it was diminishing his strength, or whether it was just another type of power he needed to master.

He continued wrestling with the question, finding no resolution. Just then, Leo's words broke through his contemplation, and he looked over at him.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked, hurrying to Speed's side.

Raiden stood up reluctantly. *"Keep him alive if you can."*

Leo gave a quick nod and went to feel for Speed's pulse, but the moment his fingers neared Speed's neck, he yanked his hand away—the body temperature was scorching.

Without looking back at them, Raiden made his way to his room to see Ash, but the question of how he'd actually deliver on Speed's demands, assuming Speed accepted his bargain, puzzled him entirely.

Chapter 32: The Jasper House

Raiden inhaled deeply, his hand finding Ash's head. Her condition held at a maddening standstill—stable enough to avoid immediate crisis, yet too severe for any real recovery.

She was caught in this middle ground, breath coming in heavy gasps, temperature climbing without pause, her wounds weeping blood that never seemed to slow.

Standing from the bed, Raiden glanced once more at Ash, pocketed Speed's necklace, and headed for the exit. A week of silence stretched behind them. No attacks, no confrontations. The quiet felt ominous.

He walked out onto the grassy field where Leo and Levi were putting the captured goblins through their paces, the same creatures Raiden had subdued days ago. The sounds of combat barely registered. His attention was fixed elsewhere entirely—on the sky.

He looked up at the apparent emptiness, but the feeling wouldn't leave him—someone was watching. His danger senses stayed dormant, unusually quiet, yet his assassin's training ran bone-deep. He'd spent too many years in that world not to recognize the weight of hidden observation.

Yet nothing revealed itself. He'd scanned every inch of the surrounding area. Frustrated, he retreated back into the house and activated his invisibility, hoping to detect the heat signature of whoever—or whatever—was spying on them. Again, he found nothing.

The sensation had been plaguing him for two days now, but with no concrete evidence to support his instincts, he decided to abandon the search. With a resigned exhale, he allowed himself to become visible again.

Turning left, he made his way toward the group. Raiden's initial orders had been simple: kill the goblins. But Leo and Levi had slaughtered most of them within minutes. With the three remaining creatures, he'd painted ink marks on the backs of their necks and revised the exercise—erase the ink without taking their lives.

He'd designed the exercise to improve their reflexes, battle awareness, and decision-making under pressure. But one look at the current situation had him shaking his head, hand slapping against his forehead in obvious disappointment.

They were both pursuing the same flawed strategy: pin down the goblins, then scrape off the ink by brute force. True, the creatures' obstinate nature and sharp self-

preservation instincts made them difficult to catch despite their weak physiques, and some cunning would be necessary. However, this wasn't the skill Raiden wanted them to develop.

"Stand down," Raiden ordered, walking past them and approaching one of the cornered goblins.

"They're monsters. The only thing they have over you is raw survival instinct." He turned back toward Leo and Levi while the winded goblins bent forward, hands on their knees, still maintaining their death grip on their wooden sticks.

"You're human—you can think and reason, unlike them." He gestured back toward the goblins, then closed his eyes and drew in a slow breath. In his mind, he visualized mana flowing through the silent pathways he'd carved throughout his body, filling every vein with energy.

It was a gamble, but with the goblins' attention elsewhere, he acted. His hand cut through the air with fluid precision, making no sound whatsoever. One moment the goblin stood unmarked by his approach; the next, Raiden's hand had connected with its neck, the ink already gone.

The speed had been extraordinary, beyond what Raiden thought himself capable of, moving so quickly it never triggered the goblin's detection. Utterly confused by the sudden absence of its mark, the creature turned to its brother, spouting garbled nonsense in their guttural tongue.

Turning to Leo and Levi, Raiden said, *"This is the standard I'm looking for."*

"Would've been nice to know that upfront," Levi muttered, stepping around Raiden to face the remaining goblin. "Watch and learn." His cocky grin earned him nothing more than Raiden's tired stare.

Mimicking Raiden's breathing technique, Levi drew air into his lungs. The strike that followed was instantaneous—his hand connected with the goblin's neck and wiped away the ink in a movement that exceeded even Raiden's demonstration, moving at exactly twice the velocity.

Raiden stared in shock at Levi, who stood there wearing that same cocky grin, his own eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. Was this the true potential of someone in the 7th realm?

The torrent of thoughts crystallized into grudging respect, marked by a slight smirk. *"Not bad, Levi."*

Levi's smugness needed no verbal accompaniment. He simply retrieved a dagger from his pocket and started playing with the blade, letting his cocky silence fill the space.

"Leo, the ink is gone now, but you can still attempt to strike those exact spots."

Leo nodded his understanding and stepped up to the challenge. After taking his preparatory breath, he struck—too slowly. The goblin reacted instantly, its stick whistling past Leo's head in a vicious counter. He regrouped and attempted the move again, but his timing remained off.

A sigh escaped Raiden's lips. "You need to augment your physicality the way 7s do. That's how I managed it."

With a determined nod, Leo inhaled deeply and made another attempt, but his strike went wide again. Exhaling in defeat, he looked back at Raiden. "I can tell this will take a while, so you guys don't need to wait around. I'll keep working until I get it right."

With a decisive nod, Raiden gestured for Levi to accompany him inside.

"Are we really going to just leave him like that?" Levi questioned as they entered the house.

"It's what he wanted. He can handle himself."

Upon entering, they walked toward Speed's new accommodations. He was still barely alive, his survival uncertain from moment to moment. Considering both his injuries and the prospect of forming an alliance, they'd upgraded his lodging to match the quality of their own sovereign quarters.

"Do you have any sense of our location? Could we still be somewhere in Persia City?" Raiden asked, pushing the door open as Levi followed.

"I don't think so. It's not Nyx City either, considering they lack the landmass for this kind of forest."

Raiden acknowledged the observation with a nod and walked over to Speed's bedside. The injured figure lay still beneath the covers, bandages encircling his head while his golden ears moved alertly, following their faces.

"You're conscious—that's fantastic." Raiden offered a warm smile, acting as though he hadn't already known Speed had been awake for some time.

Speed's only response was a wordless stare, but Raiden had anticipated this reaction. The silent treatment had gone on long enough to become their established pattern.

Nevertheless, Raiden breathed deeply and took a seat at the bedside. *"You're not well enough for bargaining under normal circumstances, but this situation can't wait."*

Leaning in slightly, Raiden continued. *"The details about your sister aren't clear to me, but I believe the Dawnbringers have her—and they're using her safety to ensure your compliance."*

He held Speed's stare and smirked knowingly. *"I've had my share of dealings with power-hungry and money-obsessed individuals. Your circumstances don't fit that pattern—that's what led me to this assessment."*

Raiden's eyes narrowed to slits as he locked gazes with Speed, their expressions matching in stubborn resolve. The staring contest continued until Raiden reached into his pocket, withdrawing Speed's necklace and setting it gently on him.

"If saving your sister was part of our bargain, would you consider signing a contract with me?"

Speed said nothing, continuing to stare at Raiden with obvious disbelief written across his features.

"Your skepticism is warranted," Raiden smirked. *"I'd have the same reaction in your place."*

Rising from the bed, he moved to stand by the canopy. *"This is why I'm suggesting we rescue her as the first step. I'll bring her back here, prove to you that she's alive and well, and only after that do we sign anything."*

Speed's eyes narrowed fractionally, the silence stretching between them. When he eventually spoke, his words brought a satisfied gleam to Raiden's expression.

"How exactly do you plan to pull that off?" he rasped, his voice carrying a bitter edge.

"That's not your concern. Simply give me your word, and consider it done."

Speed watched Raiden intently for a moment, then looked away, his gaze settling on the wall beside him.

"It's going to be challenging. She's being used for experiments—not by the Dawnbringers, but by Mack Jasper, the man who accompanied me."

Raiden's eyes narrowed slightly. A different family entirely—he hadn't seen that coming. So what was Mack, if not a Dawnbringer?

"The Jaspers are allies of the Dawnbringers. Small household, but their roots go back to the Kingdom of Eldon—that's where they get their love of research and experimentation."

Raiden's expression softened but was still uneasy.

"So the Dawnbringers themselves are yet to attack us?" Levi asked as he stood on a stair leading toward the bed area.

Speed remained silent for a moment and then ignored Levi's question entirely. "I accept the deal... save my sister, and I will form a contract with you."

Raiden stared at Speed for a moment. There was clearly something Speed didn't want them to know—but if he managed to get him as his slave, he'd milk everything out of him. So he simply smiled.

"That's great, Speed."

"The Jasper house is two blocks away, to the left of the Dawnbringers' home... sits right on the third town square—the queen's square."

Raiden didn't want to press the matter any longer—he was going to take a risk that might put them in huge trouble, and that needed attention and concern. He smiled at Speed and gestured for Levi to follow him.

The moment they got out, his expression grew dark. *"Can you do it?"*

"I don't know how strong Mack is, but if he is 7 just like me, then I can take him on," Levi said, his voice tinged with pride as he wore a confident smirk.

"Great, then I'll brief you on everything you need to know about his ability," Raiden said as they arrived at the living room.

At that moment, Leo hurried into the room, his shirt soaked in sweat and a confident, proud smile on his face.

"I just turned 7!"

Chapter 33: Smurf Attack

As it turned out, none of them aside from Raiden had a systematic voice in their head to tell them when they increased in rank—they felt it within themselves. It was instinctive, like something you just knew even before looking at the numbers on your crest. So the moment Raiden heard of Leo's achievement, it filled him with hope.

He began thinking everything through thoroughly. Since Levi's mission couldn't be timed precisely, he needed stronger defenses in case they were attacked while Levi was away. Leo's advancement couldn't have come at a better time.

It was late into the evening, and Levi was finally able to leave on the mission to save Speed's sister. They gathered in the living room while he collected supplies for the journey.

Raiden placed a thousand persa on the sofa. *"Take the forest route and maneuver through it to Persia City. Get a carriage if you need one, and you'll obviously need somewhere to sleep—this should cover everything."*

Levi gave him a firm nod. "You said there might be a spy around, right?" He glanced at Raiden. "Either way, I won't be coming back if I spot any of them in the forest." His voice was firm and steady, leaving no room for bargains.

"Good... and don't forget to get us information on the kingdom too. I can't shake the feeling that something bad is coming."

Levi turned to him with a smirk, turned invisible, and left the room entirely. Raiden didn't know if he wanted them to succeed. He felt no sympathy for Speed or his sister whatsoever. He just wanted to get Ash on her feet. But the question that haunted him was whether what he was doing was worth it.

At that moment, Leo returned from Speed's room, holding a book as he resumed his studies on magic and Ash.

"Speed wants to speak with you." Leo's words cut through Raiden's daze. Raiden turned to him and gave a firm nod but remained motionless for a moment, wondering: was this the only thing he could do?

He shrugged and left everything up to chance. He walked past Leo, who was reading at the entrance of the corridor while playing with a brown bracelet, and headed to Speed's room.

The moment he entered, Speed spoke. "When are you going to save my sister?"

Raiden's expression softened instantly as he stood by the door, shoulder against the wall, glancing left to stare at Speed.

"Calm down, brother... you will see your sister soon."

Speed sneered, the expression visible even through his mask. "Mack isn't the strongest in the Jasper house. He has a brother—and that's who you should watch out for."

Raiden's expression darkened in an instant. *"Why are you only telling me this now?"*

Speed's eyes lit up with amusement—he was definitely mocking Raiden behind that mask. "I just remembered..."

Raiden remained still and let out a sigh. Speed had clearly omitted that detail intentionally, meaning his loyalty to Mack remained intact.

He suddenly smiled—soft and gentle. *"You do realize I'll kill both you and your sister if this is a trap, right?"*

Speed's eyes widened with fear instantly. With that calm, tender expression on Raiden's face, he hadn't expected such brutal words. And he knew with absolute certainty that Raiden wasn't lying.

"I am not lying... Mack has a brother, Seth, and he's the one who actually took my sister." Speed's voice was calm and calculated now, his expression reflecting the same control.

"Sure..."

Raiden said, still wearing that smile as he left the room without another word.

He made his way to his room, walking past Leo, who still remained at the entrance. More than a week had passed without an attack from any of their enemies. Considering how much his enemies had increased in size, he was expecting at least an attack every three days—but nothing. It was great because they had enough time to prepare, but it still made him uneasy.

The moment he entered his room, he checked on Ash once more and lay down gently on the bed, staring at the ceiling as he wondered what the Kingdom was planning.

This was his nightly routine—most of his evening spent with these heavy thoughts. Thinking about it all alone felt like a crushing burden. Those worries consumed every part of him until he finally drifted off to sleep.

Raiden had barely slept when morning came. But the moment he woke up, his danger detection kicked in. It was faint, barely registering above a pulse, which meant the danger wasn't immediate.

Still, he hurried to his feet, and the moment he got downstairs, Leo was already up—towel wrapped around his neck, sweat dripping across his ripped torso as he read.

"We have a visitor, Leo," he said, sparing him no glance as he walked past him to the training room for his sword.

The moment he returned to the living room, Leo was on his feet, wrapping bandages around his hands. The fierce confidence in his eyes left no doubt—he wasn't going to let history repeat itself.

A glance at him made Raiden smile, though he walked past him to the house entrance. There, he drove his sword tip directly into the pavement, hands resting on the hilt's edge as Leo stood behind, massaging his palm.

In an instant, sudden goosebumps surged through his body, filling him with relief. He wasn't happy about their predicament, but it lifted something within him.

He smirked. *"Finally, they are attacking,"* he muttered.

However, his expression immediately darkened as he tilted his head upward. The persistent feeling of being spied upon had finally lifted. The absence made him question himself—had it all been his own craving for conflict, or was something out there merely waiting for the right moment?

Still, his expression instantly shifted toward the forest's range as the danger detection finally intensified. Euphoria began to fill him as a devilish smile spread across his face, his heartbeat quickening with anticipation.

Yet his smile began to fade the moment they came into view—hundreds of smallish blue humanoid creatures, each roughly three apples in height.

Both Raiden and Leo were confused as they watched the creatures yelling in their own tongue and charging toward them.

"Are those Smurfs?" Raiden asked, confused.

Chapter 34: Smurf Attack 2

Something wasn't right.

The creatures seemed childish and innocent—hardly a threat—yet Raiden's danger detection continued its relentless warning. Confused but cautious, he unplugged his sword's tip from the pavement, rested the blade on his shoulder, and began moving toward the approaching creatures.

"Stay on guard, Leo," he ordered. Though Leo was more confused than Raiden, he still steeled himself and nodded.

However, after Raiden took a few steps, something caught his attention, and he narrowed his eyes for a better look. The Smurfs began to thin out, their cute and sweet expressions growing darker as they drew closer.

Euphoria surged through Raiden once more, a psychopathic smile creeping onto his lips. He gripped his sword tightly, his hand trembling with fear as he watched the creatures slowly fuse together.

Abruptly, the Smurfs began to form a disfigured, elongated creature about 10 feet long. It had dozens of legs stretching across its snake-like body and ten hands, with two appearing on its massive head like-horns.

"What the fuck is that?" Raiden's euphoria instantly faded as he stared at the creature with a disgusted expression. Its long tongue flicked between sharp teeth as it moved toward them—still advancing, but slower than before.

"It's a cursed doll," Leo said as he moved closer to Raiden. "A familiar like Ash, but twisted—sinister."

Raiden turned to him. "The summoner must be around." He cracked his knuckles. "Just like white dragons—they give their summoner no power and stay cute until they need to become something sinister."

Euphoria surged through Raiden again as a big grin spread across his face, thrills coursing through his body. *"So all we need to do is take care of this?"*

Before Leo could respond, Raiden was already sprinting toward the creature. His body thrummed with excitement on each step, and when he got close enough, he raised his sword with practiced precision.

The creature struck at him, but he leaped over the attack effortlessly. Upon landing, he brought his blade down on the creature's first few legs, slashing them clean off.

The creature lashed out again in pain, but it was far too slow for Raiden, who dodged effortlessly. Leo seized the opening, dashing forward to strike the creature's chest—the force of his blow shattering two of its arms.

Raiden's expression grew even more devilish as he sprinted forward and leaped onto the creature's tail. With one swift, precise strike, he sliced its head clean off. He hit the ground at the same moment as the severed head, his body shaking with excitement.

"Done!" he said breathlessly.

However, the creature continued moving backward despite losing its head, deflating Raiden's excitement immediately.

"What's going on, Leo?"

Leo sighed. "Curse dolls can only die if their master is dead... but if the master dies first, they become nearly impossible to kill."

Raiden gave him a lazy look. *"So we have to kill them at the same time?"*

Leo shrugged. "That's the myth... but no one knows for sure since curse dolls are rare."

Raiden's expression dimmed as he watched the creature put distance between them, already beginning to regrow its severed parts. This wasn't going to be easy, so they would have to split up.

"*You said the summoner is around, right?*" Raiden asked, narrowing his eyes as he watched the creature.

"Yeah... they can't go far without their master."

Raiden cracked his neck. "*Handle this thing while I find the master. Once I kill them, I'll come help you finish it off.*"

Leo gave him a nod, and in that instant, Raiden vanished from sight. Confusion filled Leo as his eyes searched frantically—he could only see Raiden's sword suspended in the air, while Raiden himself had become completely invisible. This was Leo's first time witnessing Raiden use this ability; none of them had ever seen it before.

"Where are you, and why is your sword hovering in midair?"

Raiden's expression darkened. "*Really?*" he muttered, dropping the sword. He was puzzled—if Levi could turn invisible with his dagger, then Raiden's ability wasn't evolving like Levi's had. Still, he couldn't stand around dwelling on it. He began making his way into the forest.

His vision shifted to heat detection, painting everything in reddish tones. There was no sound, no rushed movements—only silence, as though he had ceased to exist entirely.

Raiden moved deeper into the forest. Since everything appeared in identical heat signatures with far more to process than usual, he had to use his imagination and the shapes of objects to distinguish between them.

Within just a few steps, he could see slimes clustered throughout the area. When his attention turned to the right, dozens more slimes were bouncing toward him.

He smirked, remembering a key detail from his first slime encounter—they always fled when they sensed humans or any dangerous creature nearby. Following this lead, he moved in that direction, taking care to avoid the slimes themselves in case contact would reveal his presence to the enemy.

A few steps in, he discovered two girls roughly his age or younger chatting while leaning against a tree. One was petting what the heat signature revealed to be a bird—a phoenix, Raiden realized instantly. That's when everything clicked: the phoenix girl had been spying on them all along.

From what he could remember, phoenix familiars allowed their masters to see for miles with perfect clarity, as though they were standing right there. His body shook with excitement as euphoria coursed through him—he was thrilled at the thought of taking them down.

He ignored their conversation entirely—the thrill of the kill alone made his body move on its own as he stalked toward them, his smile stretching from ear to ear as his heart raced with bloodlust.

He moved his hands close to their heads, drew a deep breath, and channeled mana into his strength. Then, seizing the moment, he crashed their heads together with brutal force.

The strike was swift and brutal. The crash echoed through the forest as blood splattered across his face. Though he could only see heat signatures, the sensation of warm blood on his skin sent him into fits of excited laughter. He turned visible instantly, revealing the full scene—two girls in black dresses lying by their luggage, heads crushed, blood seeping into their dark hair.

However, the phoenix girl had the heart of a survivor. Even with half her head crushed, she remained alive, attempting to crawl away while clutching her familiar desperately. The red phoenix was dying alongside her, its life bound to her own.

Raiden crouched down and seized her shoulder, halting her desperate crawl. She turned toward him, tears streaming from her dark eyes as she struggled to speak, though no words came. Raiden knew exactly what she was trying to say: "Please, spare me..."

His devilish smile disappeared as he grabbed her collar and lifted her up. The grin returned as he prepared to end her life, but something made him pause. He needed contracts, and this girl was a perfect candidate. With her, he wouldn't need Speed all that much.

A smile of realization spread across his face, his eyes lighting up with excitement at the opportunity before him. *"Today is your lucky day, girl—you are chosen by the bookkeeper."*

The girl couldn't speak, her head jerking from side to side. She was dying.

Raiden sighed and set her back down on the ground. He needed to ensure the other girl was truly dead. Walking over to her, he gripped her neck and snapped it with a sharp twist, his body shaking with dark satisfaction.

He turned back to the phoenix girl and felt for her pulse. She was still breathing. Carefully, he lifted her and her familiar onto his shoulder and started back toward where he'd left Leo, intending to save her life and help deal with the cursed doll.

His pace quickened beyond his usual speed, but his expression grew dark as he left the forest.

The doll had transformed into a massive blue giant with rippling muscles and six arms, towering above its previous size.

Leo stood before it, clutching his ribs, blood trickling from his mouth, while the giant panted heavily, teeth clenched, saliva dripping, its eyes burning with unmistakable rage.

Raiden approached them steadily, his body shaking with fear as he wore that devilish smile. The giant's rage-filled expression thrilled him beyond measure, showing how deeply his euphoria had warped into psychotic pleasure.

Chapter 35: Smurf Attack 3

"Leo!" Raiden's voice cut through the air, and Leo spun toward him instantly, bewilderment clear in his expression. Without hesitation, Raiden let go of the girl and her familiar plummeting toward the ground below.

"Get her, Leo... keep her safe and watch yourself." Raiden moved forward as the giant turned its attention to him. *"I've got this covered."*

Raiden and the giant rushed at each other, and as soon as Leo saw an opening, he shot forward across the field, racing toward where the girl lay.

The moment Raiden and the creature neared each other, his devilish smile deepened. He slid through the grass, diverting the creature's attention as he dropped his hands to the ground and launched himself forward, both legs slamming into the creature's gut and sending it crashing into the earth.

He continued to wear his smile as he took steady steps toward the entrance of the house and picked up his sword, while the creature hurried to its feet, growling in fury. Raiden glanced back over his shoulder at the giant as it began to dash toward him. Chills ran through Raiden's body as he gripped his sword tightly.

He turned to face it with his devilish smile, his body trembling from both fear and excitement as he adjusted his sword in his hand for a better grip and, using its curved blade to his advantage, hurled it directly at the creature's head.

It was too fast and unpredictable for the creature, so it paused mid-run and caught the blade with two of its hands, but the sword slid through its grasp with sheer force, forcing it to add two more hands to completely stop it.

But Raiden wasn't done—his body jerked forward as he burst into laughter; the only thing on his mind was killing it for more thrills, for the relief.

Once within reach, he lunged toward the embedded sword and delivered a devastating strike to the hilt, driving it deeper as it sliced through the creature's hands, its razor edge severing a few of its fingers as the blade plunged into its skull.

The creature dropped to its knees with the blade still embedded in its skull before finally collapsing to the ground. Raiden tilted his head back as his laughter slowly began to deepen before it finally echoed above the silence in the distance.

However, at that moment, just as he enjoyed his victory, his danger detection kicked in, and before he could process it, there was a grip on his leg. His expression darkened in an instant as he tilted his head down to look.

It was the creature, still alive, with its wounds healed but the blade still embedded in its skull. Confusion washed over him as he tried to escape its grip, but it was too late—the grip was tight and firm.

The creature abruptly leaped to its feet, added its remaining hands to the grip, lifted him up, and slammed Raiden into the ground. The sheer force was enough to make Raiden bounce off the earth.

Everything happened so fast that it caused him to feel nothing. Only the distant ringing in his head and the sensation that some of his ribs were shattered gave him the slightest idea of what had truly happened.

The moment he hit the ground, he felt the sudden urge to rise to his feet, but that attempt alone made him cough up blood. His eyes began to dart around as he tried to process his condition properly.

The creature pulled the sword from its skull, tossed it aside, and walked toward Raiden. Raiden simply stared at it.

How the fuck are you still alive?—he wondered.

But clearly, the blue giant couldn't read his mind, and even if it could, it was obvious that it wouldn't be interested. It grabbed Raiden by the leg once more and slammed him into the ground again.

This time Raiden felt it as he let out an agonizing scream. His organs felt displaced as fire coursed through his body, his stomach burning with searing heat and his chest tightening until he ran out of breath.

Even through the pain, he reasoned that a strike like that again would most likely kill him. He immediately turned invisible as he fought the urge to vomit blood.

The creature's head snapped around, searching for where Raiden went as it panted heavily with its mouth slightly open and saliva flowing through its razor-sharp teeth.

At that same time, Raiden began to crawl away from it as his body trembled, his head aching like a thousand blades were slowly being pushed through his skull simultaneously. But he knew distance was his best option at that moment.

The creature, however, began slamming its fists into the ground before finally trying to enter the house, but before it could even get near it, Leo emerged from inside and delivered a strike to its chest, sending it crashing into the ground.

"Raider?!" he called out.

The moment Raider heard his name, he smiled and tilted his head to watch as Leo positioned himself before the blue giant. Bandaged around his torso, knees, and hands, Leo's eyes darted around searching for him, though his expression remained filled with rage toward the creature.

"I need to rest a little..." Raider muttered, his voice barely audible.

Raider stopped where he was, pushed through the pain, and tilted back to face the sky as his lungs struggled. His breath came out in heavy, ragged chunks as if he was on the verge of death.

The coldness of the golden key around his neck sent a chill through his body.

He began to wonder if this entire incident was worth it at all. Should he have just taken Ash and run, and left the book behind? They could have grown stronger elsewhere, and eventually, he would have found his way back to his world.

But no... this wasn't something he could simply abandon. They would come for him either way, and he knew that perfectly well—because Jack's parents would have done exactly the same.

He clenched his fists until his knuckles went white. This was his hell—a war he was born to fight and destined to die in. If not for victory, then for his pride as a warrior and assassin.

He released a weary sigh. *"I must finish this..."*

He turned to watch Leo and the creature engrossed in brutal combat. His invisibility limited him to heat detection, making it hard to see clearly, but he could tell each fighter was giving everything they had.

He struggled to his feet despite his trembling hands and legs, barely resisting the urge to give up. But he pushed through and stood, walking toward his sword while gripping his ribs, teeth gritted against the pain.

The moment he reached it, just bending to retrieve the sword made his body crack fearsome warnings, his back locking up in brutal cramps.

The instant he lifted the sword, Leo saw him and yelled, his voice raw with tiredness. "I've... I've been trying to nullify its weight, but nothing's working."

He bent forward, gripping his knees as he panted heavily. "I want you to stab him through the heart."

Raiden missed most of what Leo was saying, but the message was clear: he had to kill it. Even through the pain, euphoria rushed through his veins as he flashed his devilish grin.

He clutched his sword and moved behind the creature, his face alive with twisted excitement. Quiet laughter bubbled from his lips as he dragged the blade along the ground, the scraping steel sending chilling sounds through the air while Leo battled the blue giant with everything he had.

The moment he stood behind the creature, Leo stopped attacking and calling out. "Now!" he rasped, his dry throat scratching against itself as he broke into a cough.

Raiden didn't spare a moment—he dashed forward, taking advantage of his invisibility, and plunged his sword into its heart.

Seizing that brief moment of victory, he pulled upward with all his strength, slashing heart and chest in two as the blade slid past its shoulder and sliced its ear. His eyes sparkled with excitement as he practically trembled with joy.

Leo also dashed forward, and this time, with the creature's heart already slashed, he struck again, slamming it into the ground.

Then, as the air began lifting it like a piece of paper, Leo sprinted after it and delivered another devastating blow, launching it high into the sky.

Raiden dropped to his knees and turned visible, blood trickling from his nose—he had pushed past his limits, and now, his smile was gone.

"Did we win?"

Leo turned to him. "Maybe... it'll still regenerate. So unless someone stronger finds it and finishes the job..."

"Let's just hope it doesn't come back."

Raiden smiled, but at that moment, all he wanted was sleep, and his body collapsed to the floor.

[ALERT]

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

MANA CONTROL: 35

DRAGON MANA POOL: 215/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 205

STAMINA: 200

DRAGON AURA: 55

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 85%

—Euphoria: 20%

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: 11%

—Invisibility

—Others Locked.]

Chapter 36: Unwelcome

The household was vulnerable.

Raiden stayed confined to his bed, downing potions to dull the pain of his wounds, but his chest still burned with every rattling cough, and he could feel something vital bleeding within. His body refused to mend, even after two days had passed since their battle with the blue giant.

While Raiden remained bedbound, wrestling with his ravaged body, Leo, less wounded than his master, pressed on with his training, believing the apprentice must carry the master's responsibilities when fate demanded it.

The evening was gentle, and Raiden lay abed, his fingers absently brushing against Ash's still form. For the first time since coming here, he felt overwhelmed by the burden of it all, his mind drifting inevitably to Jack's parents.

He was certain the Grim family would spare little thought for such a pitiful death as his—if they had even bothered to check whether he lived or died at all.

Despite knowing this, he still wondered: if they had found him dead, would they have felt anything? Jobe's death had stirred nothing in them. The very day his brother died, they had forced him to train before cameras while they attended some prestigious party. But still, he was their last remaining child—surely that meant something?

He sought no answers, only the luxury of contemplation, the freedom to let his thoughts drift where they would. So he did, and found solace in the act itself.

As he lay there lost in thought, Leo entered his room. "How are you doing?" he asked, climbing the three steps to the bedside before settling beside him.

Raiden gave a brief nod, his face darkening with displeasure at the coddling, but he was in no position to refuse such care.

Leo handed him several potions and started working on his torso. "The girl's phoenix woke up not long ago."

Raiden's face contorted briefly, his eyes finding Leo's as the massage aggravated his broken ribs.

"I got a closer look at her phoenix, and it's unlike any I've seen before... is that why you brought her along?"

Raiden remained silent, inwardly resolving that he wouldn't suffer this torment any longer. Not merely the physical agony, but the indignity of being coddled like an infant.

Leo continued. "Well... I think she'll be getting up soon, but her injuries affected her brain, so unless we find a healer to help her..." He paused for a moment. "Maybe Aeris."

Raiden's gaze slid toward him, barely turning his head. Leo recognized the warning in that sideways look—mention of her name was unwelcome. Rather than provoke him further, Leo stood and made his way out of the room.

He paused and turned to Raiden. "I'll be bringing your meal soon."

The truth was, Raiden felt no particular irritation at hearing Aeris's name. He didn't care about her one way or the other, save for the certainty that he would end her life. He bore her no hatred, and Leo had misunderstood his expression entirely. His frustration stemmed from being coddled like a broken-down clerk rather than the warrior he remained.

Once Leo was gone, he muttered under his breath, *"I need to get to my feet before tomorrow."*

It was crucial because the silence from both the kingdom and the Dawnbringers meant a surprise attack could strike them at their most vulnerable.

He attempted to sit up, but even that small effort brought pain more intense than he'd ever experienced, his body burning with fever. He abandoned the attempt and lay staring upward, willing the torment to fade.

"What if I just pushed through the pain?"

he muttered with a smirk. *"That's not a bad idea..."*

He drew slow, measured breaths while waiting for his moment. As soon as he felt able, he forcefully swung his legs over the edge and pulled himself upright in one sharp movement.

But in an instant, his body buckled at the waist as he cried out in agony and collapsed to the floor. He began letting out small, pained sounds as his entire rib cage felt like it had been shattered anew.

Leo chose that exact moment to return with his meal. Finding Raiden crumpled on the floor, making small sounds of pain, he shook his head with a sigh. "Can't you just wait a few days?"

He rushed over and carefully lifted him back onto the bed. "Let me take care of this for now... trust me, I've got it."

Raiden looked at Leo for a long while, appreciation warming him despite his silence. He had thoughts that could have encouraged his apprentice, but such words risked being taken the wrong way. What mattered was the certainty: Leo was someone he could trust completely.

He resolved not to surrender, methodically finishing his food bite by bite. Once Leo was gone, he exhaled deeply, yet a quiet smile touched his lips.

The loyalty of Leo's caliber was exceptionally rare. He was more faithful than Levi, despite Levi being contractually bound to serve. The thought occurred to him: would it be worthwhile to bind someone so naturally devoted with a formal contract?

Even betrayal from Leo would be acceptable—his loyalty had been so complete that he'd earned the right to choose his own path.

"Maybe I should sign with Speed and the phoenix girl instead..." his eyelids began to droop as sleep pulled at him. "Since Levi's already putting his life on the line for Speed, killing Speed probably won't make much difference now."

Sleep swept over him as soon as the words left his lips. He hadn't been under long when a touch jarred him awake—Leo's hand on his shoulder.

"You need to wake up, Bookkeeper..." Leo examined Ash for a moment before turning back to him. "It's past noon. You should take your medicine."

However Raiden tried to frame it, but he couldn't accept this treatment. Annoyance flared as he gritted his teeth, his consciousness still heavy with sleep.

"The girl's awake, but she won't talk to me." For the first time, Raiden's expression brightened, a subtle smile crossing his face. At last, he could advance his experience points.

"I told her you would visit her soon."

Chapter 37: Freya Pasha

A silent calm settled over the afternoon, and yet Raiden propped his hand against the canopy, finally managing to stand for the second time without much difficulty. Even so, he still needed support to keep his balance occasionally.

With steady movements, he cracked his back and began making his way downstairs, still using the walls to keep his balance when his ribs began to give out. His fragile body could give out at any time, but he needed to push through the pain and find his feet.

Not only that, but the phoenix girl had been up for two days, and he knew he needed to start working on his contract and try to find out if she knew anything about the kingdom's delay in attacking.

His path to her room wasn't easy, but he didn't come across any obstacles. Leo was too busy training to worry about him resting.

The moment he reached the girl's room, she instinctively turned to him with panic in her eyes, nearly jumping out of her bed. But she couldn't move—her head wasn't fully healed. She clutched it, adjusting the bandage while her teeth were gritted wide in agony.

Raiden gave her a smirk and leaned against the wall, putting distance between them as he stared at her, her blue aura fluttering around her. *"Hey,"* he said, causing the girl to look at him.

"I remember you... it's you," she said, her voice filled with slight uncertainty, her eyes slightly narrowing.

Raiden's smile deepened. These were the first words she had said since waking up, and they were in Noorian—so clearly she hadn't understood anything Leo said to her. But from the expression she wore, Raiden knew she had more to say, so he simply stared at her and waited.

"Who are you?"

Raiden's expression shifted in an instant. He had expected something about how he nearly killed her—something to deepen her fear and ease the situation.

He let out a sigh and prepared himself to speak Noorian for the first time in a long while. *"What do you mean?"*

"I've been trying to think about what happened, why I'm here, and how I got here, but the only thing that comes to mind is your face." Her eyes narrowed, filled with confusion and uncertainty.

Raiden stared at her with an unreadable expression, calmly trying to assess the situation. Had she lost her memories somehow?

"It's sad to know you don't remember me correctly." He wore a smile. *"Tell me about yourself... you might remember me in the process."*

"She hesitated for a moment, her eyes darting to the floor, her expression somber. She then raised her head and turned to Raiden. "I am Freya... Freya Pasha, from Silver City. I am a blue crest bearer, a number 8, and my familiar is a hell phoenix."

Freya's eyes began darting around once more—her confusion didn't get any better.

"Tell me more."

She began massaging her head, searching through her mind. "That's all I can remember... your face, and this kind of fear that comes after it that I can't fully explain."

At that moment, dozens of thoughts ran through Raiden's mind. Should he use this to his advantage and lure her into signing the contract? That would be easy and save time, but is that how he wanted people to serve him?

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. He needed time to think about everything.

He gave her a soft smile. *"I will be back in a minute,"* he said and simply walked out of the room.

Maybe having the wind brush against him and the sun scorch his skin would help. Maybe it would help him think clearly, and that's exactly what he was going for.

The moment he stepped outside, he had to raise his hand to block the sun's rays as they scorched directly into his eyes, piercing through them like a blade.

Still, his hand remained raised as he took a few steps into the grassy field and slowly, careful not to increase his pain, lay down on the ground. With his eyes slightly squinted, he began staring at the sun until he finally grew accustomed to its bright rays.

He was breathing heavily and unsteadily, the rise and fall of his chest visible even through his white shirt.

Levi had been gone for about five days with no sign of returning with Speed's sister anytime soon. Speed himself had been showing less concern about whether Levi could retrieve his sister or not—he simply believed the task would be very hard to pull off.

Yet he stuck with his words: if they managed to save his sister, he would form a contract with Raiden.

And if that situation wasn't dire enough, Ash wasn't getting any better. Clearly, though not certain, Raiden had to increase in rank to at least help her. And without her being on her feet, the shadowy chains around Speed could not come off.

Raiden considered all of this as he lay there, and everything would have been easier to assess if he had enough strength—but no.

His ribs were still shattered, and he seriously doubted he could even stand against a goblin in his current state. So the only person fit enough to protect the book was Leo. And that wasn't a good sign for the kind of bookkeeper he wanted to be.

He then let out a loud, hollow scream of frustration, and it echoed through the distance as if he were locked in a cage. His expression darkened as he turned toward the forest.

"What was that?" It was normal for a scream to carry across distance, but considering how his had echoed, it was perplexing. His voice wasn't that loud.

But after glancing in the forest's direction for a while, there wasn't anything out of the ordinary, so he tilted his head back to his original position and continued thinking.

He let out a sigh. This wasn't a situation where he should let his pride get the better of him. Many people had served his parents not from their own interests initially, but later found something within the arrangement that piqued their interest.

He had to give Freya a reason to serve him, but at that moment, he would have to play with lies—and truths could be lies as well, when said right.

He took a deep breath as he finally tried to get to his feet. *"Just tell her the truth..."* he muttered, but at that very moment, he tilted back and glanced at his surroundings. Something was off, and yet everything was perfectly normal.

Still, he shrugged and began making his way to Freya's room, still using the walls to keep his balance. The moment he entered, once again, Freya panicked, her expression etched with fear as if her soul were leaving her body.

Raiden met her dark eyes with a smirk. *"Don't be afraid... at the moment I'm in no shape to hurt you."*

Her expression darkened even further. "Hurt me?"

Raiden gave a nod, his expression unreadable. *"My ribs are broken, and I can't stand properly."* He raised an eyebrow and gestured at his posture. *"See?... I need support, otherwise I'll collapse to the ground."*

Freya wore a concerned expression. "I'm very sorry about that."

Raiden gave her a pretend smile. *"And do you know who did this to me?"*

Freya seemed calm and confused as she shook her head, but then her expression shifted in an instant. "Did I do that?"

Raiden adjusted his body slightly against the wall, his expression turning grim as his grey eyes locked directly onto Freya's dark ones. *"You and your friend did..."*

She attempted to say something, but Raiden gestured for her to stop. *"The only reason you're alive right now is because I chose to have sympathy for you... but clearly, that came with a price. You've lost your memories from the concussion I gave you."*

"I'm sorry..."

Raiden's expression shifted. *"That's why, to prevent you from betraying me, I need you to form a contract with me."*

"You believe I will try to kill you again?" Her expression alone showed she didn't doubt a thing Raiden said. Well, it wasn't like he was lying—he lied with the truth.

Raiden was impressed by how quickly she was catching up, so he gave her a nod with a soft smile.

"Okay..." Freya said without hesitation and outstretched her hand for a handshake. She seemed confused about what she was doing, but it was as if her body already knew.

Raiden was perplexed for a moment before he finally recalled what he had read in the book of Aaron. A contract between two blue crest bearers didn't need a seal since they were both contractors—all it needed was an oath and enough mana.

Raiden smirked and began walking toward her. The moment he climbed onto the bed and got to her level, Freya saw how he was struggling, so she sat upright and leaned forward. Raiden finally placed his hand in hers.

She gave Raiden a skeptical look. *"Oh, yeah. The name is Raiden Night."*

"I, Freya Pasha, swear an oath to be a loyal and faithful servant to Raiden Night for all eternity. Should I go against my oath, let it be the end of me."

The moment she finished taking the oath, their handshake was caught up in blue flames. They were both calm as they watched it burn. It wasn't painful or unpleasant—in fact, it was beautiful, and the flames simply sealed their contract.

As soon as the flames finished burning, Freya reached for her neck, touching her crest. She smiled. "I think I just turned seven."

At that very moment, Raiden's blue screen popped up.

[ALERT]

[NEW CONTRACT MANAGED]

[+30XP]

[DRAGON MANA POOL: 450/5000]

[NEW ABILITY: GAZE BEYOND]

[CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 3]

—Name:[ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [?]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL-50/100XP]

Chapter 38: The Lurks

"I've been meaning to ask," Leo mentioned, joining Raiden for their training session as they stretched and worked on conditioning their bodies.

"How is Ash? Did she grant you the invisibility power?"

Raiden barely looked his way, completely focused on strengthening his ribs and managing the pain. He'd gained some strength in the past two days and was determined to build on it.

"No, she's still unconscious."

Leo paused. "Where did you get it from then?"

Raiden stopped and shot him a lazy look. It should have been obvious, given that Levi was his slave and could turn invisible, but Leo's expression said it all. Somehow, it wasn't obvious to him. He of all people.

"What do you mean?" Raiden asked, trying to read him.

Leo's expression darkened. "I've been thinking about it, and I can't wrap my head around it."

Raiden shifted his gaze away and went back to his strengthening routine.

"Did you somehow manipulate your mana to do that? It's the only thing that makes sense—people in the 5th realm can naturally produce elemental magic once they have the right training and understanding."

He joined Raiden in training. "Even still, you're in the 8th realm, and that's practically impossible, even for you."

At that moment, Raiden knew there was something going on, something he didn't understand yet. Getting an affinity from your contractors clearly wasn't normal. Leo would have known that.

His mind raced for a moment, and the only logical conclusion he could reach was that he had some kind of advantage over everyone else—probably because of the voice and screen that only he could see. The system.

He didn't answer Leo's question or offer anything to satisfy his curiosity. Instead, he asked a question to test his theory.

"Is it true that summoners can communicate with their familiars? Like actual verbal communication or some kind of internal dialogue..."

"No, who told you that?" Leo muttered. "They're just creatures. Well, I've never seen or heard anything like that."

Raiden just sneered. He was the only one, and once again, this drove his ambition to climb the ranks. Ash might know something, and perhaps, only perhaps, the system could return him to his world.

"Can you feel that?" Leo's words broke through Raiden's daze as he turned to find Leo's eyes scanning the ceiling above.

"I don't know how to explain it, but something's off."

Raiden knew what he was talking about. He had experienced the same sensation the day before and two days ago when he contracted with Freya. It felt like something was moving above them, and worse still, like they were trapped.

"Let's check it out," Raiden said. Without a moment's hesitation, they headed out of the training room.

Just outside in the living room, Freya stood with a bandage around her head and her red phoenix on her shoulder. When she heard their footsteps, she turned toward them.

"Can you feel that?" she asked in Noorian.

Raiden gave her a firm nod and walked past her, and she followed behind them. Once they stepped outside, there was nothing. Without waiting for the others, Raiden took a deep breath and channeled mana into his eyes, activating the new ability he'd gained from Freya: gaze beyond.

Freya followed suit. But none of them saw anything. Raiden's enhanced vision pierced through the forests; even from two miles away, he could see white slimes moving through the trees and, beyond them, a new pack of goblins. Still, nothing unusual.

"I can't see anything..." Freya turned to Raiden. "But I could send my phoenix up for a better view."

Raiden looked at her. *"How would you see what he sees?"*

"He's my familiar—I can see through his eyes."

Raiden narrowed his eyes slightly before nodding. Something troubled him at that moment. If he had Freya's ability, why couldn't he see through the phoenix's eyes too? His understanding began to fall apart. The same thing had happened with his invisibility—he couldn't replicate everything Levi could do.

What was going on?—he asked himself, perplexed.

But he knew this wasn't something he could ask Leo to look into for him. Something about him was different from the others. Even though they all existed within the same parameters, he had certain exceptions. With something like that, he couldn't let anyone know. They might discover he wasn't really Raiden after all.

Before long, Freya's familiar returned and landed on her hand. "There's nothing from above."

"I can't shake the feeling that we're being oppressed, like we're trapped in a cage that keeps shrinking," Leo said, his eyes scanning their surroundings as he stood beside Raiden.

Raiden smiled slightly. Leo was right, and thinking about it, that probably explained why his scream two days ago, when he'd been resting on the grass, had echoed the way it did.

"It's fine... you two can head back inside," Raiden told them, his eyes scanning their surroundings cautiously.

But before Freya could leave, he paused her. He needed to know a few things and saw this as an opportunity to build a connection with her, since she was now his slave. *"What else can your familiar do?"*

She looked confused for a moment, then moved back to her original spot as Leo walked away. She extended her hands, and instantly, flames erupted from her palms.

"Can every phoenix do that?"

She shook her head in response. "Every phoenix can see clearly from great distances. But each one has its own unique abilities too."

"You're a blue crest bearer. Where's your familiar?"

"She's not feeling well right now. She got hurt protecting me." Raiden faced her, maintaining his composed expression. Building trust with Freya was crucial.

"Her name is Ash... and she's a white dragon."

"I'm sorry to hear she's injured." She grinned. "But I like dragons... My phoenix is called Free."

"Good to know."

None of them said anything after that, and Freya's expression showed she was uncertain whether she should leave or stay. But after a while, she broke the silence.

"There are three types of phoenixes, just like dragons: white, black, and red."

She patted Free softly. "Reds are extremely rare... I can't recall much, but Free is probably the only red phoenix I've ever known."

Raiden looked at her. *"What makes them rare?"*

"White are divine phoenixes, black are chaos phoenixes, and red are hell phoenixes." She took a stick from the floor and ignited it. But the flames suddenly died out.

Raiden's eyes widened in shock as he watched the stick burn from within. It was as if the flames had penetrated inside and were consuming it from the core—before he knew it, nothing remained but ash.

"They're a special breed, and their flames are very unique."

Raiden smirked. *"I can tell."*

This gave him better insight into his situation. Though he appeared fortunate, it wasn't entirely the case. He could only access the basic version of each slave's abilities. And like how Freya had full access to Free's powers, the only contractor he could completely utilize was Ash, since she was his familiar.

Still, he felt relieved. Even if Ash couldn't return him home, all he needed to do was form more contracts. Maybe he could acquire an ability that would send him back.

But right now, he had to focus on the current situation. Levi still hadn't returned, and he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever was giving them that strange sensation came from either the Dawnbringers or the kingdom, and they would be attacking soon.

"So you're the bookkeeper, and our job is to protect the book at all costs?" Freya asked softly. Clearly, she wasn't entirely sure of their role.

Raiden nodded firmly while giving her a soft smile.

"Why? How important is the book?"

Raiden shrugged.

Chapter 39: Return of the Shadow

Late afternoon shadows stretched across the ground as Raiden and his subordinates stood before the house, their gazes drawn upward with confusion and mounting dread, an unnatural chill creeping through the air around them.

"We are in very big trouble," Leo said, his voice tight as he swallowed nervously and sweat beaded on his forehead.

"How is this possible?" Freya asked in Noorian, her words edged with uncertainty.

Raiden fixed his gaze on the transparent white cube materializing around them, its walls extending from the forest's edge to the mansion's far end, trapping the entire estate within its confines. Like being sealed inside a twenty-foot-tall box. He felt no panic, no fear—only the methodical need to understand what confronted them.

"Let me check if Free can fly beyond it," Freya said, motioning to her familiar. But as Free prepared to take off, Leo's voice cut through the air, sharp and terrified. "Stop!"

He couldn't understand what Freya had said, but he clearly understood what was about to happen. Freya realized it too and quickly stopped Free from flying.

Raiden took a confused glance at them both. *"What's going on? Do you know something, Leo?"*

Leo swallowed hard and stared at the cube once more. "Yes, this is the marked barrier," he whispered, terror evident in his trembling voice.

He gestured toward the barrier's edge where it met the forest. All eyes turned to follow his direction. Three birds fluttered frantically against the transparent wall, unable to break through. As they watched, another bird flew in from the trees—only to find itself immediately trapped with the others, all of them now caught in the same invisible cage.

"Only white crest bearers can create the marked barrier. But casting one this size, the person would have to be sixth realm or higher."

He turned to Raiden. "Once cast, the caster marks someone inside as the target. The barrier can only be broken when that person fulfills whatever command was given.

He paused for a moment while Raiden watched him expectantly. Freya, on the other hand, remained confused; she couldn't understand a word they were saying.

"If the caster's command involves death, the marked person must die before the barrier will break. Same if the command is as simple as 'sleep'—the barrier breaks the moment they sleep." He waited for the words to register.

"It traps everything that enters: insects, leaves, maybe the air itself. But mainly, it's meant for you, bookkeeper."

Raiden stared at the barrier once more. The oppressive feeling that had been weighing on them—it was this barrier all along? After over a week of silence from the kingdom, was this finally their move? His thoughts spiraled through possibilities, each question leading only to more uncertainty.

"Everyone can enter the barrier easily, but once inside, no one can leave until the marked person fulfills whatever command they were given."

As soon as he stopped talking, Freya turned to Raiden. "What is he saying?"

Raiden carefully explained everything to her, watching as the same dread that plagued Leo crept across her face.

"What do you think the command is?" she asked, her gaze locked on Raiden while he studied the barrier.

"*Death*," he said, his voice dry and distant. "*The bookkeeper must die.*"

Freya's expression grew dark. "I have a war to fight, then," she said, her voice just as cold and distant as Raiden's. Her fingers found the bandage on her head, touching it gently.

Silence settled over them as they stared at the barrier, each lost in their own thoughts. Despite the determination written on their faces, Raiden understood the truth: this was his battle to fight. He was the marked target, and he needed to be strong enough to face whatever came, but his weakened body betrayed him at every turn.

His ribs hadn't fully healed yet, and any attempt to fight would only worsen his injuries. Frustration coursed through him, his hands curling into tight, sweaty fists.

Just then, Freya's voice cut through the silence, edged with alertness. "People are running toward us from the forest."

Fear shot through Raiden, making his heart stutter, yet euphoria flooded his body at the same time. A devilish smile pulled at his mouth despite his trembling body.

"Two people, a boy and a girl. The boy looks injured."

Raiden's expression dropped instantly. He activated his gaze beyond, scanning through the forest, and there they were. He found them, but his focus locked immediately on a little girl in ragged clothing. She was surrounded by an enormous dark aura. Her dark hair flickered within the shadowy energy, and her golden eyes were filled with fear and desperation.

Raiden's gaze snapped to the other figure: a guy stumbling forward, one hand pressed to his bleeding gut while his blood-soaked clothes clung to his body. His long dark hair whipped behind him as he gasped for breath, but his grip on the little girl's hand never loosened.

"Levi?" The name escaped him, tinged with disbelief.

Leo, who had remained quiet, turned sharply to Raiden with surprise written across his face, then looked back at the forest. In that instant, Levi and the girl passed through the barrier.

Levi immediately collapsed, and the girl began pulling at him desperately, trying to get him away from the dangerous zone. Leo sprinted toward them without hesitation.

"Are they enemies?" Freya asked, confused.

"No, Freya. That's Levi, one of our comrades. He's just returned from his mission, and it looks like he saved that girl." Raiden spoke gently, his eyes fixed on the pair.

His mind flooded with questions. The terror in Levi's eyes was completely out of character, and Raiden hadn't anticipated this level of devotion from him. More perplexing still was the girl's aura—how could such a small child generate an aura that towered nearly as high as the barrier? Did corruption always create such overwhelming power in crest bearers?

Leo used his ability to nullify Levi's weight. The girl appeared wary at first, but once Levi grasped her hand reassuringly, she helped support him as they moved toward Raiden and Freya.

As they approached, Raiden quickly signaled Leo to start healing Levi while motioning for the girl to remain where she was. He smiled gently and knelt down in front of her. Curiosity gnawed at him—he wanted to check her number, but like Speed, she was wearing a black turtleneck that covered it. Her golden eyes darted nervously to the pavement, filled with confusion and fear.

"Do you want to see your brother?"

Her expression changed immediately, and she nodded firmly, her eyes lighting up. Raiden's smile broadened as he extended his hand to her. She hesitated, clearly wanting to place her hand in his, but something made her keep drawing back.

Raiden understood instantly. She wanted to trust him but couldn't quite manage it. That was entirely understandable, given her circumstances.

"That's fine," he said gently. *"Follow me."* He turned and walked toward the house with Freya, while the girl lingered behind before eventually trailing after them.

Her eyes continued scanning around anxiously until Raiden guided her to Speed's room. Speed acknowledged the visit with casual disinterest, not sparing them a glance as he stared at the opposite wall. The little girl remained rooted in place, her golden eyes trembling as she witnessed her brother chained up like a prisoner.

Raiden looked over at her as her aura suddenly expanded, pulsing against the ceiling and sending gusts of wind through the room.

"Speed, your sister is here," he announced urgently, hoping to spark their reunion before she lost control completely.

Speed spun around to face her. "Soul?" Relief and joy flooded his voice. Immediately, Soul's aura shrank back to normal as she rushed forward and flung herself into his arms.

As the siblings began to cry in each other's arms, Leo rushed into the room, looking past Freya to address Raiden directly. "Raiden, Levi needs to talk to us—it's urgent."

Chapter 40: The Monstrous Seth

"I killed Mack," Levi muttered, sprawled across the bed with sweat coating his face and his hands shaking from sheer exhaustion.

"His brother is coming, and he will be here any moment from now," he said, his voice dry and raspy. The words caught in his throat as he coughed, each one scraping painfully against the next.

Raiden studied Levi in silence, his mind racing. Mack's silence domain had pushed him to the brink—he'd barely survived their first encounter and had nearly walked away from everything he'd sworn to protect. But Levi had killed Mack. Actually killed him. And yet this same man had run from his brother.

What kind of monster was Seth?

Just as he stood there, Levi's expression shifted back to his usual demeanor—curious, almost casual. "Tell Freya she's your slave..."

Raiden simply nodded, barely registering Levi's words. His mind was already racing through their options for facing Seth. He didn't have enough energy left to fight, which

meant his last shot was forming a contract with Speed. Maybe, if he could rise in the ranks and awaken Ash, Speed would be able to help as well.

He turned to Leo immediately. *"I don't think he's close yet, but wait for him."*

He then turned to Freya and repeated the same thing in Noorian. "Once he enters the barrier, you already know he can't get out until I'm dead..." he added, his tone dropping to something lower and colder. "You must kill him."

Freya stared down for a moment, lost in thought. Finally, she raised her head and gave Raiden a firm nod. She and Leo headed outside together.

"I could have killed him, but he got me real bad." Levi clutched his torso. "His ability..." He let out a frustrated sigh. "You'll see it for yourself."

"You could have simply turned invisible."

Levi gave him a lazy look, then simply rested his head on the bed without sparing Raiden another glance. Raiden smirked. He knew his question wasn't worth answering. Invisibility was Levi's only ace in the hole, so of course he'd use it. It just hadn't worked.

Just as he stood there, a sudden chill washed over him. He could sense the danger now. Seth was coming, though not close yet. His body began to twitch, followed by a surge of euphoria and a light grin.

He immediately hurried out of the room, grabbed a contracting seal from the training room, and began making his way to Speed's room. The moment he rested his hand on the door handle, something hit him—the danger detection abruptly rang louder. Seth was within the barrier. He'd closed more than a mile's distance in barely three minutes.

"What is this guy?" Raiden muttered in confusion, his gaze fixed on the entrance's direction.

Still, he opened the door and entered the room. The moment he stepped inside, Soul was fast asleep, clutching Speed with a smile across her face, while Speed lay there staring directly at the ceiling.

"You want the contract?" Speed asked, turning to him.

Raiden said nothing, he simply walked over. Speed adjusted his fingers through the chains, allowing Raiden to place the other half of the seal in his hand.

"Before I take my oath, I want to say thank you," Speed said, his voice tender, unlike his usual tone.

Raiden raised an eyebrow as he wasn't interested in his praises. He simply wanted it done so they could get on with the predicament.

"I've always dreamed of this moment, and you actually saved my sister." Speed took another look at Raiden and instantly knew he wasn't in the mood for that. His expression shifted at once. Speed took his oath, and the seal burned in an instant.

[ALERT]

[NEW CONTRACT MANAGED]

[+30XP]

[DRAGON MANA POOL: 750/5000]

[CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 4]

—Name:[ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [?]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL-80/100XP]

Raiden's expression darkened instantly as he stared at the blue mechanical screen before his eyes. The contract wasn't enough to get him to the 7th realm. That's when it hit him, his eyes widening. Just as Leo had done, he needed to refine his mana.

His heart began to race as he stared into nothingness. Was everything a waste after all? Refining mana couldn't be done within a few minutes—even for him, such a feat would most likely take more than half a day of meditation. By that time they would all be dead if Leo and Freya couldn't defeat Seth.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Speed's words snapped Raiden out of his daze. He didn't spare him a glance as he ran out of the room.

Each footstep echoed through him, goosebumps erupting across his flesh in terror and helplessness while his thoughts spiraled wildly.

He needed to know if the others could defeat Seth—or at least hold him off long enough for him to refine his mana.

The moment he stepped outside, what he saw startled him, and he paused immediately. Before the fountain stood a young man about the same age as Mack, a golden aura radiating from him.

Black hair swept across his forehead, shadowing his eyes from view. His expression was calm but terrifying, a gold crest bearing the number seven gleaming at his neck. The mere sight of him made Raiden shake with fear.

The euphoria failed to give him the rush he needed because Seth's calm yet dangerous demeanor was exactly like his father, Jake Grim. His white dress shirt and dark suit, alongside the black oversized overcoat, only deepened the resemblance.

Still, he swallowed nervously, forcing himself to think clearly and see beyond Seth. Seth had his left hand locked around Leo's neck, tightening his grip and rendering Leo helpless as he gasped for air. His right hand was wrapped around Freya's familiar, Free's neck.

Just a few steps in front of Raiden was Freya, on her knees with tears streaming down her face, clearly terrified for her familiar. "Please, don't kill Free... you can have me instead." Her voice cracked with fear.

Her plea seemed to irritate Seth, his golden aura flickering with annoyance. He drove Leo into the ground, sending him bouncing off the surface as he grabbed his back and screamed in agony.

Seth then held Free with both of his hands and split him in two. Blood splattered across Seth's face and clothes as he dropped the dead body on the floor. He didn't flinch, not even from the splash of blood. Exactly like Jack's father.

Freya, on the other hand, seemed completely broken from witnessing her own familiar slaughtered in two. She looked broken and spent as she knelt there, her limbs lazily collapsing against each other.

She remained silent for a brief moment, as if she had died with her familiar, while Raiden also felt more dead than alive. Their only hope of defeating Seth had just collapsed before him, filling him with despair as his body trembled from within.

However, Freya began to murmur something repeatedly. It was soft at first but eventually grew louder.

"I will kill you."

She said it over and over as flames began radiating from her body, as if she had infused her flames into her aura itself. Raiden's eyes widened as he stared at her, not because she still had fight left in her, but because her ability to infuse flames with aura was something he hadn't seen before.

From Seth's expression, this was new to him as well. He began taking a few steps backward as Freya slowly rose to her feet.