

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 51: God Beast - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 51: God Beast

Chapter 51: God Beast

Silence settled across the distance as they all awaited the arrival of the God Beast and the assassin. However, Raiden couldn't help but wear his twisted smile, fear etched beneath it, though he knew he had to steady his nerves and deal with the threat before it consumed them all.

He steeled himself, forcing the euphoria from his system, before turning to Speed with an unreadable expression. *"How fast can you move, Speed?"*

Speed scratched his hair for a moment, his golden eyes darting around in thought. "Since I turned black, my speed ability has plateaued. It's not going to improve like it did when I had my white crest."

Raiden raised a subtle eyebrow, prompting Speed to elaborate. "I'd say 800 to 1000 meters per second."

Raiden turned back to look in the intruders' direction once more. They were moving fast, and he had to think quickly. To face the God Beast with all their strength, he needed to split up his team.

But given Speed's abilities, it would take him less than three seconds to reach the intruders the moment they crossed into the barrier around the estate. And if things went badly, that would be enough time for Speed to find himself in trouble with the God Beast nearby.

This was a gamble they had to take. He let out a sigh. *"Leo and Speed, I want you two to take on the assassin."*

Both Leo and Speed gave him a nod. *"Get to a safe distance between us and them. From the moment they step into the barrier, I want you to pull the assassin away from the blue giant. After you handle him, come back and help us."*

They gave him a nod and began moving toward the burnt grassy field on the left. Leo adjusted the bandages around his fists while Speed repositioned his mask, opening his mouth and working his jaw against the sharp teeth embedded in the mask as he prepared for action.

"Levi, I want you to move carefully through the battle, striking whenever you get an opening." He turned to Levi with a cocky smirk. *"Fatal strikes only, and stay hidden until the battle's over."*

Levi's grin widened before he simply vanished from sight.

Raiden reached to lift Ash from his shoulder. Her heart pulsed with fear and doubt, emotions he could feel all too clearly. *"Don't worry, Ash... I will defeat him. Trust me."*

He masked his fears with a smile and patted her head as she flapped her wings slightly. *"Now, I want you to safeguard the house."* Raiden's expression darkened. *"React if you sense any danger approaching."*

[Okay, Papa,] Ash replied as Raiden lowered her to the floor. She grew instantly, wings folded slightly at her sides, her height reaching about three inches above Raiden's.

At that moment, Raiden's heart sank as the God Beast and assassin breached the barrier. The instant they made their move, Speed burst forward and slammed into the assassin, driving him to their side of the field.

The God Beast hesitated momentarily and snarled, but with Soul by Raiden's side, he couldn't help but charge toward them. That was exactly what Raiden had been counting on.

With Freya's excellent mana control and unique flames combined with Soul's overwhelming aura and soul condemn ability, the three of them had a solid chance of drawing the God Beast in and, more importantly, actually hurting it.

"Soul... Freya," Raiden called out as fear forced his devilish smile to surface once more, his heart pounding rapidly while his grey eyes locked with the God Beast's blue ones. *"This is our cue."*

The moment he said it, Soul's overwhelming aura almost doubled in size, sending a blinding wind swirling behind Raiden, while Freya merged her flames with her mana, the fire enveloping and transforming her very body.

Raiden clutched his sword tightly and immediately dashed toward the beast, Soul and Freya right behind him. However, before any of them could get within striking range, the beast paused, and they followed suit.

Raiden watched as the beast blinked abruptly, teeth clenched through its rumbling growls. Before he could make sense of this strange behavior, Raiden's instincts kicked in and he yelled.

"Get out of the way!" They all jumped to the grassy areas as a blue laser beam shot out of the beast's eyes, the beams hitting the pavement and melting it into molten liquid.

At the rate the lasers were moving, if the beast lifted its head, they would arc toward the house, and Ash would be in trouble. The moment Raiden noticed that, his body moved on pure instinct, and he sprinted toward the beast.

He launched himself into the air, sword targeting the beast's neck, but before he could strike, Levi delivered a devastating blow to the beast's ribcage, cutting off the laser beams and making the beast howl in pain.

The brief moment caused the beast to shift, making Raiden's strike slash across its eye as its agonizing screams intensified. As Raiden touched down, his twisted smile deepened. He seized the moment, readjusted his grip on the sword, swung upward, and slashed the beast's face, completely severing its cheek and remaining eye.

What emerged from the God Beast was a hollow, piercing scream loud enough to burst an eardrum, but none of them were deterred as Soul and Freya immediately flanked Raiden.

What came next was a brutal, unrelenting attack on the God Beast. Raiden didn't hesitate for a second, every strike he landed flooded him with excitement and savage satisfaction.

Soul's attacks relentlessly shattered the beast's soul, blood beginning to seep from every opening with each strike she landed. Freya proved equally devastating, her attacks burning the beast from the inside out, just as she had planned.

For that moment it didn't feel like a battle but rather pure, deadly choreography. Their timing and understanding of each other were perfect, and the God Beast could only absorb the relentless attacks as its body was progressively dismantled.

Carved apart by Raiden's sword, the rest of the beast's body was caught in Freya's red phoenix flames, and still, the beast had no energy left to fight back due to Soul's relentless strikes against its soul.

It was finished. The God Beast they had dreaded hadn't proven to be the threat they expected. This was evident even to Speed and Leo, who remained engaged in fierce combat with the assassin, a number 7 possessing teleportation abilities.

But Raiden wasn't satisfied yet. He could feel the lingering fear in Ash's heart, and he had witnessed the beast's incredible regeneration firsthand in their previous encounter. He knew better than to celebrate such an early victory.

As Soul and Freya moved away from the beast, Raiden sliced its head clean off, the head rolling across the earth's surface. Without a word needing to be spoken, Freya set the entire corpse ablaze, flames consuming it from the inside out.

However, it stopped abruptly, and Raiden's instincts kicked in as he backed away from the God Beast's body. Soul and Freya, witnessing the fear and sweat streaming down Raiden's face with his mouth slightly parted, backed away also.

Raiden couldn't fully process his thoughts, and they were instantly confirmed. The flames within the beast began producing smoke as the flesh began reclaiming those burned areas, with all its severed parts growing back as well—including a new head.

Raiden swallowed nervously as he watched the God Beast's transformation.

"It truly is impossible to kill."

He muttered, and the very thought of it being impossible to kill only made him want to kill it more, imagining the relief and warmth he could feel after destroying it.

His body began twitching from excitement and fear. But did he really need euphoria in this dire situation?

Chapter 52: God Beast 2

The God Beast's transformation sent chills through Raiden and the others, and the assassin, even while fighting Leo and Speed, couldn't stop laughing—intrigued by the sheer danger everyone was in.

However, he wasn't the only one laughing. Raiden was too. With euphoria filling every inch of his body and his skin twitching, he couldn't help but want to see the beast's blood spilled.

And obviously, everyone around him noticed that too. "No..." Freya said, gesturing for Raiden to stop, but she was too late.

His body moved on its own volition as he swung his sword toward the beast's neck. Though the creature's head wasn't fully regenerated yet, it somehow saw the attack coming, caught the blade with its bare hand, and shattered it into pieces.

Raiden's expression darkened in an instant, and he flipped backward, creating a gap between him and the beast. His heart began pounding as the adrenaline rush completely washed away.

His eyes darted toward the beast, his mind racing, each thought spiking his temperature. The same sword that had cut through the beast's head with ease was caught barehanded and shattered by the monster without drawing a single drop of blood. What was going on?

"I think it evolves whenever it dies," Freya said, and her expression darkened as she lowered her guard.

"We need to finish it off with a single attack—one that it can't recover from. Otherwise, it would grow stronger to the point where we'd all die." The flames around her stopped.

Raiden also let down his guard as he watched Freya approach Ash, who still remained at the house's forefront. He knew immediately that she had a plan to destroy the God Beast instantly.

"Can you guys hold it off for a moment?" Freya said, but before Raiden could respond, the beast had finished regenerating and appeared before Soul.

The beast moved so fast that the only evidence of its movement was the wind that followed in its wake.

Soul's eyes widened with fear as she stared up at it from her smaller frame, her golden eyes flickering as she swallowed nervously. But before the beast could strike her, a wind heavier than the beast's own swept through, and the next moment Raiden saw the beast slamming into the ground.

"Don't touch my sister," Speed declared firmly as he shielded Soul. His golden eyes narrowed with intense coldness, nearly matching Raiden's expression when provoked, which made him smile for a moment.

However, he turned his head to the left to see the assassin's body looking thin and pale, as if all his life energy had been drained from him. Leo held him by the neck and finished him off completely.

He turned back to see Freya sitting cross-legged on the floor behind Ash as she became engrossed in deep meditation.

However, in that brief moment, the God Beast rose to its feet, standing motionless as it watched Speed guide Soul. It panted heavily, its expression unreadable as if lost in thought.

In less than a blink, all Raiden could register was Speed delivering another strike to the beast's gut, sending it crashing to the ground. Instantly, its blue body ran pale like the assassin's had. It was as if Speed had delivered dozens of strikes that the beast couldn't withstand.

Raiden was caught in a standstill—whether to join in or simply stand by and watch Speed and the God Beast go at it. It seemed to him that Speed had the upper hand, and considering both of their speeds, there wasn't much he could do.

Right on cue with his thoughts, his assumptions were proven right. Speed felt confident he could take the beast on. He bent his knees slightly and whispered something into Soul's ear, his eyes revealing the cocky smile hidden beneath the mask.

Soul hesitated for a moment but gave him a firm nod and hurried to Raiden's side. What happened next wasn't something Raiden could see or analyze, but he could hear the sharp sound of each strike Speed delivered upon contact.

"Do you believe in your twin that much?" Leo asked as he walked toward Raiden and Soul.

Soul gave him a firm nod, her golden eyes darting to her brother. "Yes, among all of us, he has the best chance of getting the beast exhausted without killing it."

She tilted her head to look at Leo, craning her neck upward to get a better view of his face. "His corrupt ability is hungry lash. It drains the opponent's physical strength."

Raiden's eyes widened in understanding. Of course, Speed was their safest option. The beast operated purely on physical strength, and since it wasn't entirely human, his and Soul's attacks could only inflict limited damage. But he still couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, despite Ash no longer being scared.

He could see it now—the God Beast wasn't attacking; it was only absorbing. In fact, throughout the entire battle, it had only attacked once, and even that seemed accidental.

That's when it hit him, and his eyes opened wide. *"Leo, didn't you say it might be possible that the beast is being brainwashed?"*

Leo turned to him as he searched his memory. "Oh, right. Cursed dolls do not cooperate with anyone in their berserk form, especially not in the God Beast state."

He gave a subtle nod. "I believe this one is under powerful mind control."

Raiden swallowed nervously as he tried to track Speed and the beast's movements. If his assumptions were right, then the beast hadn't come there to fight. Whoever was controlling its mind could observe them one way or another, and it was collecting information on them. Their strengths and weaknesses.

Maybe that's why Ash was scared, not because of the battle but because of what might follow. Still, he felt compelled to confirm his doubts.

"Can the person mind-controlling the blue giant see through its eyes?"

Leo paused for a moment as he also grasped the implications. "Oh shit... Yes, at the appropriate rank, they can."

He turned to Raiden, worry etched across his face. "Do you think the assassins are finally taking you seriously? And are we screwed?"

Raiden simply shrugged. He didn't know if they saw him as a formidable bookkeeper, but they clearly wanted to understand why they still couldn't retrieve the book from him after sending fighters like Levi, Freya, and the master of the God Beast after him, all of whom had failed.

Before long, Freya rose to her feet with her eyes closed, unleashing an incredible amount of mana infused with flames that seared through the sky. The sheer intensity could rival Soul's aura at its peak.

After seeing Freya's power surge, Speed immediately stopped attacking and backed off from the beast, putting a reasonable distance between them.

However, the beast looked dead rather than alive. Its long curved horns had grown to nearly the same size as its head, its cheeks appeared to have aged a century with gaping holes, and its muscles were completely stripped away, making it look more like a skeleton than a giant beast.

However, with its blue eyes cast downward, Freya approached. Her dark hair whipped behind her from the mana and flame infusion, but not a single strand was touched by flames.

Without a moment's hesitation, she struck the beast's gut, burning off a huge hole through its torso as it collapsed to its knees, all the flesh within the area she struck crumbling to ashes. She then grasped its head and increased the intensity of the flames. And not so much as a growl was heard from the beast—it didn't have the energy left to make a sound.

And before long, Freya burnt every inch of it into ash, leaving no room for regeneration.

Witnessing that display, Freya's mana mastery was beautiful to Raiden. He had known that controlling mana was different from controlling abilities and aura.

But the way Freya wielded her mana with such perfection wasn't something he had found even in Aaron's book, written by the man who claimed to be the most civilized among them all.

He could only imagine what would become of her once she learned everything the book of Aaron had to offer, assuming she even needed it.

However, now that the blue giant was completely out of the way, they had to prepare for what awaited them from their enemies on all sides.

[ALERT]

[STAMINA +5]

PHYSICAL STRENGTH +5

FAMILIAR TRUST 110%

SOUL OF DRAGON 20%

HEART OF DRAGON 22%]

Chapter 53: Book of Ashes 2

Though the God Beast battle ended without casualties or damage, it sparked doubt among Raiden's subordinates about their destiny.

The day following the battle arrived with an early morning tension. As they assembled in the living room, every pair of eyes fixed on Raiden, silently demanding the truth he'd yet to share.

"What exactly is the book of ashes? What does it do?" Freya's gaze locked onto Raiden as she spoke.

Raiden found no answer within himself, and a search through his recovered memories came up empty. Yet based on what he'd observed the book accomplish, he had some ideas about its nature, even as his own questions remained.

But Raiden's expression gave him away—he knew nothing helpful. Still, they needed to understand what was worth dying for. In the heavy silence that settled over them, Leo finally spoke.

"I don't really know what it could do exactly, but I know a few things that might be helpful."

Everyone's attention turned to Leo, Raiden included. Maybe some of his lingering questions would finally be answered.

"Many years ago, the Devourer emerged from chaos as a godkiller, and naturally, the gods feared what it could do."

The room went quiet as they hung on every word. "But being chaos itself, the Devourer couldn't be killed outright. Its actual death would have thrown all of creation out of balance."

He pressed on. "So they divided it among four books—Heart, Flesh, Mind, and Voice of the Devourer."

"Bring all four together, and the Devourer would be reborn—unstoppable as before."

Disbelief flickered across Raiden's face as he shook his head. He needed to know more, but before he could press Leo for details, Levi interrupted. "We all know that much, but what exactly is within the books?"

Leo drew a deep breath. "Growing up, my father told me the books contained horrifying stories—that opening one would curse me with endless nightmares." A bitter smile crossed his face. "Same story every child heard... They made sure we'd be too terrified to ever seek them out."

A knowing smirk crossed Raiden's face. The same old pattern—adults spinning terrifying tales to keep children from pursuing whatever they considered forbidden or dangerous. Yet behind every fabricated warning, there was usually some fragment of reality.

"How long has this story been told?"

Leo's eyebrow arched. "No one ever told you?"

Raiden offered a simple shrug.

"From what I know, it's been passed down since the books were first given to the kingdoms—centuries back."

Raiden's smirk deepened. Anything passed down for centuries carried weight. But stories bringing back the Devourer—how did that work? Were there stories in the other two missing books? Had those tales been told already?

The questions churned endlessly, but at least he could now offer the others some understanding of the book's nature.

Clearing his throat, he seized the moment. *"Aside from Leo, Ash, and Levi, the rest of you haven't seen how we keep the book, right?"*

"We keep the book locked in a chest, bound with heavy chains, and there have to be enchanted wards around the storage area. Without them, the book's energy alone would be enough to kill us."

He adjusted his position. *"I think the book holds dark energy of some sort, and as you read further, that energy grows denser with each page."*

Uncertain expressions crossed every face as they looked at Raiden. *"But to confront those atrocities and remain human, you'd need immense power—enough that the book's dark energy couldn't touch you."*

"So you're telling me whoever locked that book away was that powerful?" Raiden's face grew troubled as he looked toward Soul and Speed. He couldn't rid himself of the

disturbing realization that Speed was the twin of Soul, who appeared to be just twelve years old.

Yet he forced a smile and nodded firmly at Soul. He understood that Soul had suffered greatly, and that wasn't something he should treat lightly. The uncomfortable feeling remained, though.

"So the book is nothing more than concentrated dark energy?" Freya asked, her expression troubled.

Raiden offered a confident nod and smile. He was lying, though. That wasn't what he'd pieced together from the evidence. The book probably did hold stories, exactly as the old tales claimed, and when those stories were shared, they poisoned listeners' hearts with chaos and bloodlust—nurturing the Devourer's heart through that corruption. But he wasn't about to tell them that. He wanted them to fear the book, not understand it.

"What's the connection to the Devourer's heart then?" Levi questioned, raising an eyebrow.

After a heavy sigh, Raiden lifted Ash from where she'd been lying across his lap and settled her on the sofa. Rising, he walked to the left wall, grabbed one of the fake books, and showed it to the others, gesturing at the heart illustration and false bloodstains on the cover.

"I don't think the Devourer is real. It's metaphorical. Anyone with fear in their heart would likely have it ripped apart by the overwhelming drain of the book's dark energy." He returned the book to its place on the shelf.

"Maybe the survivors gain strength comparable to gods themselves." He returned to his chair. *"Just a theory, though."*

Their faces betrayed their skepticism; clearly, none of them bought his explanation. But it was the most reasonable theory they had, and they would have to settle for it.

Silence fell over the room as everyone retreated into their own thoughts, but Raiden couldn't let it drag on. More questions about the Book of Ashes would inevitably follow.

His attention shifted to Freya. *"What makes you so gifted with mana, Freya? I've never witnessed anything quite like it."*

Freya studied him briefly, obviously sifting through her mind for any remnants that might have survived her amnesia. Finally, she gave up with a shrug. "I don't know... it all feels instinctive, like skills I've honed for years." The words came out in Noorian.

She ran her fingers through her hair. "Perhaps I trained intensively with mana before the amnesia hit."

"Well, I'd attribute it to her mentor," Levi said in Noorian, shrugging. "If memory serves, she trained under our kingdom's Duke, and that man was legendary."

Freya looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean 'was'?"

"He vanished ten years ago," Levi explained. "Most people think he starved to death out there—he was so devoted to finding resources for the kingdom that he wouldn't give up, even when it killed him."

The rest of the group looked at each other in confusion, lost without understanding the language. One by one, they stood and quietly left the room, leaving just Ash, Raiden, Freya, and Levi.

Freya shook her head in denial after hearing Levi's explanation. "No, he's not dead."

"Look, I understand it's painful to think about losing your mentor, but after all this time, he has to be dead."

"No, not that," Freya said, shaking her head again. She exhaled slowly. "I don't know how I know this, but he's not dead. I'm certain beyond any doubt."

Raiden looked from one to the other. The fate of Freya's mentor held little interest for him, and he had no patience for emotional exchanges. Their current circumstances demanded attention to more urgent concerns.

The assassins had unleashed the God Beast precisely to make them reveal their full capabilities, counting on its near-infinite regeneration.

With that plan having backfired, another attack was inevitable, and the enemy now knew their capabilities. Raiden needed to learn his allies' limits too.

"You were right, Levi," he said, breaking into their conversation. "We need someone to spy on the assassins."

Chapter 54: Mana 2

The air was calm and quiet when Raiden and Freya sat cross-legged in the training room, their nerves calmed as their grey and dark eyes locked onto each other's.

Raiden's odachi sword was undoubtedly his favorite weapon, but with it completely broken, he needed something else, and he couldn't imagine anything better than mastering mana the way Freya does.

"I don't know how to put it in words, but just like everyone, I can release it within each part of my body," Freya said in Noorian, gently scratching her cheek nervously as she still didn't understand how exactly she used her mana.

However, Raiden was ready for this moment. He was going to guide her to the right path. She had to tell him.

"Not everyone can feel mana in every part of their body, Freya." Freya gave him an awkward smile. *"It is a fact that we are made of mana..."*

The moment he said that, Freya's eyes widened in realization. She leaned slightly toward Raiden. "That's it... I think I remember now."

Raiden gave a silent fist-pump of triumph. "I can remember spending hours meditating in the wilderness with my mentor to build my mana reserve."

Her eyes widened even more with excitement as she rushed to get all the words out, as if they would escape her. "Since we didn't have any natural resources in Noor, I had to absorb mana from the mana beasts and lost familiars that wandered through the desert."

Raiden's expression shifted into confusion. If he could remember correctly, Levi said Freya's mentor vanished ten years ago—when she was seven. She was left to wander the wilderness at that age? How brutal was the mentor? And what puzzled him most was whether they had even gotten a glimpse of how strong Freya actually was then.

"How did I defeat her then?" he muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?" Freya asked with a curious expression.

Raiden gave a faint smile and shook his hands awkwardly. However, he dropped the act instantly, and his expression shifted.

"How did you absorb mana from external creatures, and how did it contribute to your mastery?"

Freya's eyes dropped to the floor. "I don't know... but I think it's no different from absorbing air."

Raiden narrowed his eyes and turned to her. *"Was that what you did to deliver your final strike against the cursed doll?"* He paused for a moment, and his tone dropped. *"You absorbed our fractured mana, didn't you?"*

Freya nodded, her eyes still darting to the floor, as if she felt bad about her action somehow and that's why she couldn't speak freely about it.

But to Raiden, this made him realize how much they were lacking in mana usage, and with the assassins finally having witnessed their abilities during the battle with the God Beast, they would most likely take advantage of their weak mana application.

If any of the assassins could absorb mana as effectively as Freya did, then once they attacked, they would end up unleashing mana, which would only make their enemies stronger. They had to fix it before it was too late.

"Don't worry about it... no one will blame you for it. You did what you had to do."

At that moment, it wasn't about Raiden anymore. He wanted to get everything Freya knew so he could share it with the others more effectively, and combined with what Milo wrote in the book of Aaron about mana, they could actually improve quickly.

"You should have told us sooner... I mean this is something we really need to work on."

Freya turned to him with a confused expression. "Really?" Raiden nodded.

"I thought it was a forbidden technique. I mean, I could feel the others' mana leaking out of them almost all the time." She smirked. "But for you and your familiar Ash, not so much."

Raiden was startled. *She could feel mana in the air*—he thought to himself as he swallowed nervously.

Freya then took a deep breath and exhaled. "This is going to be a theory, but I think that's how I do it."

Raiden nodded as he listened patiently.

"I believe I made my entire body the core of my mana... I heard Leo reading the book of Aaron the other time, and it said the mana core can be found at the chest." She turned to Raiden. "Though I didn't understand everything he was saying, I knew that wasn't how I viewed mine... my mana is me, and I am the mana."

"Am I making sense?"

"Of course," Raiden said with a nod. He had never considered mana could be viewed in such a manner, and that made him question Milo's claim to being the most civilized person among them, since he didn't even write about this.

"Since I view it that way, it allows me to feel it in the air. I can tell what is pure air and what is mana since my body is already used to its texture."

Raiden simply nodded, taking in everything she was saying.

"And just like how air can be breathed in and out, I can do the same with mana. So with trees, harmless animals, mana beasts, and humans alike, I just take in the mana they're letting out by letting it resonate with me."

She closed her eyes. "And infusing my flames into it, I simply extend it out of my body since I already consider it a part of me, and my flames are also a part of me." She touched her heart. "Because Free will never hurt me."

She smiled and turned to Raiden, whose expression was growing dimmer little by little because he could feel something but wasn't sure what it was.

"So, since my flames are a part of me and my mana also is, I can easily set myself on fire without burning myself."

Raiden heard everything she said, but that wasn't exactly what he was paying attention to. He could feel some people approaching the house, but he couldn't sense any danger.

Considering their situation, for someone to come to them without any intention to cause harm was rare, and based on his tingling senses, there were multiple people, so it couldn't be Aeris, the traitor.

The moment Freya finished speaking, he spoke up. *"I think there are intruders... I'm not sure, but I don't want to wait to find out."*

Freya's eyes widened. "Really?" She asked as she rose to her feet, and Raiden did too, but her eyes betrayed her thoughts. She clearly wondered how exactly Raiden always managed to know about intruders.

However, that wasn't a question he would answer if she asked, and at that moment, there were more pressing things to deal with. Raiden began leaving the room, and Freya followed as they made their way to the living room.

The moment they reached the living room, they saw Levi and Leo sitting there, and on the sofa was Ash, sleeping. Raiden gestured at them, and they immediately knew there were intruders. However, Raiden paused and stared at Ash, walked closer to her, and checked her temperature. She was completely fine.

She had been sleeping an awful lot and randomly ever since Raiden got the heart of dragon ability and she healed from her wounds. Though she used to sleep a lot before, this wasn't normal.

"I think she's in some kind of hibernation mode... nothing to worry about," Leo tried to assure him after he saw the sad expression on his face.

Raiden let out a sigh, gently brushed his hand against her, and left the room. Outside, just on the fields, were Speed and Soul; their energy seemed a bit down, as if they were tired, and a glance at their dark auras confirmed it. But that wasn't where his attention was focused—he could feel the intruders getting closer, and this time, he felt danger.

Chapter 55: Alora, Star

A brief silence settled over them as Raiden and his comrades waited for the opposing threat to come within reach. Though Raiden could feel the danger approaching, it wasn't as overwhelming as what he had faced before. This left him wondering what they were truly up against.

Still, the moment he sensed the auras were close enough, he activated Gaze Beyond and looked through the distant forest. He saw them. Two girls.

One had dark hair with a violin on her shoulder, while the other had long white hair and a more developed figure than her companion, who appeared calm and collected. Both were dressed in black suits and wore star-shaped contact lenses.

Raiden smiled in an instant. They were Stars, and he remembered the one with the violin all too well. She had attacked them before and nearly killed him, leading his familiar, Ash, to save him and land herself in a very dire situation.

However, he knew this wasn't his time for revenge. They had probably been sent by the kingdom, and if that was the case, attacking wouldn't be their safest option.

Freya also activated her Gaze Beyond and described the Stars to the others in broken Persian.

"Stars?" Leo asked, both perplexed and curious. "Do you think the kingdom found your message too impulsive?"

Raiden smirked. He had said some inappropriate things in the message, but he was certain the Stars' visit would work in his favor.

"No matter what happens, do not attack."

Each of them wore a confused expression while Raiden simply smiled, and looking at him, they knew they had to trust him. Still, Levi, who leaned against the entrance to the house, had a few concerns.

"Should I do my job?" he asked, flicking a blade across his fingers.

"No, we must all be around."

Before long, the Stars entered the barrier, and the moment they did, Raiden's smile deepened. The dark-haired girl also widened her grin, clearly planning to make Raiden pay for humiliating her during their last encounter, but the other one stayed in character. She didn't flinch once.

This was the kind of war Raiden had been anticipating for a while. This wasn't a war of strength or magical prowess but a battle of endurance and mind games. Which of them knew what they were doing? Him or the kingdom?

The moment they got close enough, Raiden decided to meet them halfway. He opened his arms with a smile. *"Welcome aboard, Stars..."* He paused after a few steps. *"To what do we owe such a pleasure?"*

Before he could finish speaking, the dark-haired girl played her violin, and a sharp blade of sound launched at Raiden, striking just in front of his leg and cracking the pavement. All of his comrades panicked a little as they hesitated to step in.

But Raiden didn't flinch; he didn't even glance at the damage. He only stared at the Stars with his hands still spread wide, anticipating a calm response even though he knew he wasn't going to get any anytime soon.

The girl was clearly offended by Raiden's reaction to her attack and delivered three more. Two of them struck beside Raiden and nearly sliced off his head, leaving a small cut on his neck before continuing on to strike the building behind.

Yet Raiden still hadn't even blinked from the attacks. He kept his posture unchanged, the smile still playing on his lips.

This stung the girl's pride even more, so she threw the violin to the floor, sprinted toward Raiden, and struck him on the cheek. The force caused him to take a step back, which irritated Raiden's subordinates even more—Leo was clearly on the verge of attacking.

But Raiden kept smiling, giving them the impression that he knew what he was doing.

In the moments that followed, it was strike after strike. But Raiden endured them all without showing any sign of weakness or anger. He simply smiled as his face was bruised while the white-haired girl stood watching.

This was exactly as Raiden had anticipated, and though each strike sent enormous pain shooting through his face, he fought the urge to scream in agony.

Thankfully, his regeneration was working—it numbed the pain before the next strike landed, letting him endure more blows without sustaining too much damage.

During his message to the kingdom, he had made a promise. They could come for the Book of Ashes if they believed there were people who could protect it better than he and his comrades could, and he vowed he would not lay a finger on any of them.

This was a risky gambit. The six elders could have simply sent their own knights to retrieve the book and kill Raiden and his comrades in the process. When questioned,

they could claim Raiden broke his word and attacked first, forcing them to act in self-defense.

Well, he was certain that wouldn't happen. He didn't have anything concrete to base it on except for King Hannes being around and this being about the kingdom's reputation. Everything was a gut feeling.

Even so, he knew they were going to attack regardless and would do anything in their power to make Raiden strike back at one of the Stars. Still, this wasn't meant to kill.

How long could he hold on? The strikes continued, causing his face to swell so badly that he couldn't see properly. His eyelids had swollen larger than his eyes themselves.

But this was his way out. If he managed to survive this, not only would he get the kingdom wrapped around him once more, but he could also demonstrate his resilience and gain influence even within the palace.

However, before Raiden could die from the strikes alone, the white-haired girl intervened. "Stop, June." The dark-haired girl stopped immediately and let out an annoyed sigh.

The white-haired girl bowed before Raiden, but all he could feel at that moment was unbearable pain in his face, his head aching relentlessly as if needles were being driven through his skull over and over. But he held his ground and managed a smile through his swollen cheeks.

"She is very sorry, bookkeeper. She can be troublesome sometimes. Please pardon her."

Raiden smiled again.

"I am Princess Alora Romanov. We've lived under the same roof for years, but I don't think we've ever met."

Raiden could barely follow her words. The pain was unbearable even though his regeneration was working, and he wasn't sure if he could even speak through his deformed face.

"This here is June Calmer, my fellow comrade as a Star."

Leo immediately joined them, leaving the others behind, wearing a confused expression. "You are Princess Alora? But I thought you were living in the Kingdom of Aurelia."

Alora flashed a sarcastic smile. "Well, I am here now..."

Leo bowed his head. "Would you like to take a seat, Lady Alora?"

Alora's expression darkened, and she let out a sigh. "No, thank you..." The moment she said it, they could feel the barrier flickering like disturbed water and slowly fading from view.

"Raiden Night, the bookkeeper of the Book of Ashes, the Heart of Devourer... by my command as Princess of the Kingdom of Persia and devoted member of the Stars."

Raiden's pain began to subside, but by that point he knew everything Alora was going to say. And her—he remembered her now. They had never been on friendly terms.

Though both of them had spent most of their lives in the palace, they never had the chance to even talk to each other. But his mission was over, and he wasn't interested in what she had to say. He needed to sleep!

"I hereby grant you your freedom from your prison... but a few measures will be taken to ensure you don't betray the kingdom."

At that moment, Raiden's eyes began to grow tired.

"Knights and Stars alike will be checking up on you twice every week."

The moment she said that, Raiden collapsed to the floor as everyone rushed to check on him. He had started feeling sleepy, and he knew that going unconscious after taking June's strikes would only benefit him, so he allowed himself to sleep and ease the pain.

Chapter 56: Return

The truth hurts—not necessarily in the knowing of it, but in how it strips away one's ego. The truths Raiden spoke to the kingdom and its elders did precisely that.

Their honor, respect, and carefully cultivated maturity were being stung by a seventeen-year-old, and worse still, he voiced accusations that, even if denied, would forever tarnish their image as the wise elders they claimed to be.

However, from Alora's expression and the confidence in her tone—speaking with the sheer determination of a Persian princess—Raiden knew she herself might harbor her own agenda against him. Still, the barrier around them was finally broken. But was it at a price Raiden could afford to pay?

It was a calm afternoon, and Raiden, alongside everyone else, sat cross-legged on the grassy field to the right of the mansion's entrance.

They followed his lead as he guided them through everything he had managed to learn from Freya's explanation of her mana usage. And yet, Freya herself remained in their midst, still learning from Raiden.

"I'd suggest we fill each part of our bodies with mana."

He reached for his face and touched the few bruises remaining from his encounter with Alora and June the previous day.

"How? Using the previous meditation skills you've learned on how to carefully tap into your mana. The same imagination. Scatter it across your entire body."

Raiden said and sank deep into his meditation. Whatever the kingdom had planned ahead, he had to make sure his comrades were in shape in terms of strength first, before reconsidering anything else.

And not only the kingdom—the assassins, Dawnbringers, and their most recent enemy, the Jasper family.

They all remained on the ground, eyes closed and breathing calmly like ancient monks.

However, just as they settled into their meditation, a loud crash echoed from within the mansion, prompting them to open their eyes in an instant.

Raiden's heart began to race as he feared something might have happened to Ash, since she was the only one inside the house, sleeping.

He instinctively rose to his feet and began sprinting into the house, and the others immediately followed.

However, the moment they entered, a huge wind blew against them, forcing them to grab onto the shelves on the wall as books scattered across the floor and some floated midair.

Now none of them could see the dark energy within the room, but Raiden could. The sensation grew thicker and thicker as it began suffocating him and the others. Someone was trying to steal the book.

Raiden held his breath and began taking bold steps with strong determination as he tried to reach the rails of the staircase in the living room. The hovering books slammed into his face and the dark sensation prevented him from seeing clearly, but he knew he had to get there.

He had done this before—even back then it was the actual storeroom with the real Book of Ashes, and yet he had managed to pull through.

Now, with only a camouflaged storeroom and a replica of the Book of Ashes containing just a fragment of the book's overwhelming dark energy, he knew he could pull through again.

Yet that didn't make it any less difficult. He had to pull ten times his weight through the mist. But he gritted his teeth and planted his legs firmly on the floor with determination. He managed to get his hands on the rails and then began forcing his way up.

However, he wasn't going through this out of responsibility and curiosity alone, but fear and doubt. The thought that pushed him forward was Ash. Was she the one who tried to take the book? Had her hibernation caused her to become insane?

Each of his steps radiated a different thought, making him want to reach the third floor even faster. And finally, he pulled through, making his way upstairs.

Right before the door to his room, he could see someone in a blue dress lying on the floor with blood streaming from their head. The image wasn't clear due to the dark energy radiating from the book room, which was opposite his room.

There were no enchanted stickers to contain the energy and pull the dark sensation back into the chest within the room. He had to use sheer strength to resolve this.

Without a moment's hesitation, he pushed harder and made his way to the book room. He pressed his hand against the wall and gripped the door handle, then with all his might pulled the door open against the energy.

In the heat of the moment, he feared he might break the door from the force alone, but still, he had no other option. He had to pull through.

He harnessed all his strength and pulled the door with sheer determination, and the moment he closed it, most of the dark energy was abruptly pulled back into the room.

Raiden let out a deep sigh of relief and leaned his head against the door, trying to catch his breath. The sweat on his face stained the door as some dripped onto it. He reached for the key in the door and locked it.

The moment he did, realization hit him, and he reached for his pocket. His key to the room was still there, and that was when he turned his head toward the person who collapsed on the floor.

He immediately wore a smile of relief. It wasn't Ash, but rather Aeris. She had come to steal the book.

At that very moment, the others also made their way through the thin sensation to Raiden, and the moment they saw Aeris on the floor, Leo hurried to check on her to see if she was still alive.

However, Levi, who was fully absorbed by what exactly was happening, walked toward Raiden while the others remained still, confused.

"I thought you said you would kill her the next time you saw her," Levi mocked.

However, Levi, who was fully absorbed by what exactly was happening, walked toward Raiden while the others remained still, confused.

"I thought you said you would kill her the next time you saw her," Levi mocked.

His words put a smile on Raiden's face. Now they had seen the energy the book radiated, which meant they were most likely to believe the theory he had given them about the book—that each page was filled with enough dark energy to destroy a heart.

"Yes..." he gave them a reassuring nod.

Freya's expression darkened. "She's a traitor, then... so why is Leo checking up on her?"

Raiden paused for a moment and glanced at Aeris. Regardless of whether he would kill her, not only had she betrayed Raiden and put them in danger, nearly getting all of them killed multiple times, but she had also tried to steal the Book of Ashes—the sole book he was sworn to protect as the bookkeeper.

"I know what you're thinking, Raiden... and yes, let's sacrifice her," Levi said with a cocky smile.

Raiden also smiled. They were in need of someone to spy on the assassins, and considering each of them was already a powerful and effective ally, making them serve as a spy would be a very bad decision. They might end up dead.

But now, with their sole traitor, Aeris was once again around to be used against those who would betray them. Her blood wouldn't be mourned, at least not among them—the guardians of ashes.

"Leo, I want you to heal her." His grin deepened. "We get answers on who sent her, and after that, we use her as bait."

Chapter 57: Slave Quest

Whoever sent Aeris was generous enough to provide her with a spare key to the storeroom, though, like everyone else in the palace, they remained blissfully unaware of which book she truly sought.

And now, her entire fate rested in the hands of Raiden. The same man who refused to sign a contract with her because he intended to kill her eventually. Without question.

Aeris lay on the living room sofa, hands tied behind her back and legs firmly bound. Raiden sat with his tea while Levi and Freya trekked through the forest, heading for Coast City to find a temporary slave choker.

Speed and his twin sister, Soul, remained outside the house practicing mana control while Leo crouched beside Aeris, gently wiping her face with a damp cloth and ensuring she was well enough to stand soon.

Raiden sat with one leg crossed over the other when a voice echoed in his head.

[Papa...] Ash said, her voice somewhat raw.

Raiden turned to her with a smile, set down his cup, and wrapped her in his embrace. *"Are you willing to tell me what's going on now, Ash?"*

Ash remained silent, flapping her baby wings with a faint smile as she nudged Raiden. He watched her for a moment, sighed and smiled, and then placed her on his shoulder.

He didn't know what was causing Ash's random long sleeps, but he couldn't feel any fear within her heart, and she seemed peaceful whenever she woke up. He decided to simply trust that she knew what she was doing.

But then Aeris began coughing, drawing Raiden's attention to her. His smile widened as he saw Aeris open her eyes slightly and drag her fingers through her blonde hair.

"Are you okay, Aeris?" Leo asked, concern evident in his voice.

Aeris gave him a firm nod, but the moment her gaze found Raiden's, something within her snapped. She shot to her feet, eyes widening with fear as she wiped her sweaty palms against her thighs. Raiden, however, simply smiled at her.

"You don't understand, Raiden," she said, her voice breaking. "I... I had to go home."

Raiden's expression darkened in an instant. She'd been caught trying to steal the Book of Ashes, and her only concern was that she'd fled the hideout?

Raiden sighed. *"You know that won't stop me from killing you, right?"*

Leo sank into the sofa, staring at Aeris in disbelief as she gazed at the floor, struggling to find her words.

"Well... I've got a few questions for you," Raiden said. Aeris turned to him, swallowing nervously.

"Before we move on to more important matters, how exactly did you manage to get into the house?"

Aeris began twisting her fingers as sweat formed on her forehead. "I used teleportation. When I arrived outside, you were all meditating, so I stepped carefully and entered the house."

Raiden began tapping his chin with a finger. His danger detection was supposed to alert him to Aeris's presence. Was it because he unconsciously didn't view her as a threat, or did his ability genuinely not see her as one?

He pondered this for a moment, but there weren't any clear answers. He shrugged and decided to seek an answer once he had gathered enough facts to decide.

He tilted his head toward Aeris. *"That brings me to my question... who sent you?"*

She couldn't even look in Raiden's direction. Her eyes darted everywhere except at him, and from her expression, Raiden could tell she wasn't going to simply betray whoever sent her.

Raiden leaned back into the sofa, a wicked smile playing on his lips. *"Whether you tell me or not, I will kill you. Your decision will only determine how long you last before I do."*

Aeris started trembling in fear, but still struggled to look Raiden in the eyes. "I know you think I sold you out to the elders and Captain Kai, but I didn't."

Her voice started cracking. "The moment I left here, I hurried back to take care of my family... I didn't betray you, Raiden." Her voice softened. "Please trust me."

Raiden stared at her for a long moment. Lies with tears. They worked quite well back in his previous world. In his early years as an assassin, before his twin brother Jobe died, he always hesitated when he saw those tears and snot on an enemy's face. But Jobe was stone-cold, just like their father.

He killed without hesitation, but cared and loved when it mattered. But when he died, he took Raiden's scared, hesitant side with him. So tears and lies held no power over him anymore. She was more than a decade too late.

His thoughts continued for quite a while as he weighed whether knowing who had sent her for the book was worth it. But to Aeris, the frightening expression on his face as he stared at her was too much, and before anyone knew it, she blurted out:

"Captain Kai sent me, and he promised me five million Persa, so I simply couldn't refuse." She said it all in one rushed breath.

Raiden's eyes widened, and he smiled. The way she'd rushed out the confession amused him. But then his expression darkened in an instant.

Captain Kai had been a troublemaker. He was the sole reason why the Dawnbringers were so proud and arrogant, and his corruption was what allowed families like the Jaspers to wield enough power to cause such tragedy to his servants, Speed and Soul.

It went without saying that they could have all been dead at the hands of the Jaspers not long ago. He needed to take care of that nuisance.

His expression spoke volumes, and he didn't need to say a word for Leo and Aeris to understand exactly what he was thinking.

"Let me handle him, bookkeeper," Leo said with his elbows on his thighs and his chin resting on his fist, his eyes focused on the floor.

Raiden looked at Leo with both confusion and uncertainty.

"I am your apprentice, yet I have done nothing to prove that I am worthy of that title." His tone dropped low. "Perhaps that's why you haven't formed a contract with me yet."

Raiden's eyes widened in realization. Leo had personally requested a contract between them, which Raiden had agreed to, but when he later changed his mind, he hadn't told Leo why. And clearly it had been eating him up.

"Each one of us has demonstrated incredible feats worthy of being your subordinates: Levi killing Mack, Freya's intense fight with Seth and killing the God Beast, and Speed's fight with the God Beast."

Raiden wanted to speak, but he knew better. If he had learned anything about teamwork since arriving in this world, then it was knowing what to do when someone was pouring their heart out.

"Let me take on Captain Kai..." He turned to Raiden with that same determination in his eyes that Raiden had been seeing for so long. "For me, Raiden. For my pride."

Raiden smiled. He wouldn't take away his dignity. If Leo wanted Captain Kai dead by his own hands, then so be it. What mattered was Kai being out of the picture.

But before Raiden could speak, Levi and Freya returned. "Oh, the traitor is up," Levi said and tossed Raiden a black slave choker.

Raiden caught it and tested its strength.

"It can only be torn after the contract cast on it has been fulfilled," Freya said in Noorian as she took her seat.

Raiden nodded in approval. He reached for Ash on his shoulder, placed her gently on the sofa, and rose to his feet.

"Don't worry, Leo." Raiden gave him a smirk. "Captain Kai is all yours."

Leo's expression shifted as he stared at Raiden with fierce determination.

Raiden took a deep breath and moved closer to Aeris. She stood there, visibly trembling. *"You have two options..."*

His smile widened. *"Either I kill you here and now, or I give you a chance to redeem yourself."*

Aeris finally looked at him, her eyes sparkling. "Anything, Raiden. Anything."

"Anything you say..."

Aeris gave him a definite nod.

Raiden's expression grew dark as he pondered why people made empty promises driven by determination alone. Aeris had no idea what he intended to ask, yet she claimed she could do anything. Did people actually compare what they'd gain to what they'd lose? Or did they just pursue rewards blindly, never questioning the sacrifice or calculating the risk?

A smile returned to his face. Fools like her were precisely the ones who would make his dream possible.

"I want you to spy on the assassins for me."

Aeris' eyes went wide, and she swallowed nervously.

"Infiltrate their hideout. Report back to me with everything you see and hear."

The excitement in her eyes from moments before had vanished completely. Fear consumed her once again. With the slave choker binding her, she couldn't simply flee. Freedom would only come once she fulfilled her duty.

"Will you really kill me if I don't?" Her voice cracked as she looked at Raiden, though his cold expression already told her everything.

She let out a sigh and reached out for the choker with trembling hands.

Raiden placed it lazily in her outstretched palm.

"I, Aeris..." She paused, taking a deep breath. "I, Aeris, promise to serve as a spy among the assassins. I may be free only when I return and report everything I see and hear to Raiden."

Raiden let out a soft laugh and infused the choker with his mana, making it spring open. Aeris' hands trembled without mercy as she positioned it around her throat.

The moment she did, Raiden pulled a ring from his pocket. "Oh, silly me... I forgot." He threw it to Aeris. "This will allow you to stay in contact with us, communicate with us, and alert us when you're in trouble."

He started to toss the matching ring to Raiden, but Raiden waved him off, indicating he should keep it.

Aeris examined the ring, studying it briefly before slipping it onto her finger.

"It's a callsign ring." Levi raised an eyebrow. "I trust you know how it works... three gentle touches and you can speak with me."

Aeris gave a small nod.

Her mission was nothing short of suicide. Even Levi, with all his years among the assassins, had only the slimmest chance of survival—and everyone in the room knew it. Aeris included.

"Leo... Aeris." Raiden sank into the sofa once more. *"You have today to prepare. Tomorrow, you strike."*

Chapter 58: Dream

Raiden lay on the ground, his breath warming the floor and lifting smoky dust into the air. The ground felt comfortable and inviting enough for him to sleep eternally. It felt like home.

Yet sleep didn't feel like the right choice at that moment. He opened his eyes a fraction and saw himself lying on smoky skeletons.

Fear jolted through him as he scrambled to his feet. His breathing became labored as the sight before him slowly stole his breath.

He found himself in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by everything made of thick dark smoke—as if shadows had taken physical form. Even the air and the grass on the ground were no exception.

His gaze shot instinctively toward the east, where a glowing full moon hung suspended above. Adding to his confusion, everything the moonlight touched appeared to transform into smoky wisps.

Without hesitation, he looked down at his own body to find it meeting a similar fate. Beginning with his fingernails and toenails, he watched them transform into smoky shadows.

The realization struck him like a blow as his heart pounded frantically and his mind raced. Was he in hell? What was happening to him?

His head whipped around in every direction, but there was nothing. Only darkness surrounded him.

Without warning, a skeletal hand shot up from the ground, grasping for his leg. Raiden instinctively sprang away as his body started to tremble.

"What the fuck was that?" he breathed.

However, more hands began clawing up from the ground, and before he knew it, an entire army of living corpses was standing, lurching toward him with the same gait as zombies.

Confusion filled Raiden's mind, but the only thought that surfaced was how exciting it would be to battle the living dead. Without wasting a moment, he began pummeling them with his fists, crushing their skulls.

His fists crashed through their wispy bodies. There was nothing solid to feel—just thick smoke that absorbed each of his blows completely.

But before he could continue, he noticed that every corpse he had struck was already rising again. Their bodies were reassembling themselves through the darkness.

Worse still, their numbers were growing, and they were all moving toward him. Fighting them was pointless, and there was no honor in combat against something he couldn't comprehend.

Before he could even think, he was already fleeing. He needed to escape whatever situation he had landed himself in and find a way out.

Was this Aeris' work? Or maybe he really was in hell?

The questions were endless, but he wasn't going to stand still to find the answers. Yet even as he ran and felt himself moving, he remained in the exact same spot, as though he had never moved at all.

He looked down to see his legs trapped by smoky hands emerging from the ground. He struggled to break free, but before he knew it, he was being pulled down by countless hands while the standing corpses leaped onto him, covering him entirely.

In mere seconds, Raiden shot up from his sleep, gasping as sweat drenched his body. His heart hammered against his ribs, and his skin was ghostly pale. He looked around to find himself in his room. It had all been a dream.

He pressed his hands to his head and chest, gripping them as pain shot through both. He tried to remember what he had witnessed, but his memories were blank. He could sense that he'd experienced some horrific dream just seconds before, but he couldn't grasp what it had been.

After a few moments, he dismissed it and looked over at Ash, who was still sleeping beside him. She appeared fine, but something was off about her. Her breath seemed strangely smoky, reminiscent of what he had witnessed in his dream.

Raiden watched her breath for a long moment. It seemed familiar, but he still couldn't place what it reminded him of. He dismissed this too. It wasn't unusual for him—after all, she could summon shadowy chains from her mouth.

"I don't know what kind of rest you're getting, Ash, but don't you dare get sick on me." He patted her gently with a smile. *"I need you to help me return to my world."*

He got up and walked to the washroom to clean himself up. He felt uneasy, like something was crawling beneath his skin.

Leo and Aeris had already departed on their respective missions. Whether they would survive remained uncertain, but Raiden genuinely wanted to see Leo return. But given the opponent he had voluntarily chosen to face—Kai, captain of the kingdom's knights—Raiden knew Leo's survival would be nothing short of miraculous. And he didn't believe in miracles. To him, Leo was walking toward his death.

As for Aeris, she found herself in downtown Persia City, and worse still, deep in the western slums where the most heinous crimes took place. But he didn't care about her safety—he only wanted information about the assassins. Even if she survived the mission, he planned to kill her anyway.

Once Raiden finished freshening up, he pulled on his black shirt, rolled the sleeves up to his elbows, and adjusted the key necklace around his neck. Then he made his way downstairs.

With Leo gone and Ash perpetually asleep, the others naturally paired off. The twins spent their time together, while Freya and Levi wandered aimlessly around the house.

Levi's eyes held tenderness as he filled Freya's ears with his constant chatter. But looking more closely, Freya appeared to be enjoying herself as she smiled from time to time.

Raiden watched them briefly before deciding to mind his business and look for something to eat.

He walked to the back of the staircase and stepped into the spacious kitchen to find something to eat. But before he could, his danger detection activated. There were intruders.

They weren't nearby yet, so he had decided to eat something before dealing with anything else. However, he couldn't shake the strange feeling he had about his dream.

Why couldn't he remember? This wasn't like him—he wasn't forgetful—so why couldn't he recall it? And what was this strange sensation coursing through his body? Even the hazy memory brought him warmth and comfort, yet it felt so unfamiliar.

Eventually, he pushed the thoughts aside. Intruders were approaching, and that should be his priority.

Chapter 59: The Jasper Attack

Raiden and his comrades stood before the house's entrance, watching as three men and a woman approached. Leading them was an elderly man—probably in his late sixties—with long white facial hair and a white beard tied back in a ponytail. Despite his aged appearance, his yellow aura radiated strength that contradicted his years.

He was flanked by a bald, muscular man with a golden aura on his right and a young man roughly a year or two older than Raiden, grey-haired with his aura radiating gold. Behind them all walked a young girl, about fifteen years old with dark hair, her aura radiating white.

The old man's eyes held sheer intensity—he clearly wasn't someone to kid with—but he also carried a calm demeanor. The young girl, however, was the most hyper among them, jumping from side to side as they approached.

To match the sorrow they were about to let out, they all wore black suits, the pitch-dark fabric reflecting their expressions perfectly while displaying the number seven on their crests.

"Shit..." Speed muttered as he pulled Soul into his arms. "That's the Jasper family—the head and all his children."

Levi raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't expecting them to come this early."

Raiden sighed as aura began coursing through him, a twisted smile forcing its way onto his lips. *"Were you expecting an invitation to fight?"*

His grin deepened. *"They want us to kill them."*

Raiden's words hung in the air for a brief moment as Levi narrowed his eyes for a better look while Soul continued to hide behind Speed.

"The girl... I've seen her before." Levi immediately turned invisible. "She's a psycho and their supporter as well."

Raiden's expression darkened. He turned backward, and Levi was no more. *"You want to take care of it?"*

"Yes... she blesses them with luck, so with her they can never lose."

Raiden's expression grew even darker. He had heard of white crest bearers possessing many different kinds of support magic, but a supporter with the blessing of luck?

That changed everything, making him feel uneasy about facing the Jasper family as a whole. He didn't believe in luck, but this world had been quite tricky with things he'd never believed in.

Before long, the Jasper family closed in, and Raiden adjusted himself, pulling himself together. He began taking a few steps forward. The fear within him caused his body to twitch with excitement, a twisted smile playing on his lips.

Once they were close enough, they paused. The old man simply stared at Raiden's devilish face with his calm expression, while the men flanking him wore furious expressions that were somehow distinctively calm. The young girl treated the danger like an act. She moved from side to side with unmistakable happiness.

However, before he could utter a word, there was a tap on his shoulder. His expression shifted as he turned. It was Speed, clutching Soul's hand very tightly, but she seemed very scared, her eyes darting to the floor, lost in thought.

"This is my fight... I don't care if you are my master." Speed narrowed his eyes, his furious expression visible even through his mask. "They are mine... I should have done this a long time ago."

Raiden glanced at him as he turned to the Jasper family. He didn't mind who faced them first as long as they won against them, but he couldn't understand Speed. He doubted they were there to satisfy Speed's ego. They just wanted revenge.

Still, he knew it would be best to allow Speed to do as he pleased, so he gladly stepped back, allowing him to take the vanguard.

"You murderers... after all you've put us through, you still want revenge?" Speed clenched his fist, his voice thick with undeniable pain. "Aren't you ashamed?"

They all stood motionless. The old man's hands rested on his back, his waist slightly bent, remaining cocky as they stared at them with disgust. Meanwhile, the girl seemed to be whispering something into their ears, growing happier after each person.

"I think you are mistaken about our presence for something different, kid," the old man said, his voice echoing with age and maturity. "I am Jasper, the leader of the Jasper family."

He tilted slightly to his right toward the bald man. "This is my first child, Perfect." He turned to his left. "This is Axel, and the little girl you see is Becky, my youngest child."

Their names seemed to irritate Speed even more as he clenched his fist even tighter, while Raiden stood behind with narrowed eyes, waiting for what the man had to say.

"Don't be too eager to speak, kid. We simply want to ensure you can deliver your final message... end the conversation."

Raiden's eyes widened as he began to smile with attraction and fondness, peering behind Speed to get a better glimpse of his angel. His father had always told him that killing was a form of communication—to kill blindly meant such a person didn't understand the act of being an assassin.

To find someone who understood the conversation of killing was a treasure greater than gold. With such individuals, even a single strike meant something and spoke volumes.

"You won't touch anyone here... you all die by my hands, you monsters," Speed said, gesturing for them to come at him.

Old man Jasper simply shook his head in disbelief. "Which one of you killed my sons—Seth and Mack?"

Raiden peered once more, his body filled with excitement as his body twitched repeatedly. *"I killed Seth."* His voice was etched with thrills.

"But Mack's killer isn't here at the moment."

"I see..." Jasper gestured to his children. "You can kill whoever you want, but leave Seth's killer to me."

Perfect and Axel began smiling as Perfect approached Speed. Speed turned to Soul and crouched beside her. "Don't worry, Soul, I'll make sure the Jasper family never hurts us again."

Raiden was happy about getting to fight Jasper—for the first time in a long time, he could fight someone he could communicate with through strikes. But a glance at Soul made his expression grow dark.

This wasn't the first time she had been this way, lifeless. She had stared into nothingness just like this during his fight with Seth. Soul was just like him... she couldn't fight anyone in the Jasper family.

"I will take Axel." Freya's words cut through Raiden's daze, and he turned to her, giving her a nod as she began approaching Axel.

Raiden let out a sigh and walked forward, taking Soul's hand. *"Take care of that bald bastard, Speed... Win. I will be keeping Soul safe for you."*

Speed tilted his head toward Raiden, his golden eyes filled with gratitude. He gave him a gentle nod, and Raiden carried Soul in his arms and headed back to the entrance.

The moment he got there, he turned to see Axel standing cockily before Freya, who remained calm, while Speed and Perfect faced each other, staring directly into each other's eyes.

Raiden smirked, knowing what was about to transpire would be sensational.

"I am Raiden, the bookkeeper and leader of the Guardian of Ashes." He gestured to his left. *"This is Speed, and the one to my right is Freya."*

Then he gestured toward Soul, who stood partially dead before him. *"And this girl here is the product of your family's work, Soul. And in her honor, I will kill you."*

Raiden's expression shifted into a twisted smile. *"But how about we watch the fight between our comrades first... then we fight without any distraction."*

Raiden didn't want to put Soul in danger. Despite not being comfortable with her fragile nature as a seventeen-year-old, he wasn't going to let her become a coward before stronger foes like he had. He wanted to protect her and help her overcome her trauma.

The man remained silent for a while, then glanced to his left at his daughter, Becky, who was lost in her unusual daze, simply playing with the wind. "I agree."

Raiden wore a twisted smirk, *"But that might be boring, wouldn't it?... what about we wager?"*

Chapter 60: The Jasper Attack 2

Becky's blessing of luck wasn't only a cheat code that Freya and Speed might not be able to bypass, but it was also a major threat to Raiden—unless Levi, who remained invisible, could find a way to take her out completely.

However, the lull before facing Jasper made Raiden reconsider a few strategies that could not only boost his odds of winning but would also escalate the stakes of their battle. A wager.

"And what would the wager be?" Old man Jasper asked as the others stood before each other, waiting for the final decision between the masters before their battles could begin.

Raiden stood there for a moment, but before he could speak up, Soul finally moved and wrapped herself around his waist in a tight hug. He was perplexed and uncomfortable, but after a moment, he smiled and patted her on the head. She wasn't herself—she was afraid, and Raiden had to take that fear away.

Raiden tilted his head toward the old man with a confident expression. *"Whoever wins both fights gets the first two strikes in our match. If it's a draw, the person whose opponent falls first becomes the victor, and that leader gets the opening strike."*

Raiden locked eyes with old man Jasper, his sharp gray eyes meeting the man's flickering dark ones. All he needed was Jasper's agreement, and he believed they could bypass Becky's luck.

Jasper remained silent for what felt like an eternity, his gaze locked with Raiden's without faltering even once. It was as if he could read his mind through the stare.

"I agree..." he finally spoke up with his trembling aged voice.

Raiden's smirk widened even further. *"Speed... Freya, I command you to crack their bones, let them feel the warmth of their own blood streaming down their skulls as they struggle to live."*

His tone dropped deeper, but his expression only grew more psychopathic. *"I command you, against all odds... kill them."*

Jasper remained calm and composed as he watched Speed and Freya's heads slowly drop to their chests, both muttering, "Okay, master." Like zombies.

Axel and Perfect, however, looked puzzled for a moment, their mouths slightly parted. Axel watched as Freya unleashed overwhelming mana and surrounded herself with her flames.

Meanwhile, Perfect watched as an intense wind whipped up behind Speed, and before he could blink, Speed was already before him, delivering a devastating blow to his gut that sent him crashing into the ground.

At that very moment, Axel's attention faltered, and before he knew it, Freya's hand rested against his chest. His shirt was instantly incinerated, stripping him half naked as he crashed to the earth.

Raiden, however, sensed something was off. Old man Jasper still remained calm despite his sons' dire situation. Axel and Perfect rose to their feet, their expressions suddenly shifting to smiles.

Raiden's eyes darted around. Was he missing something? They were losing, so why so calm and confident?

Perfect took a few steps closer to Speed, closing the distance between them to about six feet, coughing out blood as he wiped his mouth. In an instant, his golden aura stopped radiating from him and formed a sphere around both of them, leaving no room for Speed to escape.

Raiden's expression darkened. *"He has a domain, too?"* he muttered, confused.

But at that very moment, Becky finally snapped from living in her own world, stopped her childish roaming, and outstretched her hands toward Axel and Perfect. Raiden could see as her white aura turned into threads, extending from her hands and making contact with them. That was her blessing.

But that only made Raiden smile because he knew what he was doing. By issuing a direct command to both Freya and Speed, now fulfilling that command became their fate. Something they couldn't disobey. An unchangeable law.

Now it was fate against luck. And Raiden simply had to wait.

Raiden barely blinked, his attention shifting to Speed and Perfect. What transpired within wasn't something he could fully grasp. Despite the six-foot gap, Speed moved at tremendous speed toward Perfect each time Raiden blinked, but somehow he always ended up back at his starting position, clutching different parts of his body in agony.

It was as if he was trapped in a loop he couldn't comprehend—as if Perfect was reversing time at a rapid rate.

This sent a chilled sensation through Raiden, not just from the complications, but from Soul clinging to him so tightly as she witnessed her brother's suffering.

However, Freya wasn't having it easy either. Axel seemed able to create anything he called out. One minute he would be wielding a sword, striking at Freya in close combat, and the next, he would be standing at a distance, launching arrows at her.

Freya found it extremely difficult to avoid his attacks as she tried to dodge on pure instinct rather than experience, causing her body to be slashed as blood soaked through her clothing.

It was unpleasant for Raiden to see a fighter of Freya's caliber in such a dire situation. But Soul's body couldn't stop trembling as she hugged him tighter. He was lost in thought for a moment, but he knew it would be best to shield Soul from watching her brother's ordeal.

While the fight still progressed relentlessly, Raiden took her hand and attempted to lead her inside to rest. But she couldn't move. She seemed lost in thought, staring at something with terror in her eyes, which prompted Raiden to turn toward whatever she was looking at.

Freya had a chain wrapped around her neck, bleeding heavily from her head as blood streamed down her face, painting it crimson and showing even through her flames.

But Axel only continued laughing loudly, completely abandoning the gentleman he had been moments ago as he pulled the chains, trying to finish Freya once and for all.

Raiden's heart sank at the sight alone. The last person he expected to lose was Freya. Had he been too cocky with the wager? Worse, he still didn't know what Jasper's ability was. What if he could really kill him with just one strike?

He swallowed nervously as he clenched his fist, hoping Freya would get back up.

In an instant, something shifted beneath Freya as the ground cracked under her. Axel's mockery turned to fear and confusion as she held the chains tightly. Her flames grew hotter, beginning to burn the earth itself to ashes.

"I am the arch hell phoenix," Freya said with a masculine, echoing voice. Raiden's expression darkened, as did Soul's—they were both frozen in confusion, their fears momentarily forgotten. That voice wasn't Freya's. Her familiar? Free?

"I won't be killed by a mere mortal!" Freya roared, yanking the chain with tremendous force as Axel was pulled toward her, and she enveloped him in a burning embrace.

Axel yelled out in agony, his voice echoing across the distance. At that moment, Becky's attention faltered, and she reached out toward her brother with sorrow and fear in her eyes, watching him get scorched to ashes.

In that very moment—too fast for even the confused Raiden to comprehend—Becky's throat was slit open by Levi's blade. She began to choke on her own blood as she reached for her neck.

Her situation struck a nerve. Perfect's attention shifted as he called out to his sister with terror in his voice, and Speed seized that split second to attack.

Within barely five seconds, Perfect was drained of all his physical energy, his body growing pale and gaunt as if he had endured a decade without food and water in those brief moments.

Raiden swallowed nervously as he continued watching, trying to piece everything together. But within Perfect's domain, Perfect was just getting beaten down repeatedly.

It was as if he were trying to escape his fate by rewinding time, but he couldn't escape it. He couldn't rewind more than five seconds. Eventually, Perfect stopped his futile cycle, and without hesitation, Speed snapped his neck, collapsing the domain entirely.

Raiden began smiling as he watched their opponents crumple to the ground. They won. They had actually won.

Soul released Raiden's hand and ran to check on her brother, Speed. Levi finally materialized and moved to check on Freya, who lay on the ground with her flames gone and her body covered in ashes and blood.

Old man Jasper somehow remained calm and collected, showing neither smile nor grief despite losing all three children within seconds.

But Raiden just stood there, laughing with that devilish smile etched across his face.

"Luck... luck... luck!" He cackled wildly. *"Such a pathetic thing."*

He couldn't help but feel proud of his team, not just for the victory, but for the timing and execution. It was perfect. So perfect that he finally believed luck and all superstitious things could be defeated with sheer will alone.

He finally turned to Jasper. *"Now, old man... it's time to join your family."* Euphoria coursed through him, his twisted smile widening. *"I'm going to kill you."*