

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 41: The Monsterous Seth 2 - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 41: The Monsterous Seth 2

Chapter 41: The Monsterous Seth 2

Raiden's feet were glued to the floor as he watched Freya slowly get to her feet, her body covered in flames, yet not a single burn marked her black suit. Leo dragged himself across the floor toward Free, his severed body robbing him of any chance for a final breath. Still, Leo managed to pull him out of the way.

Seth's brief stuttering expression suddenly vanished, his calm yet cold demeanor returning as if he wasn't the same person who'd been threatened by Freya's unique usage of mana moments ago.

A brief scare shot through Raiden as he swallowed nervously, while Seth just stared at the floor, not sparing Freya a glance.

However, Freya didn't seem to care much about Seth's reaction. She took a bold step forward and hesitated. The confusion on Leo's face said it all—they were both expecting something. Raiden remained curious, his heart racing as he waited for her to do something.

Just as Raiden's mind wandered, before he could even link a thought together, Seth appeared before Freya. He didn't last a second—Freya struck him, sending him crashing through the fountain behind him and collapsing it entirely as water erupted across the distance.

Still, she didn't give him a chance to get back up. The moment he landed with his clothes drenched, Freya dashed after him and struck his torso, her fire beginning to burn his shirt from within.

Raiden's eyes lit up with relief and hope, but he knew better than to let this brief victory fool him. Despite Freya's devastating strikes, all she had to show for it was Seth's burnt shirt—clearly, he had yet to fight back. His eyes darted around in confusion. What could he do?

He remained still, hands trembling as Freya delivered strike after strike at Seth. Then it hit him—while Freya held Seth off, he could use this moment to refine his mana. Maybe he could do it after all.

He didn't think it through; it was the only thing that sounded logical in the heat of the moment. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, despite the life-or-death battle raging around

him, he turned his focus inward to his mana core. It was only the size of an apple—despite growing denser, it had barely increased in size.

Raiden didn't have the luxury to think about the specifics—he simply assumed the mana grew inward and that refining it meant tapping into it. He visualized his entire body before the core, knowing he had to get closer and enter it. But as he approached, the core seemed to expand, and before long he was sweating.

His heart pounded faster than before, his temperature spiking from the fear of failure. For the first time, he couldn't fully focus on his meditation. He could feel the heat from Freya's flames brushing against his skin.

He knew he needed to be calm to do this properly. After several moments of trying unsuccessfully to tap into his core, he forced his eyes open and began panting heavily. Sweat had completely soaked through his shirt, and he ripped it off his torso.

At that moment he looked over to see Freya caught in Seth's grip, being choked aggressively. She flailed her hands in the air, trying desperately to loosen his hold, while Seth kept his calm demeanor, eyes still focused on the floor.

He slammed her into the ground as she bounced, but she couldn't get far before she was in Seth's hand once more. He crashed her into the floor again, and on her third bounce, Seth was already positioned there, delivering a devastating punch to her gut that sent her crashing down.

Raiden's heart skipped a beat, and he nearly leaped up. He couldn't comprehend how Seth was doing this. It wasn't speed—Seth could pull others to him from any distance and close gaps instantly with the same power. It was as if he erased the very space between himself and his opponents.

The strikes Freya received should have been an end game for her, but she coughed up blood, the bandage on her head was drenched in blood, and still she rose to her feet.

She turned to Raiden and smiled at him before turning to face Seth. It was just a smile, but smiling through that kind of pain wasn't normal unless the person was as stubborn as Raiden was—that's what made him understand her. It was her way of telling him she appreciated being saved. She was willing to die fighting.

Raiden's mouth hung slightly open as he watched Freya summon every ounce of strength within her. The grass around them burned, thick smoke choking the air since it couldn't escape the barrier enclosing them—making everything even hotter.

Raiden shook his head, took a deep breath, and began calming his nerves, forcing himself to ignore his surroundings completely this time. He had to succeed—or this might be their final moment.

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

It repeated itself over and over until finally, the outside world was nothing but a distant memory. He was calm and collected, allowing only the quiet stillness within to fill his mind. The moment he decided to approach his mana core, it came naturally.

However, the moment he approached, he realized just how enormous the core actually was. He saw himself as nothing but an ant before a tennis ball.

He outstretched his hand to touch it, and the moment he made contact, he was pulled inside like he was drowning in an ocean. He began gasping for air even outside, prompting Leo—who had returned from moving Free's body into the house—to take cover from Seth and Freya's intense fight.

They were going at each other relentlessly, strikes meeting fire and fire meeting strikes, with neither backing down.

Meanwhile, Raiden fought his own battle. He felt strangled inside his core, his body trembling uncontrollably until he held his breath and forced himself to think logically. This was his core, part of him, so he should be able to control it.

He continued holding his breath, his face flushing crimson, as he gradually released control until at last he could breathe freely, sending blessed relief coursing through his body.

Inside the core, everything was bathed in blue light, like being engulfed in azure flames. He needed to refine it—purify and filter the energy. This normally required hands-on practice, but this was his only chance, and he had to succeed.

He began breathing steadily, his nerves graciously accepting each particle of mana. The calmer he became, the more mana his body naturally absorbed, leaving the impure ones behind like mist.

Just as he remained there, the ground where Freya stood began to scorch down to its core. Blood poured from her nose, her movements sluggish as she gathered all her strength for a single strike. Seth stood before her, completely unbothered, staring at the ground without flinching or showing any emotion.

At that very instant, Soul came out of the house and stood beside Raiden and Leo. The moment her eyes found Seth, she froze completely, her eyes flickering with panic as she instinctively grabbed Raiden's necklace, trying to wake him. But Raiden was far too deep to be awakened. The fear in her eyes was unmistakable—this was the man who had probably tortured her all her life.

Seth remained unaware of Soul's presence as Freya launched herself at him. He displayed no hint of worry, yet the next moment his fist was driving into Freya's stomach, denying her the chance to land her desperate strike as she collapsed. She attempted to stand but lacked the strength to even twitch.

Both Leo and Soul dropped to their knees as terror overwhelmed them, while Seth simply brushed off his clothes.

At that very moment, Raiden successfully refined his mana as the system's unnatural voice rang in his head.

[ALERT]

[MANA REFINEMENT COMPLETED]

[+10XP]

[DRAGON MANA POOL: 700/5000]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 8: LEVEL-90/100XP]

Raiden's heart sank within him as tears immediately filled his eyes. His mind began spiraling from one thought to another.

If mana refinement wasn't enough, then what could possibly be?—he wondered as despair consumed him, hopelessness setting his body trembling.

Chapter 42: The Monstrous Seth 3

Seth turned toward Raiden and the others and began his slow advance. Soul's panic reached a fever pitch as she shook Raiden frantically, but he had already given up hope, wondering if death would be merciful enough to transport him back to his world.

Soul began murmuring words so quietly that even Leo, mere inches away, couldn't decipher them. With each step Seth took closer, she looked less human and more like a broken marionette.

However, before Seth could get any closer, Leo struggled to his feet, clutching his ribs as he cracked his knuckles. But before Leo could even take a step, Seth had already closed the distance and effortlessly knocked him out of the way.

The moment it happened, Raiden's system suddenly spoke up, breaking him out of his miserable daze.

[ALERT]

[NEW CONTRACT MANAGED]

[+15XP]

[DRAGON MANA POOL: 900/5000]

[CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 5]

—Name:[ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SPEED]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SOUL]

—Bond Type: Devotion Pact.

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 7: LEVEL-5/100XP]

[NEW ABILITIES UNLOCKED: HEART OF DRAGON- 5%

— You have the unyielding heart of Ash. It boosts endurance, regeneration, berserker mode, and the inner fire of a dragon.]

[NEW ABILITY: SOUL CONDEMN]

What? Soul?! Ash?! How is that possible?

—he thought, his eyes flying wide open.

He could feel it coursing through him—his limbs gradually growing stronger, as if every muscle fiber was rearranging itself.

[Papa...] Ash's voice echoed faintly in Raiden's head, and Raiden shot to his feet.

A huge wind suddenly blew throughout the house, forcing them all to shield their faces. When Raiden looked up, he saw Speed's knee slamming into Seth's cheek, sending him crashing into the ground.

A devilish smile spread across Raiden's lips as he stared at them, his eyes lighting up.

Rest, Ash... get some rest,—he thought to himself.

[Okay, papa.] Ash replied, her voice gradually fading.

While Speed and Seth continued their fierce exchange of strikes, Raiden knelt beside Soul, who remained lost in her daze. He had never felt as hopeless as he had moments before, and despite all his experience and strength, his salvation from such despair had come from a little girl he'd never even bothered to care about.

He ruffled Soul's hair and then carefully gathered her into his arms, abandoning the scene as he headed upstairs to his room. Her golden eyes remained fixed upward, still trapped in fear, and her murmurs finally quieted.

When he got to his room, Ash was resting calmly at the edge of the bed, having obviously wanted to come and help. Raiden set Soul down beside her and gently patted both their heads. Without a word, he stared at them with his devilish smile, thinking to himself that he was going to finish this once and for all.

Without hesitation, he headed outside to find Leo carrying Freya back in with what little strength he had left.

"Well done, Leo," he muttered. Leo simply nodded and walked past him.

They had all fought to protect him in his weakness, but now he could feel it—his body had been blessed with enough power and strength to honor everyone's sacrifice.

"He's a 7 but strong, and I'm a 7 too—so no excuses." His grin stretched wider as euphoria coursed through his body, making him twitch with barely contained excitement. *"This will be fun."*

He glanced toward Speed and Seth, though he couldn't make them out clearly—only the traces of Speed's dark aura clashing with Seth's golden one. The fight was fast, brutal, and uncanny, but he hadn't felt this energetic in ages, and there was no way he was going to miss out.

Yet before he could even think, his body jerked forward, charging without any clear direction. Suddenly he found himself before Seth, a strike already heading for his chest. Instinct kicked in, making him react just in time, but not precisely enough to avoid it completely—he managed to shield his chest, though the force still sent him skidding backward.

The pain in his hands made his body shake as he broke into unhinged laughter. He hadn't been this exhilarated by a fight in so long, and seeing Speed and Seth clash, he hungered for that feeling. The euphoria of watching Seth collapse at his feet. He wanted it all. Everything. Entirely for himself.

"Speed, I command you to leave this battle to me. Take care of the others."

The command forced Speed to stop mid-air, his strike falling short, which allowed Seth to strike him down hard. Speed bounced back to his feet at once and began heading inside.

The dark energy emanating from Speed and his mechanical way of walking made him look like nothing more than a puppet. Seth, showing his gentlemanly nature, saw no reason to attack Speed as he retreated.

"You've done well, Speed," Raiden said quietly, his expression growing somber.

When Seth came inside, euphoria surged through Raiden again. *"You've done enough, Seth."* The smile kept stretching wider, beyond his control.

"All my comrades nearly died at your hands," he said with a twisted giggle, while Seth remained calm, casually massaging his muscles. *"Now you will die by the hands of the bookkeeper..."*

As soon as Raiden finished speaking, his body jerked forward and he rushed toward Seth. Oddly enough, Seth made no move to use his ability, choosing instead to stand perfectly still and wait.

The instant Raiden got close enough, he disappeared completely, leaving Seth's eyes wide with confusion as he looked around desperately. Raiden's devilish laughter filled the air as he hammered Seth with simultaneous strikes, launching him into the ground.

Raiden closed in instantly and unleashed another powerful strike. Each hit not only left Seth battered and bleeding, but something was growing stronger within Raiden—his soul seemed to feast on every strike.

This not only energized Raiden but also made him feel invincible, craving more as he rained down strike after merciless strike. Seth finally crumpled to the ground, blood trickling from his mouth as he tried to wipe it clean.

Raiden stood mere steps from Seth's crumpled form, his devilish smile as fierce as ever as he gazed down at his handiwork. He felt utterly transformed and awakened, both in body and soul. It was as if the entire world had become powerless against him.

"Soul Condemn strikes at my enemy's very soul and feeds it to mine," he whispered through his devilish smile. "While Heart of Dragon amplifies my endurance, recovery, and drive..."

He faced Seth, who was desperately trying to rise.

"Ha, that's for hurting my contractors... you are a dead man," he said mockingly, then dissolved into wild, unhinged laughter.

Seth finally managed to stand and clean himself off. "So the bookkeeper can access his servants' magical abilities," he said for the first time, his voice somehow both cold and gentle.

Raiden's laughter ceased abruptly, his eyes widening in shock. *"So you can speak."*

His expression darkened immediately and his voice turned ice-cold. It was as though he had become an entirely different person from the one cackling maniacally moments before.

"You should have shown my comrades the same respect... you're not even close to their level."

Seth inclined slightly in his direction. "Careful with that cockiness, boy." He assumed his fighting position. "Allow me to demonstrate what strongest actually means."

Freya had put her life on the line, fighting him alone despite the concussion and wounds she'd sustained, and Seth hadn't even bothered to look at her—never mind speak to her. But now he could talk? The hypocrisy enraged Raiden.

Raiden narrowed his eyes and refused to let even a hint of euphoria surface this time. He clenched his fists tight, knowing full well he could make Seth beg for mercy. And that was exactly what he planned to do.

Chapter 43: The Monstrous Seth 4

Ashes of grass drifted through the air as the scorching sun blazed overhead, slowly descending toward the western horizon.

Raiden and Seth stood facing each other—Raiden's blue aura flickering with irritation and rage as he clenched his fists, while Seth's golden aura remained steady and serene, his calm gaze fixed upon his opponent.

Raiden stared back, his blood slowly boiling, but he knew he had to remain calm and calculated. He feinted forward, testing Seth with a deliberate step. Before his foot could touch the ground, Seth was already there.

Raiden's expression darkened, mouth slightly parted in shock as he raised his guard against Seth's incoming strike. At the last second, Seth redirected the blow upward, catching Raiden's jaw and dropping him hard to the ground.

The speed and chaos left Raiden dazed, unable to properly register Seth's incoming strike. Before he'd even finished his second bounce off the ground, Seth was there again, driving another blow toward his chest. Raiden managed to block it despite his disadvantage, but the sheer force still sent him skidding across the floor.

Raiden's mind raced, desperately searching for a way to turn the tables. The disadvantage was overwhelming. In the heat of the moment, he activated his invisibility, vanishing in an attempt to escape Seth's relentless assault.

But Seth was already anticipating him, landing a blind strike square in his chest before Raiden could react. The impact sent burning pain through his torso as he gripped his chest with one hand, the other frantically working to stabilize himself and avoid another punishing bounce.

Raiden flickered back into visibility, teeth clenched in pain as he gripped his chest. Now he understood why Levi's invisibility had failed against Seth. It was useless. Seth could feel the space between them, he could read distance itself and bend it to his will.

Seth stood there, stretching his muscles with that same calm expression. He leaned slightly toward Raiden. "Just so you know, my ability is Fold Distance." He motioned for Raiden to attack. "That's what makes me the strongest."

Raiden didn't move, just stared at Seth as his mind jumped from thought to thought. They shared the same rank, but Seth's physical dominance was undeniable. There had to be more layers to his ability. He inhaled deeply, steadying his fraying nerves.

*If he folds distance, I need to stay close, give him nothing to work with,—*he reasoned, then dashed forward.

In an instant, Seth was before him, fist driving toward Raiden's gut. The strike came faster than anticipated, but Raiden reacted just in time. He let the blow connect, his eyes bulging from the searing pain that spread across his skin, but he didn't flinch.

He clamped down on Seth's hand and drove the back of his right fist into his jaw, then followed with a crushing strike to his throat. The attacks came relentlessly, one flowing into the next. Blood sprayed from Seth's mouth as he fought desperately to escape Raiden's iron grip.

But each of Raiden's strikes seemed to drain Seth's very soul, leaving him too weak to break free. Even with Raiden's regeneration working, the relentless assault was overwhelming him—fatigue setting in faster than he could recover, his hands growing

numb. Summoning every last ounce of strength, he drove one final, devastating punch into Seth's gut.

With Raiden's grip locking him in place, Seth had no choice but to take the devastating blow. A sharp, bone-deep crack split the air, and Raiden felt the unmistakable sensation of Seth's ribs crumbling under his fist.

Seth crumpled to his knees before collapsing face-first onto the ground, blood streaming from his mouth and nose. His eyes held a look of stunned disbelief, the pain beyond anything he could process.

Raiden released his grip and began stretching, gathering energy for the final blow. *"I told you I'd kill you... in your next life, never disrespect my comrades."*

His voice carried ice-cold finality as he crouched down and seized Seth by the hair. *"And remember—I am the bookkeeper."*

Raiden hauled him over the scorched grass to the pavement and drove Seth's skull into the concrete with devastating force. Bone cracked and blood sprayed across the ground, yet he could still sense Seth's heartbeat pulsing faintly in his mind.

Raiden clenched his teeth and was about to deliver the final strike, but Seth's aura suddenly turned silver. Raiden instinctively let go of him and put distance between them.

Confusion flashed across Raiden's eyes as Seth slowly stood, a silver aura radiating from his battered form. There had been no devil milk—Raiden was certain of that. And any potion Seth might have carried should have been crushed in their brutal exchange. What the hell was happening?

Seth rose to his feet, his eyes rolled back to show only blank white orbs, and he moved with the jerky motions of a corpse. "I... am the... strongest," he rasped, each word dragged out like the groaning of the undead.

Raiden didn't understand what was happening, but it didn't matter. Seth would still die. As the bookkeeper, he couldn't let the disrespect and torment of his comrades go unpunished.

"I don't care," Raiden muttered coldly. *"You can turn into a god, but I will still kill you."* He dashed forward without hesitation.

Seth was on him in a flash, his strike cutting through the air. Raiden blocked it, but the impact sent him skidding backward anyway, searing pain exploding through his left hand and tearing a scream from his throat.

As soon as Raiden came to a halt, he stared down at his left hand in disbelief. It was mangled beyond recognition, completely broken.

"What?" The word escaped as barely a breath, his eyes wide with horror.

His regeneration wasn't kicking in—the damage was too extensive, overwhelming his body's ability to heal. He looked back at Seth, who stood motionless like a statue. Mindless though he seemed, his power had increased exponentially.

Raiden inhaled deeply, centering himself. This had to end now, and he could make it happen. It was all about perfect timing and execution. He moved his broken hand out of the way, positioning himself carefully. One hand, that's all he needed.

He approached Seth with measured, careful steps until suddenly they were face-to-face. Their strikes came at the same moment—Seth's punch tore through Raiden's gut, obliterating his internal organs while searing heat flooded his abdomen. But Raiden endured the agony and drove his fist into Seth's jaw, shattering bone and dropping him hard to the ground.

Raiden stood frozen, jaw locked tight against the agony, hoping for even a moment's relief. But when Seth started pushing himself up, Raiden realized he couldn't afford to wait—he had to capitalize now.

He stepped forward, and the gut pain flared worse, but there was no choice—he had to endure it. Fighting through the agony, he broke into a run just as Seth got back up, jaw hanging at a broken angle, those hollow white eyes tracking Raiden's approach. Too late—Raiden was already on him.

Seth had no time to defend—Raiden's fist slammed into his chest with brutal force, launching him backward into the ground. Raiden pursued instantly, following Seth's trajectory until his body struck the magical barrier that had been cast around the house to contain Raiden.

By the time Seth came to a halt, Raiden was already there. He seized Seth's head and drove it against the barrier with crushing force, fracturing his skull yet again. But no blood flowed from the wounds—not a single drop—and the unnatural sight filled Raiden with urgent dread.

He crushed Seth's head against the barrier again, dropped him like a rag doll, and planted his foot across his throat. With all his remaining power, he punched through Seth's ribcage and tore the pulsing heart from his chest.

The silver aura faded to gold as Seth coughed up a final stream of blood, his frantic eyes growing vacant as death claimed him. Overwhelming relief washed over Raiden. He threw the heart away and slumped to the ground, his back pressed against the barrier.

Seth's aura flickered and faded, his desperate eyes searching as though he had final words to share. Raiden looked at him with a cruel smile, euphoria flooding through him at last, claiming its warmth.

But he had no intention of giving Seth that satisfaction—he would wait in silence until death finished the job.

"You are the strongest fighter I've ever faced," Seth murmured as his eyes started to close. "You should take pride in that... I consider you stronger than even my father."

Raiden looked away from Seth and faced the mansion, letting his eyes rest on the sunset. After a moment, he noticed Leo sprinting toward them.

"I'm sorry your brother died at Levi's hands... I know all you wanted was revenge." He glanced at Seth's lifeless form. "But I am the bookkeeper, and I must protect my comrades."

[ALERT]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 7: LEVEL- 5/100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 55

DRAGON MANA POOL: 915/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 245

STAMINA: 230

DRAGON AURA: 100

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 85%

—Euphoria: 40%

FAMILIAR TRUST: 102%

—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON

CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 5.

—Name: [ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SPEED]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SOUL]

—Bond Type: Devotion Pact.

NEW ABILITIES:

—Soul of Dragon: 13%

—Heart of Dragon: 10%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

Chapter 44: Message to the Kingdom

"I came out to help and caught sight of Seth fully transformed," Leo said as he set Raiden's broken arm. "That's what they call a ghost walker."

Leo adjusted Raiden's arm, drawing a scream of pain. "Silver Crest bearers wield forbidden magic. Unlike the black and grey crest bearers, they only take their final form when death is close."

"So in his final form, Seth was technically dead?" Raiden muttered through gritted teeth.

"No," Leo replied. "The ghost walker form appears to keep them from dying completely. So he would have come back to consciousness after killing you."

"I've only witnessed one ability firsthand. Soul Swap,"

Leo explained. "The user can transfer all their injuries to their opponent when near death, killing them instantly."

Raiden's expression darkened as he contemplated the cruelty of that fate.

"And how can you tell if someone is a Silver Crest bearer?" he asked.

"You won't know until they're about to die." Leo smiled, noting Raiden's confused expression. "Trust me, very few individuals possess the Silver Crest. It's difficult to obtain after consuming devil milk."

"But I thought the black crest was the strongest of them all," Raiden said.

Leo nodded firmly, his expression unreadable. "Yes, it is. The silver is just harder to acquire, but in terms of strength, the black crest outclasses it."

"There are only thirty forbidden magics among the four kingdoms, and each person gets just one, making it extremely rare to acquire," he said and adjusted his brown bracelet.

"So are all thirty known?"

Leo shook his head. "No, you only know what you got after obtaining it, since all devil milk looks exactly like regular milk..."

"I want you to check the ones that have been obtained and tell me their weaknesses." Leo studied him for a moment before giving a firm nod.

Raiden nodded, adjusted his hand slightly, and settled back on his bed. He could feel the regeneration working through him, though the rate was minimal. Despite feeling somewhat energetic, he could sense his body gradually surrendering to relaxation.

"I will be leaving," Leo said. Raiden simply responded with a nod, yawning through his drowsiness.

Raiden turned to the left side of the bed. Ash was peacefully sleeping there. He smirked and leaned over to pat her with his right hand. At long last, his dream to return to his world remained intact.

He adjusted himself, and before long, sleep claimed him. The entire house had fallen into despair by the time Raiden finally defeated Seth. Freya was completely shattered, and though conscious, the thought of Free being gone cut through her like a blade.

She refused to take any healing potion until Raiden finally commanded her to. Speed and Leo were the only people with energy left to spare, but Speed had to console his sister Soul since the moment she heard Seth was dead, she couldn't stop crying. And

while Leo tended to both Raiden and Freya, Levi also remained bedridden, waiting for his wounds to heal.

However, the night served as a refuge from such a brutal day. Still, since the day wasn't meant to last forever, neither was the night and before they knew it, the sun had risen.

A soft, affectionate nudge from Ash woke Raiden up as he smiled and gave her a hug. "How are you feeling, Ash?" he asked, his voice deep with sleep.

[I am okay, Papa.] Ash squeezed him tighter and flapped her wings a little. [Miss you, Papa.]

Raiden patted her on the head and lifted her onto his shoulder. *"You won't stop calling me 'papa,' will you?"*

He asked as he stood up, but Ash simply relaxed on his shoulder with a soft smile.

Raiden examined his hand once more. It was healing, but obviously, it would take longer than he wanted it to. He let out a sigh and started downstairs.

On the stairs, he ran into Leo, who seemed to be going to his room at the far end of the upstairs corridor, with several bandages wrapped around him. Leo's eyes widened in realization.

"Raiden..." Leo called out, and Raiden turned to him with a puzzled expression. "I need your permission to keep searching for the Book of Aaron. I think it might help bring Free back to life."

Raiden's eyebrow shot up in surprise. He'd never known dead familiars could be brought to life, but whether it could happen or not, he wasn't going to stop Leo. Freya's happiness would mean less drama to deal with.

"Yeah, you can."

Leo gave him a firm nod. "By the way, Levi wants to speak with you."

Raiden nodded back and continued descending the stairs. But before going to Levi's room, he stopped by the kitchen to get bread for himself and Ash, then headed to Levi.

The moment he arrived, Levi stood before a mirror on the wall, adjusting his bandage.

"Such a great master you are," Levi teased, turning to Raiden. "You actually listen to your servants."

Raiden gave him a lazy look. *"Don't get over yourself, kid."*

Levi wore a cocky smile and sat on his bed, bracing his hands behind him, while Raiden leaned against the wall at the entrance.

"There's something about you I haven't figured out yet," Levi said and locked eyes with Raiden.

Raiden smiled instantly. He was in a similar situation with Levi. Why Levi had risked his life to save Soul still puzzled him. To Raiden, it had nothing to do with Levi being his contractor—the look in his eyes, that desperation and desire to get Soul to safety, seemed too personal.

"How did you get to form a contract with Freya?"

Raiden's expression darkened—this wasn't the first time Levi had brought up something about Freya. Did he know something Raiden didn't? After all, Levi had been in the same organization as Freya.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know who she really is, do you?" The expression on Raiden's face said it all, causing Levi to shake his head in disappointment.

"In the Kingdom of Noor, Freya was one of only two Stars we had. Her mana control was exponential even at rank 8, and she was praised by the higher ranks."

Levi paused for a moment as Raiden then understood why Freya was able to infuse her flames with her mana, something that was surprising to even Seth.

"Last year at the Grand Kingdoms Festival in the Kingdom of Eldon, she placed second in the strength tournament, losing only to a girl from Aurelia, a number 6."

Levi shook his head once more as he believed Raiden wasn't getting it, but Raiden understood completely. He simply remained silent and waited for more.

"Well, she lost her Star title when she forced her fellow Star, a curse puppet user, to form a contract with her."

Raiden let out a sigh of relief and understanding. He finally grasped Freya's relationship with the curse user he'd killed—he had been worried she might be someone important to Freya, and there could be trouble when she recovered her memories.

But knowing that wasn't the case brought him relief. It had puzzled him how Freya had dropped to seven right after their contract. But now everything was clear—she was no different from Raiden.

"And worse, she was the one who defeated the bookkeeper in Noor—and he was a number 6..." Levi narrowed his eyes, warning Raiden. "She's very dangerous."

Raiden sighed. *"Well, she's my servant now, and she has amnesia. She doesn't remember any of that because I gave her a concussion."*

Levi's eyes widened in shock for a moment before he burst into laughter. "You actually defeated Freya?" He continued to laugh while Raiden simply stared at him. "You are truly something, Raiden."

However, his laughter stopped, and his expression darkened instantly. "About the Stars, the barrier around us was set by the Stars in this kingdom."

Raiden finally leaned in, sensing this was something that could decide their fate in the upcoming days.

"When I was leaving on the mission, I saw them. But that wasn't the troubling part." Levi rose to his feet and walked to his mirror, adjusting his ponytail.

"We are branded wanted..." he began gesturing with his hand. "The Guardians of Ashes—and our title was followed by our names. What's surprising is they know all of our names."

He turned to Raiden, who wasn't surprised by them knowing their names, because he knew who the traitor was—Aeris. The thought of killing her made him giggle with excitement.

"I believe I have an idea for how we can restore our good reputation."

Raiden's eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't expected Levi to make such a suggestion.

"How?"

Levi wore a proud and confident smirk. "Let's give them the book."

Chapter 45: Message to the Kingdom 2

Raiden stared directly at Levi, disappointment creeping in. How exactly would handing over the book help their case when they already believed he worked with the assassins?

"We won't necessarily give them the book," Levi said. He walked toward Raiden, placed his hand on his shoulder, and smirked. "We tell them the truth, and if they want it, they come for it."

Raiden stared into Levi's eyes for a moment, his mind spinning as he reconsidered what Levi was saying.

Telling the truth, huh?—he thought as he reached for his jaw. He then smirked; it wasn't a bad idea at all. He could simply lie by speaking the truth, a truth he was certain the elders wouldn't want to hear.

However, his expression darkened in an instant. *"How exactly are we going to speak with them?"* He raised an eyebrow. *"We're trapped, remember?"*

Levi smirked and reached into his pocket, removing two stones: red and blue. "Well, I took the initiative to get us some recorder stones."

Raiden smirked and collected the stones from his hand, analyzed them, and gave them back to him. *"Prepare the pensieve for the recording at the training room."* He rested his hand on the door handle. *"I will be getting the others."*

Raiden opened the door, and opposite Levi's room was Freya's. He closed the door behind him and took a deep breath. With Freya being such a notorious traitor in her kingdom, and also being in this pretty bad situation, was getting her up for the recording a good idea?

He stood just before her door and pondered this for quite a while before he finally shook his head to get himself together. Whether Levi's suggestion became successful or not, the kingdom was bound to send people there, and when they did find her, his situation was bound to worsen in that regard.

So he took a few steps forward and knocked on the door. With a low and soured tone, she asked Raiden to come in. Her room was no different from the previous rooms, but just like everyone else except Levi, she lacked a mirror.

Just a little glance to his right revealed Freya. She lay on the bed, covering herself with a blanket, and the sorrow in her eyes said it all—she had been crying because of Free's death.

Raiden remained motionless beside the door for a moment, having no idea how to approach Freya in her situation. A direct command would be rude to her, and he wasn't one to mistreat their servants.

"Leo believes he could bring Free back to life," he blurted, but Freya barely seemed motivated—she was already aware of that.

"I'd urge you to put your trust in him, if not him, me." Freya tilted slightly toward Raiden as he walked to her. *"I'd do anything possible to make sure you get your familiar back."*

He crouched beside her bed and stared directly into her dark eyes, her black hair scattered across the pillow. *"But for now, I want you to do something for me, and after that, we will all do everything to bring Free back to life."*

Freya remained silent for a moment, then gave a firm nod while Raiden gave her a soft smile. *"I'd like you to meet me in the training room. Can you?"*

She gestured positively, and with that, while still wearing a smile, he rose to his feet and left the room. Just at the door, he turned to his left to see Soul and Speed returning from the living room.

In an instant, Soul rushed toward him and wrapped him in a hug, causing Raiden's face to turn crimson—his discomfort with emotions was visible even from afar.

"Thank you," Soul said as she pulled back from the hug, still struggling to keep eye contact.

Raiden immediately felt puzzled by her appreciation. If she hadn't voluntarily formed a contract with Raiden, they would have all been killed by Seth. So what was she talking about? Was she not aware of what she had done?

Speed soon closed in on them. "I know she formed a contract with you without your consent." They both bowed their heads. "We are sorry about that."

Raiden let out a sigh of relief. *"Don't worry about that... you guys should follow me."*

He said and turned to his right, making his way into the training room. *"How did she do it, though? I never knew someone could force a contract."*

"She was initially a blue crest bearer before Mack experimented on her, turning her black." They finally neared the training room.

"And since we get to keep our previous abilities after turning corrupt, she can still form contracts."

Raiden tilted slightly toward them, thinking to himself how interesting that was. Even though unfair, those who turned corrupt still kept their previous abilities, but that wasn't something he was particularly interested in.

The moment they entered the room, Leo and Levi stood before a mirror, its surface covered in water as they waited for Raiden and the others to finally break the red stone against its surface and begin the recording.

However, barely a minute after Raiden and the others entered, Freya joined them, prompting Leo to break the red stone and spread it across the watery mirror screen. As

the powdered stone began to spread, spin a little, and finally stop, it turned the entire screen red—the pensieve.

"Levi couldn't get a high-quality stone, so this would probably last less than five minutes," Leo said, and Raiden gave him a nod.

To play it safe, Raiden had to summarize everything there was to say in four minutes; otherwise, once the time limit was up, the recording wouldn't be transferable, meaning they would be back to square one.

He took a deep breath and gestured for everyone to stand behind him, clearing his throat as they positioned themselves before the mirror.

"This is a message to King Hannes, the six elders, and the entirety of Persia. This is Raiden Night, the bookkeeper, and behind me are my subordinates." He smirked.

"And together, we are the Guardians of Ashes whom you've come to despise."

Raiden adjusted his broken hand properly before the mirror. *"Unfortunately, I can't be at my very best at the moment due to this injury. My hand is completely broken."* He smirked once more and stared directly into the red screen.

"And do you want to know how I got this injury? I'm sure you do."

He turned back and gestured at Freya. *"This is Freya, a very devoted companion of mine, and as you can see, she is brutally injured and, worse, sad because her familiar was slaughtered before her."*

He then gestured at Levi. *"This is Levi, the one you so believe is an enemy, and that makes us enemies to the kingdom."*

He lifted Levi's shirt, showing the bandages wrapped around his stomach. *"And as you can see, this traitor nearly died protecting the book."*

He then gestured to Leo, who had bandages across his nose and fingers and a few bruises on his neck. *"Leo Odin—safe to say, the only person here you people are most likely to trust—and yet see him. This was after his sacrifice to protect the book."*

"And finally, Soul and Speed," he said, his tone tinged with excitement as he emphasized Speed's mask. *"These two are the product of corruption and inhumanity within the kingdom."*

"By the influence of the elders, Captain Kai, and the Dawnbringers, these two had not only suffered but were tortured to the brink of death."

He walked to the mirror once more, staring directly with his ice-cold expression. *"And guess what—the same people whom those in power permitted to do such torture to Speed and Soul were the same people who did this to each one of us."*

Raiden walked a little closer, his tone dropping. *"And do you know what? This wasn't to save the kingdom, but rather to kill me, steal the book, brand themselves saviors, and claim the bookkeeper's duties for the Dawnbringers."*

He took a deep breath. *"The Guardians of Ashes are respectfully putting their lives on the line for this kingdom and the entire world, but if you want pride and hypocrisy to be your guide, then..."*

He wore a soft and cunning smile. *"Come for the book. I give you my word, no blood will be shed. Just come for what you bastards desperately need—what you would risk the fate of the world for."*

And with that, he bowed his head, and so did the others. Leo walked closer, shattered the remaining blue stone, and poured it on the mirror as it began to spin.

"Deliver to the Royal Palace of the kingdom of Persia," Leo said, and the screen instantly stopped spinning, turning into a reflective mirror once again.

Chapter 46: Aftermath

The palace traitor was yet to be found, and Raiden trusted no one within those walls, hardly anyone beyond them. What he did trust was that King Hannes would take action after receiving his message. And if his prediction held true, they had yet to face the kingdom's most devastating attacks.

With the message to the royal palace sent, he and Ash, who continued resting silently on his shoulder, began their exit from the training room.

But the moment they stepped outside, Freya closed in on them. "Can I speak to you for a moment?"

Raiden turned to her, startled, but gestured for her to speak. "I want you to know that I've given reasonable thought to what you said, and I've decided to give it a shot. I'll work with everyone else to bring back Free."

Raiden smiled—not only would this lift Freya out of her depression, but he was relieved he wouldn't have to endure her sorrowful expression daily. Still, his expression changed the instant Freya's did, her eyes darting downward to the floor.

"You've already explained my amnesia, which I understand perfectly." Her eyes shifted downward. "But regarding Free... I can't just let his death go without feeling grief."

She lifted her gaze and locked eyes with Raiden. "I can feel it inside—he was so important to me. You know? It's something I don't need anyone to tell me to remember. It's already there."

Raiden raised an eyebrow, his gaze remaining fixed on her. He understood completely. As Jack, transforming into Raiden, there were aspects of Raiden's life that he found impossible to release—his family's reputation and, above all, his duty as the bookkeeper. These weren't memories he had to recover; they felt embedded in Raiden's soul itself.

"Free feels like the only thing that matters to me right now." Freya paused for a moment. "So I will help. We're going to bring back my familiar."

Raiden smiled broadly at her. Since Leo couldn't understand anything in Noorian, Freya's best bet would be speaking with the shadow of Noor himself, Levi. But before that, there was something he needed her to do.

"That's great, Freya." He gave her shoulder a gentle tap. "But I'd feel better if you waited to recover fully before putting in much effort."

Freya gave a positive nod, and they both started walking away. Raiden needed to go outside and assess what could be done about the smoky mist their battle with Seth had left behind. Something about Freya, however, troubled him.

Given everything Levi had told him about Freya's past, this calm and gentle behavior didn't match what he'd expected from her. But he dismissed the thought after a few moments, his attention turning to Ash, who still perched on his shoulder, staring down at the floor.

The moment he stepped outside the house, the dense air made him cough as he waved his hands to dispel it from around his face.

"Is there anything you want to tell me, Ash? You must have some idea of what you really are." Raiden spoke hoarsely through his irritated throat, still coughing.

But Ash remained silent. She only raised her head slightly, shooting him a sharp glance from his shoulder before settling back into her resting position.

Raiden hesitated slightly. After all, since advancing two ranks from when he'd first summoned her, she should have gained some awareness of what she was. Still, he decided not to press the matter, his attention shifting to the problem of clearing the dense air.

He remained there, hand pressed over his nose, his gaze sweeping the area desperately. With air this dense, they risked dying from suffocation if he didn't find an answer soon.

Just then, a voice interrupted his thoughts from behind—Levi.

"I wasn't expecting you to be so brutally honest." He spoke with a smirk as Raiden turned around.

"What did you expect me to say?"

He stepped closer. "Well, I didn't have anything particular in mind, honestly. I just knew you would find the right words."

Raiden gave him another look. The expression on Levi's face didn't match his casual words—something Raiden found unsettling. It seemed as if what had transpired served Levi's interests in ways Raiden hadn't yet grasped.

"You know that what you said might be taken as an insult to the leaders, right?"

Raiden scoffed. *"Not really."* He turned to face Levi directly, hands settling on his hips. *"Their pride will be hurt, and this isn't something they'll overlook easily."*

"Our chances of surviving are better now, but not until we win a particular war, one that doesn't depend on strength."

Levi's smirk stretched wider. "It's remarkable how psychologically sharp you've become. Would you share your history with your humble servant?"

Raiden remained silent, turning his attention back to the dense smoke behind him.

"I mean, none of your people really understand who you are. Not even Leo... they all say you've transformed completely in recent months."

"..."

Raiden turned his gaze to Ash. *"Can you do something about this, Ash?"*

[Yes, Papa.] Ash responded and sprang to the floor.

Raiden's expression immediately darkened as Ash increased in size before his eyes. She crouched on her front legs, opened her mouth, and her eyes went completely black as her wings settled against her back. Then she began absorbing the dense air around them.

Raiden wondered why she hadn't suggested helping sooner, choosing instead to wait for his request. Had she somehow believed he could manage it alone, despite knowing his limitations?

Within moments, Ash had absorbed all the dense air around them, returned to her original size, and looked at Raiden with a satisfied smile. She bounded toward him, and he scooped her up, placing her back on his shoulder.

At first glance, most of the grass had been reduced to ash, while the surviving patches had turned brown, leaving countless potholes across the formerly pristine landscape. The Marked Barrier continued to surround them, but what it couldn't take away was the sky's enduring beauty.

Raiden looked up at the beautiful sky and allowed himself a smile, releasing his worries about Ash's enigmatic nature and Levi's calculating demeanor. He turned to face Levi.

"There's still daylight left, and everyone capable of training should get started." He said, walking past Levi toward the house.

"So you won't be sharing anything about your past then."

"..."

"Oh, and I'm entrusting Freya to you. Teach her Persian."

Chapter 47: Open Threads

[ALERT]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 7: LEVEL- 5/100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 60

DRAGON MANA POOL: 915/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 255

STAMINA: 250

DRAGON AURA: 105

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 90%

—Euphoria: 45%

FAMILIAR TRUST: 102%

—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON

CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 5.

—Name: [ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SPEED]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SOUL]

—Bond Type: Devotion Pact.

NEW ABILITIES:

—Soul of Dragon: 15%

—Heart of Dragon: 15%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

Raiden stood in the center of the training room, chest heaving as sweat poured down his body, droplets hitting the floor with soft splashes. His hands maintained their firm grip on the odachi's handle.

His broken hand had grown stronger after a few days of rest. With all his subordinates putting in the work, it was only fair he dug in himself the moment he felt strong enough. And with the kingdom's silence dragging on, it was only natural he prepared for their eventual response.

Raiden stood there, allowing his nerves to calm after the intense training, when a voice spoke from behind. Levi.

"Can we have a duel? You and I?" he said, stepping closer. "I need a challenge, and I think sparring with you would be perfect."

Raiden studied him for a while, wiping the sweat from his face as it dripped down. He hesitated over Levi's request. The man had clearly grown stronger since their last duel, but why challenge him? Freya was far more powerful.

Levi kept smirking as he peeled off his white suit, while Raiden simply watched, still uncertain. After a moment's consideration, he decided to go through with it. After all, it wasn't as if Levi could actually win.

Raiden moved to the shelf across from him, sheathed his sword, and turned back to face Levi. *"Deal, but you'd better give me everything you have."*

"It would be stupid of me not to." Levi smirked. Before Raiden could react, Levi vanished, closed the distance in an instant, and struck at his head. Raiden's instincts kicked in—he caught the blow with his left hand.

The span between blocking the strike and Levi pulling back for another attack lasted barely a second. Yet Raiden seized the opportunity—he grabbed hold of Levi, feinted a strike, and drove his leg into Levi's gut, sending him crashing into the ground.

Raiden shook his head, disappointed. *"How did you manage to kill Mack with this?"*

Levi pulled himself to his feet, one hand pressed to his gut. "Unlike you, my invisibility actually worked on him."

Raiden smirked and vanished as well. *"Guess I'm the only one you can't deceive."*

Before Levi could even respond, Raiden was already moving, following his heat signature. When Levi realized he was closing in, he tried to put greater distance between them, assuming Raiden was merely reacting on instinct. But before he could take a step, Raiden was there.

Raiden sent a strike at him, and Levi held his ground, blocking it. Raiden followed immediately with another—blocked as well. But he didn't stop. His joints were already hurting from training, yet the moment he entered the flow of striking, he couldn't resist continuing. Euphoria slowly built within him, pulling a devilish smile across his face.

But Levi held his ground, dodging and blocking Raiden's strikes through gritted teeth, unable to bring himself to strike back. Suddenly, Raiden's danger detection flared to life, breaking his focus and forcing him to halt his strike midair.

But Levi didn't waste that moment of hesitation. He delivered a devastating blow to Raiden's chest, sending him crashing into the ground. His fist had struck the key hanging from Raiden's neck, leaving its outline pressed into his chest.

He became visible and clutched his chest, his teeth gritted in pain.

"That's a win for me then," Levi said, becoming visible again.

"Well... there are no excuses in battle, so you won." Raiden pulled himself to his feet and examined his chest again, checking the damage Levi's blow had caused.

His regeneration was already beginning to work, but that wasn't his concern right now. There was an intruder.

[ALERT]

[MANA CONTROL +5

STAMINA +5

PHYSICAL STRENGTH +5

DRAGON AURA +5

EUPHORIA +5%]

"We need to get outside. There's an intruder within the barrier," he said, walking toward the entrance. He grabbed his black shirt and flipped the switch, transforming the walls back into bookshelves.

Levi stood motionless for a moment, his expression showing he clearly had questions for Raiden—but Raiden didn't wait around for them.

The moment Raiden got outside, Speed and Freya were waiting by the entrance, Freya carrying Ash in her arms. Straight ahead, past the fountain on the scorched grass, Soul and Leo battled an older man who looked to be in his early forties.

He wore tattered brown clothing, had red hair and a beard, and a yellow aura radiated from him—his yellow crest displayed the number 7.

It wasn't exactly a fight, because all that could be seen were Leo's yellow aura and Soul's dark aura, both fluctuating whenever they managed to land strikes on the man.

Their fighting style was pure beauty to him—they moved as one, perfectly synchronized as if they'd been partners for decades.

Between Leo's attacks nullifying his weight and Soul's strikes targeting the assassin's very soul, the man was helpless. His expression said it all—he hadn't expected this. A 7, being outmatched by children.

Staring at them as they brutally beat the man, blood pouring from his injuries, only amused Raiden. It showed how far his team had progressed, and he no longer had to worry about every little detail.

However, something else caught his attention entirely. Soul's aura seemed to grow stronger with each strike she landed, which explained her overwhelming presence—and also why his dragon aura had gotten such a significant boost after his fight with Seth.

Soul's ability, Soul Condemn, didn't just drain the opponent's aura with each strike—it absorbed it.

Before long, Leo delivered a devastating strike to the man's chest, completely nullifying his weight. His body suspended in midair as blood poured from his mouth like a stream.

Soul then slipped beneath him and delivered a powerful strike to the exact same spot Leo had hit earlier. The force launched the man upward until he crashed into the magical barrier above, his body breaking apart on its hard surface as warm blood rained down on them.

Just then, Levi, who had been standing behind Raiden for quite some time, spoke up, snapping Raiden out of the spectacle he was trying to savor.

"Just so you know, we're at Coast City—the main forest leading to the ocean, to be precise."

Raiden turned to him, startled. Coast City was two cities away from Persia City—a three-day journey by the fastest carriage. So how exactly was their teleportation working? Could it possibly reach that far?

"Really?"

"Yes, and I think that's why it's difficult for assassins to come here often. The bandits on the roads make it dangerous."

Raiden turned to Leo and Soul as they approached with satisfied smiles, clearly pleased with their synchronization.

"That's why I think we need someone out there to watch the assassins for us. A spy."

Raiden remained silent. Given Levi's recent questions and mysterious behavior, letting him go spy on the assassins could spell trouble.

"I believe they'll strike soon, but the timing is the issue—and I know you want to know as well."

Raiden smirked. He did want to know about the assassins, but given Levi's questions, there was no chance he'd send him.

"Maybe you could send Speed or Leo once we get out of the barrier."

Chapter 48: The Twins from Kingston City

Raiden rested on a sofa, his eyes darting at the chandelier above, while Speed sat right beside him in silence. Outside, the others were training while Leo went through the bookshelves across the house. Neither would speak first—too arrogant, both of them.

Raiden had wondered why he didn't receive any ability from Speed after their pact, but he'd already dismissed the concern. Probably because he was wrapped in Ash's chains at the time, his crest barely recognizable. Not that he would have asked about it anyway—Speed himself wouldn't have known.

However, after a brief moment, Speed set his pride aside and spoke up. "We are very grateful for your help, but I'm afraid we don't serve anyone. We aren't slaves."

Raiden tilted slightly toward him. They were already his servants, so he couldn't understand what Speed was mumbling about. Beyond that, he didn't want people working for him solely because of some contract they'd formed.

They had to have a personal reason, something to gain from serving him. So he said nothing; he simply tilted back to stare at the chandelier and began wondering how they were made.

"Soul and I have been through a lot, and I'm not going to let that happen anymore." His voice carried both rage and sadness.

Raiden immediately understood what was going on. Speed wanted to speak his heart out. Perhaps there was something he expected from Raiden but wasn't receiving, leaving him confused and conflicted.

Soul tilted upward too, staring at the chandelier. He smiled. "When we were around eight, our parents suddenly vanished. Whether they're dead or alive, no one knows."

He paused. "A few days later, the rent was overdue. Soul and I were kicked out."

Raiden's expression darkened. Had Speed been taking care of his little sister since they were eight? It seemed both impressive and impossible, but he held back his questions. He didn't want to disrupt Speed's sharing.

"We both had our crests, so we decided to leave Kingston City. It's right next to Coast City, on the west side." His eyes stayed locked on the chandelier above, ignoring even the breeze that drifted past.

"It was a small city full of commoners, but we thought having crests would be enough to make it in Persia City—even as commoners ourselves."

He smirked again. "How wrong we were."

Speed's mention of commoners brought back memories for Raiden—the day of his duel with Levi, when crowds had swarmed his carriage downtown. He'd assumed they were just migrants from smaller villages, not realizing they'd come to Persia City specifically hunting for riches.

"As it turned out, commoners would always be commoners regardless of their magical status."

"We spent months on the streets. Just the filth on our clothes was enough to get us kicked out of places. Most people wouldn't even acknowledge we existed."

Raiden smirked. He understood Speed's experience all too well. Even as a high-class noble, he'd struggled to get people's attention on Persia City's streets. Everyone seemed too busy to be bothered.

"That's when we finally understood the nobles. It wasn't really their fault. Just maintaining noble status and staying in the major cities was a full-time job."

"So we tried to fit in without nobility, without education."

"We survived on restaurant scraps day after day, until he appeared. Seth." Speed's expression darkened at the name.

"He seemed kind-hearted, bringing us food and water. I was suspicious, but Soul wasn't—probably because she was the one getting most of his attention."

"Sometimes he showed up only to see Soul, give her food, and watch her eat it."

Raiden's expression darkened. He'd never realized how predatory Seth had been behind that calm facade. If he'd known, he would have made Seth's death much slower.

"It didn't take long before they invited us into their home. Soul trusted him, you see." Speed's voice went cold. "That's when the experiments began."

"Seth started hurting Soul daily, making her drink various potions. He was obsessed with creating a new type of devil milk—one designed specifically for silver crests that could grant more than thirty abilities."

His voice dropped and trembled, the unmistakable sadness sending chills through Raiden. He hadn't been expecting this.

"Soul would cry herself to sleep, sometimes couldn't even talk or walk. The potion side effects left her without food or water for days at a time." He clenched his fist. "I tried to help, but I was too weak. So I decided to steal devil milk to make myself stronger."

He touched his mask. "I didn't know what devil milk was supposed to look like. So when I reached the laboratory, I just took the first potion I could find and drank it."

He closed his eyes briefly. "Turned out it was acid. Burned through part of my face and tongue." He sighed heavily. "My screams brought everyone running, and after that, they made Soul pay for what I'd done."

Raiden fought back the urge to laugh. Not at Speed's suffering, but at the sheer stupidity of drinking a random lab potion. One look at Speed's tear-filled eyes, though, and he knew laughing would be cruel beyond measure. Even for someone like him.

"We were twelve then, and it didn't take long before Soul's crest turned black from all the potions she'd been forced to take."

Raiden's face darkened. Speed had said "we"—that was troubling enough. But what really perplexed him was that Soul's corruption hadn't followed the traditional path.

"Soul stopped aging. Now she's 17 but still looks like she's twelve."

Raiden's eyes went wide with shock.

Seventeen?—The thought hit him hard. He couldn't believe that little girl was actually his age.

"Worse still, they locked her in a dark room with barely any food or water. Seth had written her off as useless—called the experiment a failure." Speed rubbed his eyes. "But to free her, I had to do whatever Seth and Mack demanded."

He finally looked at Raiden. "Five years I worked for them, and in the end, it took you to save us from that hell."

Raiden offered a sardonic smile, awkwardly accepting the gratitude when all he'd really done was give a command.

"But don't celebrate yet. We're thankful, but we're not going to carry out whatever twisted schemes you have in mind. Those days are over."

Raiden relaxed, his expression easing. He'd read Speed right. Speed was suspicious of why Raiden wasn't giving cruel orders despite being their master—that wariness made

perfect sense. After what he'd endured, Speed had learned to expect the worst from anyone in power.

Raiden burst out laughing, slapping his thighs while Speed stared in confusion. Sure, he'd give reckless orders without hesitation, but he wasn't that cruel. His psychotic side only emerged with people he saw as enemies.

Speed stared at Raiden for a moment, then let out a sigh. "Just so you know, with both Seth and Mack dead, the Jasper family will be seeking revenge."

Raiden's laughter stopped abruptly. Why hadn't he thought of that? But before he could dwell on it, Leo burst in clutching a book.

"I found it!" His excitement was obvious as everyone turned to look. "The Book of Aaron."

Chapter 49: The Book of Aaron

In Leo's hand lay a black book, its cover adorned with a skull painted in dripping gold that cascaded partially across the surface. Beneath the skull, the word 'AARON' gleamed in luminous gold lettering. Below that, 'The Book of' was inscribed by hand in Persian script, followed by 'Distortion' handwritten in English—Raiden's native tongue from his previous world.

Raiden's expression darkened instantly as he stared at the book. Something didn't sit right with him—could any of them actually speak English? The thought gnawed at him as he sat there, lost in contemplation, until Leo's voice cut through his reverie.

"It was hidden among the camouflage books... which made it nearly impossible to find." He said this with evident satisfaction. "But I believe this is the genuine article—written by Aaron himself."

Raiden shot to his feet and gestured for Leo to hand over the book. The moment it was in his grasp, he pointed to the word 'Distortion.'

"*Can you pronounce this word?*" he asked, his voice tinged with curiosity and confusion. Speed and Leo both shook their heads.

This deepened Raiden's confusion, his heartbeat quickening with anxiety. Unable to contain himself any longer, he forced the book open to the first page.

His eyes began to flicker, and his legs trembled. This wasn't what he had expected—worse, it contained more than he could have ever imagined since arriving in this world. An entire page filled with English words stared back at him.

Instinctively, he turned to them once more, asking if they could read it. But again, none of them could. They stared at him in confusion, perplexed by the strange expression he wore while studying the book.

Little did they know that Raiden was consumed by a torrent of emotions as he stared at the passage before him. It read:

"My name is Milo, previously from a completely different world from this one. I was a secret agent for my country's government until I found myself in a dire and inexplicable situation. Before I knew it, I was in this world, inhabiting a completely different body."

It continued. "I've been searching for a way back home, but unfortunately there's nothing I can do. Even worse, I seem to be the only one who was transmigrated."

"Now, being the only civilized person in this entire kingdom, I'd like to use this book as my diary. Perhaps when someone else from my world comes into contact with it, they could add their own ideas and finish what I couldn't—find a way back home."

The moment Raiden finished reading that page, he immediately turned to the next. His heart sank in terror and defeat as he clenched his fist in frustration, nearly hurling the book aside. The next four pages had been torn from the book entirely, and the ones that followed were written in Persian.

Yet he didn't let his frustrations overwhelm him at that moment. He flipped through the pages to the very end, finding that everything within was spread across multiple languages—but not English. Most of the pages from there were missing as well, leaving only fragments of magical techniques, just as the book of Aaron was proclaimed to contain.

He finally let out an annoyed sigh and tossed the book onto the sofa before sinking into it himself. Speed and Leo remained confused, staring at him as he sat there massaging his forehead in exhaustion.

Ever since his arrival, this was the first time he had felt like he stood a real chance of returning home, despite his magical incapacities. But as it turned out, he hadn't been the only one in this predicament—and the person before him couldn't get back despite all their magical prowess. To make matters worse, the trail he had left behind was gone.

This alone made Raiden want to crawl out of his own skin. It wasn't enough to make him give up on returning to his world, but the disappointment and confusion flooded his mind, darkening his mood until Leo spoke up.

"Did you see the spell to bring dead familiars back to life?"

Raiden tilted slightly toward him and stared for a moment, wondering if Leo was ignorant or simply oblivious. He clearly wasn't in the mood to speak, and he had

expected them to understand that. However, Leo's expression did him more good than harm—his eyes widened with unmistakable excitement.

He could simply search for the missing pages, but before that, he needed to consider what the passage had revealed—the book was Milo's diary, which meant every spell and message within was as important as those that were missing.

"He turned toward Leo once more, but with a smile this time. *"No, Leo, check it out... those kinds of spells are in the later sections."*

Leo hurried over and snatched up the book, flipping through the pages. Before long, his expression lit up—he had found it. In an instant, he rushed outside while Speed remained on the sofa, yet to utter a word, his eyes darting between their faces.

The moment Leo left, Speed turned to Raiden, who sat beside him with his elbows braced against his thighs, his head swimming with conflicting emotions—excitement that he finally knew there was a chance of returning home, mixed with confusion about who exactly Milo was and where he might be now. Speed finally spoke up.

"You seem different after reading that book. What's going on?"

Raiden turned to him. His problems weren't ones any of them could solve, and even if they could, he wasn't about to let them know. He needed to calm down, steady his nerves, and handle everything carefully before the others started getting suspicious.

"It's nothing, Speed. I was hoping to find a specific spell, but unfortunately, the book didn't have it." He let out a sigh and rose to his feet. *"Let's go help Freya bring back her familiar."*

The moment he finished speaking, Leo walked back in with the others. Raiden didn't say another word but simply gestured toward the training room. Speed rose to his feet and followed, and everyone else did the same.

"The book says once a familiar dies, bringing them back to life is nearly impossible, even for higher-ranked mages," Leo said.

Freya's soul seemed to crumble, her body trembling as his words awakened everyone's fears. Leaving without her familiar had been hard enough for Free as it was.

"However, it mentions something else that could be done."

Freya's eyes widened with hope. "What is it? Tell me."

Leo gave her a nod and began reading the page aloud. "Familiar restoration: nearly impossible even for higher-class mages. Requires special species of both the creature and its master."

"Mana Reconstitution: creating a mana form of the familiar from raw mana, but it requires a highly skilled mana user. When the user runs out of mana, the familiar dies again until resurrected using the same procedure."

"Finally, Essence Rebinding: this is the easiest and safest among the three. It involves reattaching the familiar's spirit or essence to the master, and this can be done even when the familiar is alive."

The moment Leo finished reading, everyone turned to Freya, who remained motionless, her eyes fixed on the floor. She didn't understand most of what Leo had read, but it was obvious she wanted her familiar back in the flesh—perhaps that alone would give her closure.

But she couldn't achieve that, and the only alternative was mana reconstitution, which would take a toll on her body, even for someone as skilled in mana usage as she was.

She would grow exhausted from breathing alone, with maintaining something like that through mana draining every ounce of her physical and magical energy.

However, as she stood there lost in thought, Raiden cleared his throat to get their attention. He didn't want to get involved, but he couldn't fight the desperation within him to read more of the book.

"I'd suggest you go with Essence Rebinding, Freya. Not only will that keep Free close to you at all times, but his body won't be rotting, and you can still bring him back once you become strong enough."

Freya stared at Raiden for a moment. He raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

Freya let out a sigh. "Let's do it then."

Raiden smiled at her while Leo began replicating the magic circle from within the book. When he finished, he placed Free's dead body within it and gestured for Freya to step into the circle.

Leo took a seal from the shelves within the room, wrote enchanted ancient letters on it, then handed it to Freya and asked her to burn it with her mana.

She did as Leo instructed, and the moment she placed the burning seal on her familiar, the entire circle erupted in blue flames along with Free's body. The flames burned intensely for a moment before abruptly stopping, leaving only ashes scattered across the floor.

However, Freya immediately smiled as she clutched her chest. "I can feel him," she said, warmth and relief flooding her voice. She instantly turned to Raiden, dashed

toward him, and wrapped him in a hug. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice cracking with emotion.

Raiden was taken aback, feeling uncomfortable with the sudden embrace, but he knew she was acting out of pure relief, and he wasn't about to be a jerk about it. So he allowed it until she finally pulled away from the hug.

Raiden masked his thoughts with a smile. *"Now, let's all savor this moment of happiness while it lasts."*

Chapter 50: Twenty-Eight Pages

"Milo had been misunderstood," Raiden muttered as he read the Book of Aaron, his head resting on his pillow as he lay quietly in his bed on a peaceful morning.

"It is distortion... meant to mislead people?" he muttered once more as he continued glancing through the pages, flipping them slowly.

The book was never called the Book of Aaron. According to Raiden's knowledge, its true name was the Book of Distortion—but since no one in this world could speak English, the word "distortion" was completely meaningless to them. So they adapted "Aaron" instead, taking it from the bold golden letters emblazoned across the cover.

To Raiden's knowledge, either Milo's actual name in this world was Aaron, or it was an acronym that had to be translated. But what troubled him most were those very words themselves.

Taking a closer look at the cover, there were scratches where the word "distortion" was written—and worse, it was the only word on the cover that was handwritten.

This led Raiden to believe that either someone other than Milo had written it, or everything on the book cover had been written before Milo got it and he had simply erased a word to write "distortion." Either way, it meant he had nothing to do with the name Aaron.

Aside from the cover, many things within the book itself made Raiden's head spin, leading him to believe the word "distortion" was written on the cover for a reason.

With careful consideration, he realized Milo had divided it into three parts—the last was about mana, but the most vital points of the first and second parts were among the missing pages. There were twenty-eight of them missing.

TWENTY EIGHT!

After lying in bed for quite a while, Raiden finally rose to his feet and began stretching his body. Finding all twenty-eight pages was nearly impossible—unless they were sold

on the black market or safeguarded somewhere, it was most likely that many of them had already been destroyed, making the book largely useless to him.

Raiden took another glance at the book. *"Regarding mana, there are things that would be both important and easy to learn."*

He muttered and began heading out of the room. Though many pages were missing from that section as well, they weren't codependent. Each page contained information on its own, unlike the first two parts which needed everything to make sense. And so, he was going to give it back to Leo—learning those techniques might help them.

He freshened up and put on his shirt, folding the sleeves up to his elbows, his mind pondering whether Milo was still alive. But he brushed the thought off after a few minutes—he needed to face his current predicament first.

Perhaps the Jaspers and Dawnbringers were plotting something beyond his control, and worse, he had yet to receive a response from the kingdom after sending them a message three days ago.

However, right on the staircase, before descending to the living room, his danger detection kicked in as he instinctively paused and tilted to his left.

It was faint, barely noticeable, but he could feel two people closing in. One had an enormous aura, while the other was partially overshadowed by it.

At that very moment, Raiden looked toward the main entrance and saw Ash dashing toward him.

[Something bad, Papa,] her voice echoed in Raiden's head as she climbed the stairs toward him.

He wrapped her in his arms and began patting her back. There was no need to lie to her, but her expression, the way she whispered, and worse—Raiden could feel exactly how she was feeling since he shared a heart with her. She was scared.

Raiden swallowed nervously as he patted her slowly. This was his first time ever feeling anything directly through Ash since gaining the heart of dragon ability. And he couldn't help but wonder if this was how scared Ash had been before every fight.

However, he knew he had to assure her that everything would be okay. *"Don't worry, Ash. I will take care of it."*

She began to nudge him while whispering, and Raiden placed her on his shoulder, descended the stairs, and headed to the training room for his sword. When he got there, Leo and Levi were engrossed in a fierce duel.

Their movements made the very ground tremble as the room filled with heat. Raiden watched for a moment, then waited for them to put some distance between themselves.

"It's okay, you guys,"

he said, interrupting their duel as they both turned to him. *"We have intruders... very powerful ones."*

He didn't spare them another glance as he walked toward his sword, set the Book of Aaron down, and drew his blade. His mind was occupied—not by the battle ahead alone, but also by the reason why Ash was this scared. He could still feel her fear despite her resting gently on his shoulder.

He had seen her extremely scared once, and that was during their first encounter with Mack. That time was understandable because Raiden was still at the eighth rank, and he was the only one capable of fighting.

And with Seth, she had even trusted Raiden enough to let him finish Seth off alone. But now they had an army, potentially people stronger than him—so why was she still scared?

Still, that only made him believe that their enemy must be very strong, perhaps stronger than Seth, the most formidable opponent he had ever faced.

The moment he stepped outside, he saw Freya, Speed, and Soul practicing mana circulation on the grassy field to his right.

He said nothing—he simply glanced at them and turned toward the edge of the barrier, at the forest. Ash began whispering once more, and Raiden could feel it too. They were close.

Levi and Leo came up behind Raiden and stood beside him, alerting the others that something was coming. They stopped their training and joined them.

Raiden's heart began to race the closer they got, prompting euphoria to course through him as it forced a faint, twisted smile.

Before long, he could feel them within the forest, and out of curiosity, he activated Gaze Beyond and began scanning through the trees. His heart sank as he saw them.

What caught his attention first was a blue giant about nine feet tall with giant curved horns, pitch-blue eyes, and long white hair. Armor was wrapped around its waist. It was the cursed doll they had failed to kill earlier—the giant Smurf.

It was alive. And beside it was a man dressed in black with dark hair, his aura radiating yellow. But Raiden was too lost in thought to register anything else about him.

This was the creature that was literally immortal—they had to use Leo's quick thinking to get rid of it, and now it was back. He now understood why Ash was as scared as she was. He turned to her as she rested on his shoulder, letting out small whispers.

Freya, however, activated her Gaze Beyond as well and described what she saw in her not-so-fluent Persian. The moment she did, Leo's jaw dropped in horror.

"We are in trouble, Bookkeeper," Leo said, his voice cracking with fear, but Raiden was already aware, so he only remained silent.

"The cursed dolls can climb the ranks on their own once their master dies. Though not with the same human structure..." he swallowed nervously, his eyes fixated on the barrier, waiting for them to enter. "If Freya described the giant correctly, then it's at the final phase of their ranks."

"God Beast."

"They usually don't cooperate with humans... I think he's under a powerful mind control."