

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 61: The Jasper Attack 3 - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 61: The Jasper Attack 3

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Raiden and old man Jasper had the field to themselves now, with Levi and Soul dealing with the others back in the house.

For Raiden, this was nothing but a thrilling rush. He approached Jasper, who simply stood there, calm, hands folded gently behind him. Raiden channeled all his strength into his hand—time to collect his reward.

The excitement didn't allow Raiden to stay still. He hopped from one foot to the other on his tiptoes, his whole body tingling as his fingers twitched with euphoria.

The old man remained unbothered, his dark eyes calmly tracking Raiden's movements, but Raiden was beyond caring. Without a second thought, he struck with precision—a devastating blow to the solar plexus. The crack echoed sharply across the field, followed by a rush of wind that swept over them both.

Old man Jasper fought against the impact, but the force sent him sliding backward across the ground. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth as he collapsed to one knee, reaching up to wipe his face.

His torture meant nothing to Raiden. All he wanted was to deliver his final strike of the wager and hopefully end Jasper with it. As the old man struggled to rise, trembling, his hands slipping from his knees as he collapsed again, Raiden simply laughed and kept jogging on his toes, waiting.

The moment Jasper managed to stand upright, Raiden had already leaped in front of him. Their eyes locked as Raiden's devilish grin betrayed his excitement. Before the old man could prepare himself, the strike landed in the same place as the previous blow.

The sharp sound rang louder than before, tearing an agonizing scream from Jasper's throat. He crashed into the ground hard. All Raiden felt was his body shaking with euphoria as he examined his fist. Jasper's blood dripped from his knuckles, and he knew instantly the devastation his final strike had delivered.

He moved closer to Jasper, needing to confirm he'd finished him off entirely and earned his reward of euphoria, that addictive warmth.

However, before he could get any closer, something coiled around his ankles and wrists.

"What's going on?" he muttered.

His excitement died instantly. His eyes darted frantically from side to side, searching for the source, but before he could understand what was happening, another binding wrapped his neck, and his body was suspended in midair as if held by invisible chains.

"I'm trapped..." he choked out, his voice strained.

Raiden's jaw clenched in agony as something constricted his neck, cutting off his air. His entire face flushed crimson as he struggled desperately to break free. His pulse hammered, his body burning up. Fear clawed at him as he battled whatever held him captive.

While Raiden struggled in midair, old man Jasper staggered to his feet. He swayed unsteadily, his whole body trembling, his garments and face drenched in crimson.

With great effort, he raised his head and fixed his gaze on Raiden, who could barely process his presence, his mind entirely consumed with escaping his suffering.

"No need," old man Jasper croaked, coughing through his dry voice. "You've walked right into my invisible chains."

He coughed again, then returned to his composed stance, hands folded gently behind him. "I've spent more than half my life perfecting these chains. The cost was my mana usage—it's what keeps me at number 7."

Jasper forced himself down on his knees and grasped his deceased daughter Becky by the collar, then, with every ounce of strength he had left, lifted her onto his shoulders.

Once he had her secured, he turned back to Raiden. "There's no need to struggle, bookkeeper... as my final message in this war, I'm taking the very thing that made you so arrogant. Your life."

He turned and started walking toward the forest's edge. "No matter what you do, you will die."

Raiden couldn't make out most of what Jasper said—the chains were crushing tighter by the second. His body grew cold as circulation to his head stopped, his face turning a deeper shade of red, fear coursing through him. But he knew this wasn't how it would end.

He continued struggling to break free, even trying to call out to the others for help, but his voice had been stolen as well. Every attempt to speak only brought more agony.

He shifted his hand, reaching for the chains, but his fingers found nothing. It was as if the restraints were made of air.

At that moment, his resolve was stronger than it had ever been, but his fate was inevitable. His heartbeat slowed, and he lost the energy to even draw breath. All he felt was his body failing, even though he wanted to fight on. And the only thing he wanted now was to sleep.

But the instant his eyes closed, his head shot up with violent force. His blue aura shifted to black as a powerful wind erupted around him.

There was no sign of fear or emotion in his gaze—his eyes locked onto Jasper, who was distant now, almost disappearing into the forest. This wasn't Raiden anymore. This was something entirely different.

Without even a flinch, he shattered the chains, and the instant he hit the ground, he was sprinting toward Jasper. A devilish smile twisted his lips, somehow even more frightening than when Raiden himself had worn it.

As he approached old man Jasper, Jasper's head snapped back in confusion and terror as he stared at Raiden. But before he could react, Raiden's hand had punched straight through his chest, breaking his own bones in the process—though he showed not a flicker of pain.

He simply maintained that devilish smile, eyes locked on Jasper's, as his shattered fingers began regenerating while they closed around Jasper's heart.

Jasper's eyes filled with terror, blood pouring from his chest as his heart was crushed in Raiden's grip. He let Becky fall immediately, landing a desperate blow across Raiden's face with everything he had left—but it merely turned Raiden's head to the side.

"You bastard... what are you?" he choked out, but Raiden only responded with that twisted smile.

Old man Jasper's head sagged briefly before he lifted it again with effort. His teeth were gritted as blood filled his throat, choking him, but he endured it.

He wouldn't die—not yet. He pulled himself closer to Raiden and bit savagely into his neck. His fangs punctured Raiden's flesh as blood drenched his clothing. It should have been more than enough to force a scream from Raiden, but there was silence.

He appeared more lifeless than Jasper himself, his psychopathic expression frozen as he stared at the old man, unmoved by what he was doing. What caught his eye immediately was Jasper's yellow aura starting to fluctuate.

He instinctively glanced at Jasper's neck and saw his yellow crest slowly dimming. He was a grey crest bearer—a forbidden magic user that even Raiden, in this strange form, wasn't willing to face.

He pulled Jasper away from him and ripped his heart out completely. He held the organ in his hand, watching it pulse slowly while maintaining that twisted expression.

Jasper collapsed to the ground as his aura faded completely.

Raiden threw the heart aside, euphoria flooding through him as his smile became almost genuine. He turned back to Jasper, who clutched his daughter's hand tightly even in death.

Raiden remained motionless for a moment, then crouched down behind him.

"How did you do it?" Jasper whispered, his eyes starting to dim. "How did you break the chains?"

"Was I not strong enough?" He managed to get the words out with all his remaining strength, his voice barely a whisper.

Raiden stayed silent as he observed Jasper. Jasper had devoted his entire life to mastering his ability, only for a seventeen-year-old to destroy that effort in mere minutes. It obviously wounded his pride, but the figure crouched over him was no longer truly Raiden, so no words came.

Soon after, he drew his final breath, never getting the answers he sought. In that same instant, Raiden collapsed to the ground as well.

[ALERT]

[BODY STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFUL]

[+30]

[MANA CONTROL +10]

PHYSICAL STRENGTH +10

STAMINA +5

DRAGON AURA +10

SOUL OF DRAGON 25%

HEART OF DRAGON 30%]

Chapter 62: Counterpart

Raiden felt gentle nudgings and something soft brushing against his face. He began opening his eyes and abruptly sat upright, startling Ash, who tumbled onto the bed.

He frantically patted himself down, checking for wounds from the battle, but relief flooded through him as he broke into a smile—he was alive and unharmed.

[Papa...] Ash's voice echoed in his head as he turned to her.

"Oh, it was you who woke me up." He said softly, reaching out to gently stroke her scales.

However, his expression darkened in an instant. He reached for his neck once more and began feeling around it, but the only thing there was his necklace.

Still, he wondered how he was alive—he couldn't remember anything after he passed out from suffocation during his fight with old man Jasper.

Did someone rush in to save him? But even through the confusion, he smiled as he recalled the battle.

From the beginning, Jasper had intended to finish the fight before Raiden could even strike. Thinking about it made him burst into laughter, his heart filled with excitement. The old man had scattered his chains across the battlefield, probably the moment he arrived.

If it weren't for the wager Raiden raised, it wouldn't have been a fight at all. And Raiden got the message perfectly—Jasper wanted him to understand what it meant to be a killer without resorting to excessive violence.

Just as he sat there laughing at the memories and patting Ash, Levi walked in and leaned against the wall. His shirt hung slightly loose as he ran his hand through his ponytail.

Raiden stopped laughing and turned to him. *"How's everyone?"*

He smirked. "Speed is doing perfectly fine, but as for Freya... you really don't want to know."

Raiden paused for a moment, wondering why Levi would say that, but if he thought not knowing was for the best, then he wasn't going to push it. He shrugged and let out a sigh.

"Did that man really escape? And how did you save me?"

Levi raised an eyebrow in surprise. "What do you mean?" The expression on Raiden's face alone was enough to tell him what he needed to know. He shook his head in disbelief.

"You killed the old man... I just finished burning their bodies."

Raiden's eyes widened in confusion. He killed them? How? As he pondered this, Ash nudged him with a smile, and that's when he remembered—he smiled back.

Ash's heart had given him strength in despair and triggered a berserk mode. So if he had won, it was probably because of that berserk state.

"You and this world never cease to amaze me," he muttered with a smile and placed Ash on his shoulder as he rose to his feet.

He headed to the washroom to clean himself up a bit while Levi remained in his position. "You still haven't told me a thing about yourself... master."

Raiden sighed the moment Levi brought up that topic. He didn't know why Levi was so invested in his life, but whether for better or worse, he wasn't going to tell him anything.

The moment he returned from the washroom, Levi stood at the entrance with a cocky smile. Undeniably mysterious.

"Where are the others?" Raiden asked as he walked past him, heading out of the room.

The moment he stepped outside, before Levi could respond, he saw Soul downstairs sitting on a sofa as her overwhelming dark aura reached the ceiling.

He paused and stared at her for a moment. *Soul Condemn*,—he thought as he gazed at Soul.

All Raiden had was a fraction of Soul's ability—*Soul Condemn*—and yet his strikes had become more impactful than he had imagined. But Soul, who had the actual ability and could evolve with it, was mostly consumed by fear. He smiled.

Just like he had promised during the battle, he was going to put aside the uneasiness he felt around her and help her overcome that fear. As a matter of fact, it would most likely deepen their bond as master and servant.

He began making his way downstairs with Levi right behind him. The moment Soul spotted him, she hurried toward Raiden and wrapped him in a hug. Raiden's face turned crimson as he began to feel uneasy.

"Thank you..." Soul said, her voice cracking.

Raiden swallowed nervously. *"Oh, really... it was nothing,"* he said awkwardly with a smile.

Soul pulled back from the hug, and Raiden's expression returned to normal. He took her hand and descended the stairs into the living room. The moment they did, he bent slightly toward her.

"Look into my eyes," Raiden said as Soul's golden eyes locked directly onto his gray ones.

"I want you to fight by my side..."

Before Raiden could utter another word, he felt his danger detection activate and immediately stood upright, turning toward the corridor on his right.

"Oh... she's coming," Levi said and began taking a few steps backward.

Raiden remained confused as they all turned toward the corridor. Who was coming? The danger seemed to be getting closer and closer, so he gestured for Soul to stand behind him, and she did.

He tilted his head toward Levi to see him on the third floor, leaning against the rails with a smile.

Before he could turn back to the corridor, Ash leaped off Raiden's shoulder onto the sofa, yawned, and settled down on it. Unbothered by everything transpiring.

The next thing Raiden felt was a strike to his cheek that sent him crashing to the ground. He clutched his face and turned toward the direction the strike came from, enraged. But the moment he saw who it was, his expression shifted.

"Freya?!" he asked, confused.

But Freya stood before him, panting heavily with fury in her eyes and bandages wrapped around her head.

She rushed toward Raiden and struck again, but Raiden easily avoided it. Another strike followed, which he dodged as well. Still, he was confused, unable to understand what exactly was going on, but with the anger in Freya's heart, there was no way he could get her to speak freely.

"I order you to stop!" Freya instantly commanded, her face twisted with anger, clearly not acting of her own will.

Raiden had seen her this way before, but that's when his eyes widened in realization. The concussion she had suffered during her fight with Axel had made her recover her

memories—now she was furious that Raiden had manipulated her into forming a contract with him.

Raiden began laughing. *"I didn't lie to you, you know?"*

Freya gritted her teeth. "You may have control over my body, but not my mind and soul... I will kill you."

Raiden laughed even harder. He turned to Soul and bent down beside her once more.

"We'll talk later, okay?" he said and patted her on the head.

Soul gave him a gentle nod.

At that moment, Raiden ordered Freya to follow him, and without her consent, her body began moving behind Raiden.

"You killed my servant, you brat, nearly killed me, and manipulated me into signing a contract with you," she said angrily. "Coward."

Raiden said nothing; he simply smiled and walked into Freya's room. There, he ordered her to take a seat, and he leaned against the wall.

He knew the day Freya would recover her memories was bound to come. Though he wasn't expecting it this soon, he already knew what to do.

"You are just like me, aren't you?" Freya's blue aura fluctuated with anger, and he could see it all too well, but he had to speak.

"You want to get stronger, perhaps for something similar to mine."

"You don't know a thing about me."

Raiden raised his hands in submission. *"Yes, I don't... but the smile on your face when we formed the contract, the moment you turned seven, said it all."*

Raiden's expression darkened. "I don't want to be a master; well, I don't want anyone to serve me solely because of a contract."

He smiled once more. *"And I'm sure if you do remember your recent memories, you'll have a reason or two to serve me."*

Freya narrowed her eyes as her aura finally remained calm, and Raiden knew he was on the right track.

"We can achieve everything together, and unless necessary—you already know—I do not issue commands."

Freya was a formidable ally—making an enemy of her would be very bad for Raiden, so even though she was his servant, he had to remain calm and collected around her.

"I don't want to work for anyone; I just want to get stronger," Freya said with her sharp tone.

Raiden smiled and locked eyes with Freya. He didn't have to talk anymore; Freya already knew Raiden could help with that.

"Okay, but never call me your slave," Freya narrowed her eyes. "Or I will kill you."

Raiden raised his hands in submission. *"Alright, you are free."*

He turned to the door, and his hand rested on the handle. *"What if I call you Free, then?"*

Freya sneered.

Raiden giggled. *"You are free to move, Free,"* he said and left the room.

Chapter 63: Twin Madness

"Fear is a disease, and it spreads the more you give in to it," Raiden said, his gaze lifted to the endless blue above them. Soul remained at his side, both of them watching the clouds in comfortable silence.

"No disrespect to your struggles." Raiden turned to Soul, his voice gentle. *"I just find it hard to know how to talk to you sometimes—you're seventeen, but you look so young."*

Soul's smile was understanding. "It's okay. I'm still a child, either way."

Raiden leaned down to her level. *"That smile right there?"* His hand found the top of her head in a gentle pat. *"I want to see it every time things get hard."*

Soul started to speak, but Raiden raised a hand to stop her. *"Don't fight your fears. Embrace them."* His gaze returned to the sky above. *"Let them shape you, and then push through."*

Soul nodded firmly, though her expression quickly darkened. Uneasiness crept into her golden eyes as her fingers found each other, twisting nervously.

"Do you want to know something?"

"Yes..." The word came out strained, fragile.

Raiden smirked. He typically avoided sharing personal details, but if it would help Soul and strengthen their bond as master and student, he could allow himself to be vulnerable.

"When I was six, I saw someone very dear to me die before my eyes." His smile grew, though it didn't reach his eyes. *"Do you know why?"*

Soul shook her head.

"Because I was weak. Too afraid, too lenient." He sighed deeply. *"That memory doesn't haunt me anymore—it drives me to never repeat that mistake."*

He drew in a deep breath, bracing himself for what came next. *"That's why I want you to fight with me—through our fears."*

Raiden turned to Soul, his expression darkening instantly. Her dark energy was intensifying, sending violent tremors through the ground as her eyes flickered wildly, as if something else had taken control.

"What's happening, Soul?" He reached toward her, trying to break through her trance, but she couldn't hear him.

Soul gave no response except for her overwhelming aura, which intensified with each passing second.

Raiden stood frozen, completely at a loss. He had never witnessed anything like this and didn't know how to help. He grabbed her shoulders, shaking her desperately, trying to pull her back to reality, but she was unreachable.

But then Soul's aura quadrupled in intensity, slamming into Raiden like a crushing weight. He dropped to his knees as the earth cracked and shuddered around them.

Blood began streaming from Raiden's nose, spattering the earth beneath him. His vision blurred and darkened as the world around him grew distant and hazy. The overwhelming pressure felt identical to the crushing force of Soul's Soul Condemn technique.

As the aura bore down on him with increasing weight, the ground fractured further beneath them. Raiden's body was being pressed deeper, as if the earth was trying to swallow him whole.

But Soul was still trapped in her trance, her eyes flickering wildly back and forth, her mouth hanging slightly open, oblivious to the destruction she was causing.

With the situation deteriorating so rapidly, Raiden found himself unable to stand. The crushing weight of Soul's aura was like bearing a mountain on his back, and the steady stream of blood loss was becoming dangerously significant.

He had to act fast, or he'd be dead within seconds. His thoughts scattered frantically, jumping from one desperate idea to another. The overwhelming pressure was clouding his mind, making him want to surrender and let himself fall.

But he refused to give up. If there was ever a moment to prove himself worthy of Soul's trust, it was now. He had just asked her to fight through her fears—as her master, he had to show her how it was done.

Suddenly, an idea struck him. He had no idea if it would work given his desperate circumstances, but he had to try something.

He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, forcing his head up slightly. "*I command you to stop, Soul!*" he rasped, his voice barely escaping his constricted throat.

Soul's body started to convulse, as though she were fighting against whatever had trapped her mind. Raiden managed a weak smile when he noticed, hope flaring that this nightmare was finally coming to an end.

But the aura's density only intensified. He tried to force himself through it, but the crushing weight suddenly doubled, driving him hard into the earth. The ground cracks that had appeared earlier spread wider, triggering a tremor that shook the entire area.

Suddenly, everything ceased. Soul collapsed to the ground, and moments later, the others rushed outside to find both of them lying there—Raiden covered in blood.

Raiden could hear their footsteps rushing toward them, though every bone in his body felt pulverized. Despite the pain, he tried to process what had just occurred while his regenerative abilities slowly began their work.

Speed hurried to check on her sister, but Freya and Levi hesitated beside Raiden, exchanging glances as they wordlessly argued over who should help him up. Both were reluctant to get covered in blood.

Raiden's gaze shifted to Levi, who was standing there with his arms crossed and a smug grin on his face. "*You bastards...*" he growled, forcing himself to push up from the blood-soaked earth.

His regeneration had restored some of his strength, and he needed to see how Soul was doing. When he finally managed to push himself upright and looked her way, she was cradled in Speed's arms.

Her dark aura had intensified tenfold, manifesting as a menacing cloud that loomed behind her. Raiden's eyes widened in bewilderment as he wiped the blood from his mouth.

"What's wrong?" Levi asked.

There was no point mentioning her overwhelming aura since none of them could see it. But as he looked at them with his mouth agape, a realization hit him. He turned toward Speed, who was gazing intently into Soul's eyes.

Raiden sensed immediately that something was wrong. Before he could utter a warning, Speed's eyes started flickering with the same terrifying rhythm as Soul's. Without warning, Levi went flying and slammed into the earth.

Raiden didn't have time to process anything. Given Speed's incredible speed, by the time he finished a single thought, they would all be dead.

"I command you to stop, Speed!" The words burst from his lips so quickly that Raiden barely realized he'd spoken them.

Nevertheless, Speed froze mid-attack, her fist hanging in the air just inches from Freya's head. She stayed perfectly still as Raiden managed to pull himself to his feet.

"What the hell is happening?" Freya demanded, outraged by Speed's aggression.

Raiden's gaze swept frantically as he tried to make sense of it all. Speed and Soul seemed to be losing their minds somehow. He remembered the day the Stars, June and Alora, had visited—their auras had been acting strangely, but he hadn't given it much thought.

"It's the effect of being corrupt," Levi said as he rose to his feet, his body already pale from just that one strike.

"This has been nagging at me for some time," he said, struggling forward. "Both of them are black crest bearers, so why weren't they going berserk like they should?"

Raiden's eyes widened as the pieces fell into place. *"They've been suppressing it."*

Levi limped up to them. "Exactly... and I think Soul's defenses slipped, letting the madness break through."

Raiden's mouth opened slightly as he turned to Soul, who was drenched in her overwhelming dark aura.

He began to smile. He'd believed Soul feared the Jasper family, and maybe that was true—considering all they'd put her through. She avoided them because she didn't want to dive too deep into her emotions. She was terrified of going berserk.

"I think they tried to hide it. That's why they were outside of the house most of the time," Levi said, clutching his torso.

Freya let out a sigh. "Stop acting pathetic." She directed her words sharply at Raiden. "This is easy to fix. Just allow them to unleash their madness from time to time, and they will be fine."

Raiden turned to Freya. She was right; that seemed like their best option to avoid situations like this. But something about Soul wasn't right with him. He had to take care of them—and probably himself—for now.

"Bring Speed inside... I will carry Soul."

Chapter 64: Twin Madness 2

A subtle silence settled over the house.

Raiden stood before the torture room—the same one where Speed had been kept when he first arrived. Ash rested on his shoulder as he stared at the door.

Soul's aura was overwhelming. The moment she entered the house, almost the entire downstairs was covered in her dark aura. Though everyone else could see perfectly fine, Raiden could barely see anything since he and Ash were the only ones who could see auras.

As it turned out, her aura could only be partially contained in a dark room, though there were still leaks seeping out. So he'd placed her in the torture room, but when she woke, all she could do was cry.

Raiden had brought her into this situation, and he was determined to fix it properly without letting her retreat back to her scared nature.

He took a deep breath as he stood before the door. The moment he opened it, some of her aura billowed into the house like smoke.

The thickness made him cough, but he couldn't afford to keep the door open. He stepped inside and locked it behind him.

Everything within the room was darker than he'd anticipated. Raiden's eyes darted around, searching for Soul. Suddenly her golden eyes appeared before him, close enough to make him jump—she'd caught him off guard.

Raiden sighed. He couldn't see anything but her golden eyes, and that made things harder since he needed to keep eye contact the entire time.

"I'm sorry I hurt you... I lost control." Raiden couldn't see her face, but the fractures in her voice revealed everything.

"There's no need to worry." He smirked. "This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't pushed you to face your fears without knowing what you were really going through."

Soul sank to the floor, and following her lead, Raiden lowered himself down as well.

"That isn't it." Soul's eyes darted across the floor. "I want to be able to help just like everyone else... I need to control my powers."

Raiden's expression darkened. *"What do you mean? You can't control your powers?"*

Soul shook her head like a baby. "I can feel them always leaking out of me... the souls."

"And when it becomes too much, any corrupt crest bearer near me goes insane."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he finally understood how Speed had gone berserk the day before. It wasn't his feelings—it was because he'd been too close to Soul. But his expression darkened instantly when something clicked. If any corrupt crest bearer went insane around her, why did Seth and the Jasper family still keep her?

"How were you staying with Seth, then? Did it not work on him?"

Soul's golden eyes darted up to his. "I was kept in a dark room... just like this one, but with enchanted stickers all over the walls."

Raiden raised his eyebrows. *"Really?"*

Soul nodded gently.

If that was the case, did it mean Soul's aura was similar to the Book of Ashes' aura? They both needed enchanted stickers to be contained.

What on earth did Seth do with Soul?—

he thought as he stared directly into her eyes.

But if enchanted stickers could contain her, then he needed to get some before her aura overtook the entire estate.

He sighed. *"I don't intend to keep you here long... I don't want to recreate your trauma."*

Soul shook her head, her eyes jerking from side to side in the darkness. "I don't mind... I need to stay away from my brother after all."

Raiden smirked. *"Well... I'll get you some enchanted stickers then."*

Soul nodded her head in approval, and Raiden rose to his feet and began leaving the room.

He glanced at his shoulder to see Ash fast asleep, and he shook his head in disbelief. Still, he didn't let her unusual hibernation cloud his mind.

All the enchanted stickers he had were finished, so if he needed some, he had to return to the palace. None of the others could go.

Freya, with her recovered memories, would only be a problem in the palace. Levi was still clearly not safe in the eyes of the elders, considering she was branded as a murderer in her Kingdom. Speed's scary mask was bound to cause commotion with his arrival. The only person who could go was he.

The moment he reached the living room, Speed hurried over to him. His golden eyes locked fiercely with Raiden's grey ones, blame evident in his gaze.

"Did you figure out a way to help her?"

Raiden said nothing. He bypassed Speed and sat on the sofa while the others, Freya and Levi, occupied the sofa to his right, chatting quietly.

Raiden let out a sigh and gently placed Ash on the sofa to rest.

"She said her ability was leaking through her, and when corrupt people like you come near her or her aura, you go insane."

Speed sneered. "What the fuck?! I already know that—tell me something better."

Raiden turned to him, eyes narrowed. The coldness and brutality in his stare spoke volumes. He didn't say a word, and Speed instantly knew his place.

"She's been at number six for almost a year now, and she's been suppressing her ability ever since she turned black four years ago." Speed walked closer and took his seat. "If we don't help her, she might explode—and I don't think that would be good for anyone."

Raiden blinked in confusion. Soul was number six? Now that he thought about it, both Speed and Soul wore turtlenecks, hiding their numbers from view.

Raiden raised an eyebrow. *"What number are you?"*

Speed stared at him for a moment, confused about how that would save his sister. After a while, he pulled his turtleneck down, revealing the number eight within his star-shaped black crest.

"I was number seven before turning black, but once I did, the ranking reset for this crest."

Raiden gave him a firm nod, but he knew he had to set his curiosity aside and focus on what was necessary. He shifted into action mode.

"She said we would need enchanted stickers."

"And do you have any?"

Raiden shrugged. *"I'll have to go to the palace."*

Speed's expression turned grim with disappointment.

But just then, Freya cleared her throat. "I can create enchanted stickers... they're easy."

Speed's expression shifted into a smile. "Really?"

Freya met him with a smile of her own. "Yes, but I don't work for free."

Raiden shook his head in disbelief, wondering if he preferred the real Freya or the one with amnesia.

Chapter 65: Twin Madness 3

Freya stood in the middle of the training room, dozens of papers spread across the floor around her, all covered in ancient words written in black ink. One by one, she picked them up and murmured incantations toward them before setting them back down.

Raiden stood aside with Levi and Speed as she performed the ritual. But while it continued, Raiden couldn't help but think.

If there were stickers that could seal away such overwhelming presences like Soul's and the book of Ashes, then wouldn't there be one that would help her release her aura without fear?

Raiden pondered it for a brief moment, then decided it would be best to ask. *"Since there are restraining seals, wouldn't there be seals that'd help her?"*

Freya turned to him for a moment, her expression unreadable as she sifted through her memories, then gave him a positive nod before returning to her task.

Raiden's eyes narrowed, his expression growing weary. *"Seriously?... and you didn't suggest it?"*

"You never asked."

Raiden let out a sigh.

"Well, I'm not sure," she said, turning to Raiden once more. "I know of only five seals—summoning, contracting, restraining, protecting, and stabilizing."

She turned back to her work. "Stabilizing seals might help, but we use those to grow plants in my kingdom. Only a few survive, though."

Since the kingdom of Noor doesn't get any rain or water, the stabilizing seals might help their plants make the most of whatever little moisture they encounter over time. If that were the case, then it would certainly help Soul.

"Deal... make some for her," Speed said, the words blurring out.

Freya turned to him with a wicked grin. "Then we extend our deal. You will serve me for a month."

"Okay!" There was no hint of hesitation in his voice.

Raiden stood motionless, shaking his head in disappointment. As he thought about it, he was glad to have Freya back as his servant, but with his memories still required, he couldn't help thinking she might kill him one day.

Still, he had to tolerate her, even though her desire for control might surpass his own.

Before long, Freya had finished creating dozens of restraining and stabilizing seals. She stood proudly as she assured Speed she would kill him if he ever broke his word.

But their little bargain held little interest for Raiden. He gathered the seals and headed to Soul's new room to finish what they had started.

Without sparing so much as a glance, Raiden left the training room for Soul's. To enter the dense atmosphere wasn't easy for him; perhaps he could have asked the others to do it. But with someone as fragile as Soul was, these small gestures were what mattered to her most, and Raiden wasn't going to let that opportunity pass.

The moment he entered the room, Soul sat cross-legged on the floor. Once again, the only thing Raiden could see was her golden eyes piercing through her thick, dark aura.

"We've gotten the stickers, and maybe more."

"What do you mean?" Soul asked, wariness in her voice.

But Raiden just handed her the restraining seals. *"The room is too dark for me; care to lend a hand?"*

Soul gave him a subtle nod, rose to her feet, and began placing the stickers on the walls.

Just as Raiden stood there, he couldn't help but wonder what kind of trouble his dragon soul might cause him. If being around people with overwhelming auras could literally blind him, there would be much worse problems in the near future.

Before he could delve deeper into his thoughts, Soul returned to him. "Done." She said it simply, her golden eyes locking with Raiden's gray ones.

He gave her a firm nod and extended the stabilizing seals to her. *"If this does what it's supposed to do, it would help stabilize your control over your ability."*

Raiden instantly saw the uneasiness in her eyes. It was clear she had come to believe nothing external could help her situation, which was partly true—the seals wouldn't help her control her ability, only help her take it at a slower pace. But this was still a step she needed to take. If the seal worked, it would do more good than doing nothing at all.

"I can't guarantee success since Freya herself wasn't sure if this would work." He stepped closer to her. *"But this is a step I think we should all take. It might help."*

Soul stood frozen for a moment, then gave her approval to Raiden. He smiled and adjusted the stickers on her.

There were eleven of them, and without hesitation, Raiden placed three on her dark hair. Using his sense of touch to guide him, he placed one on each hand, one on each leg and thigh, one on her back, and the final one on her stomach.

In the next moment, all he could see was Soul's eyes sparkling with happiness. "It's working... I can feel it." Her voice was etched with excitement.

But before Raiden could reply, her eyes began flickering rapidly, just as they had the previous day. She began pulling her hair and screaming out loud.

A sudden wave of guilt washed over Raiden as he wondered if he had made a mistake by using the stickers on her.

He quickly touched her shoulder. *"What's happening, Soul? Should I remove the stickers?"* he asked urgently, concern etching his voice.

"No..." Soul muttered through her screams, teeth gritted.

Her response puzzled Raiden. She was obviously going through hell, so why would she want to keep the stickers? But something else struck him as even more perplexing: unlike before, Soul's aura wasn't threatening. Was this time different?

Just as his hand rested on her shoulder, Raiden's hands began moving upward slowly, making his eyes narrow in confusion. The next thing he heard was the sound of her clothes tearing. Right before his eyes, he saw his hands slowly rise to almost the same height as himself.

In that instant, Soul's screaming stopped and she collapsed to the floor, unconscious. Raiden remained motionless, mouth slightly parted, hands suspended in midair as he tried to make sense of what had just happened.

After standing for quite a while, he needed to see what had actually happened to Soul. In his mind, it was as if she had grown in size. Taking steady steps backward toward the entrance, he reached the wall and brushed his hands against it, looking for the lantern switch. When he found it and turned it on, his heart skipped a beat—he turned it back off in an instant.

A sense of embarrassment coursed through him as he slowly opened the door and left the room. Just outside, he grabbed his knees and began panting.

Soul had truly grown taller, but that wasn't the source of his sudden reaction. Her abrupt growth had torn her clothes off, leaving her naked on the floor. Only her black turtleneck, now stretched tight and too small, covered her from neck to just below her chest.

He rose to his feet and braced himself. "That was nothing," he said, giving himself a firm nod to justify his situation. "I've seen plenty of naked dead women, and this wasn't even my fault. Just a coincidence." He muttered the words as he made his way to the living room.

Well, he had seen dead women, but he hadn't reacted because they were dead. Even with those, he refused to look at their private parts. It wasn't about sexual attraction—he just didn't think it was appropriate. Perhaps it was because he wasn't good with women and intimacy.

The moment he reached the living room, Speed stood up. "What happened? How is she?"

Raiden narrowed his eyes. *"Wait... you didn't hear the screams?"*

Speed's expression darkened as he shook his head.

"We couldn't hear anything because the seals keep everything within the room—even sounds."

Raiden's eyes widened in realization as he remembered the storeroom and the book of ashes. Despite all the sounds the dark energy had made, not everyone could hear them—not even him, until he'd gotten Ash's soul.

"Well, the stickers made her mature. She looks her age now."

Speed's eyes filled with excitement as he stared at Raiden.

"How is that possible?" Levi called from upstairs.

"I think she was stuck at twelve because she was suppressing her ability, not because of Seth's experiments."

"So you're saying she was born able to stop herself from growing unknowingly?" Freya asked, her expression startled.

"Yes, she's Soul after all."

Chapter 66: Dream 2

Raiden stood motionless in the middle of a misty field. The dark, smoky miasma rose to his waist as spectral corpses emerged from the haze, their ghostly hands reaching to touch his body and drag him down. But he paid no mind.

His head tilted upward as he gazed westward. A full moon hung in the sky, its light mostly blocked by a towering mountain. Upon the mountain's peak stood a smoky figure, becoming more spectral as the moonlight intensified, its gaze fixed on Raiden below.

He stood motionless for a while, head still tilted upward. But before long, he snapped from his daze and noticed the corpse beside him, its spectral hands clawing at his body, trying to drag him down. Fear crept in, and he leaped from his position as his heart began to pound.

He stood there with confusion washing over him, goosebumps surging through his body. He whipped around to face the mountain again—the figure was gone.

His mind began spiraling as he ruffled his dark hair repeatedly. He felt like he had been there before, but couldn't remember when—and that gap in his memory started to drive him nuts. Though he had dreamt about this place before, it remained just a distant, elusive memory.

He couldn't dwell on his thoughts for long before the corpses began to reappear beneath him. Without sparing a single thought, he broke into a run. Even though he would have preferred to kill them, his body moved on its own.

He sprinted toward the distance, but with each step, the smoky atmosphere grew thicker around him. It was as if the earth itself was made of darkness. Before he knew it, he was swallowed by the darkness, his movements growing sluggish as he lost all sense of direction.

He paused, his heart racing as he bent over his knees to pant. Suddenly, the corpses burst from the ground, seizing him as his eyes widened in shock and dragging him down into the darkness below.

He jolted upright, breathing heavily, his entire body soaked in sweat as if he had run a marathon. He clutched his head in agony while his eyes darted around in confusion. It had been a dream; a nightmare, perhaps.

He turned to his left to see Ash sleeping beside him, her face serene with a gentle smile as tendrils of smoke curled from her nostrils and darkened the sheets.

The sight sent a sharp pain shooting through Raiden's head. "*What is this unusual feeling?*" he thought, suddenly overwhelmed by the need to take a shower.

He headed for the shower, but paused again, eyes scanning the ceiling. No memory. Just that eerie pressure in his chest like he was being watched.

Despite having this encounter twice, he seemed to have forgotten everything by the time he woke up, just like the previous time. This made him uneasy because the feeling was like *déjà vu* to him, yet aside from the residual sensation, he couldn't grasp anything else.

Still, after pondering for a while, he shrugged it off. He stepped out of the shower and prepared to head downstairs.

The moment he stepped out of his room, ready to go, he bumped into Levi. "I was coming for you."

Raiden gave him a lazy look as he ruffled his hair.

"Aeris is on the call..." Levi said, indicating his callsign ring.

Raiden raised an eyebrow and walked past him, heading toward the living room. "*What's she saying?*"

"You heard him. You can talk now, Aeris," Levi said, following Raiden.

Aeris cleared her throat, and her voice echoed through the distance so clearly that even Raiden, who was some distance away, could hear her.

"When I got to the hideout, everything seemed calm and ordinary. There were only a few drunkards—they didn't look like assassins to me."

"Did you check their crests?" Levi asked, watching him take a seat on the couch, his mind slightly occupied by those bizarre dreams he couldn't recall.

"Yes, they were all yellow crest bearers."

Raiden turned toward Levi. *"That was your hideout, wasn't it?"*

"Yes, it was," Levi responded.

Aeris cleared her throat, but Raiden barely reacted.

"Can I speak, please?" Aeris said, irritation clear in her voice.

Raiden's fingers tapped against the sofa rhythmically—something he hadn't seen himself do in a long time

"I'm listening," he said, but Levi caught the twitch in his brow.

"I knew I couldn't just return with that information—you wouldn't be satisfied."

Raiden smirked. He hadn't expected such a traitor like her to be this thoughtful.

"I did my research and found out that most of the strongest people had been transported to Nyx City, leaving the weaklings behind. So I'm in Nyx City now."

Raiden's expression darkened. However, did Aeris always manage to make such reckless moves? Thinking about it, he realized that Aeris had never been qualified to be his tutor.

She lacked experience in her own field, wasn't physically strong, and didn't even have any real education, unlike him and Leo.

Yet somehow, she had worked her way into the palace ranks and become his tutor. But this wasn't the time to dwell on such matters. Why were the assassins leaving Persia City?

"I just returned from their hideout, and I'm back at my inn now." She let out a sigh. "The assassins are preparing for an all-out war with the kingdom of Aurelia."

Raiden blinked. Something in those words hit him like he'd heard them before. Maybe not the words — but the feeling. That sinking sense of being dragged under.

Like a nightmare he'd already forgotten.

"All-out war?" Levi beat Raiden to the question.

"Yes. King Hannes has secretly dispatched knights along with a few Stars to the kingdom, so I think you're next in line once they claim the Book of Silence."

Raiden smiled as he wondered how exactly Aeris had come to know about King Hannes' movements if they were arranged in secret. But he needed to focus on the predicament at hand rather than dwell on a traitor's incredible feat.

"Okay... I want you to keep spying on them and let us know when they send someone after us." He let out a sigh.

"Also, I want you to get me information about their strongest assassins so I know how to prepare for them."

"Okay," Aeris said and hung up.

Raiden turned to Levi, who was settling into his seat. *"Is the bookkeeper of Aurelia so strong that the assassins need an all-out war?"*

Levi settled back onto the sofa as he began playing with the ring on his finger. "Yes, I guess."

He looked up at Raiden. "Freya has seen her firsthand, so she might be able to give you a better answer. But when I was with the assassins, our leader was a number six, and he wasn't even a threat to the Bookkeeper."

He smirked. "They never even considered calling him for help."

Raiden leaned back into his seat, tilting his head upward. Who wanted the books? And why? These were questions he had answers to, but he couldn't help wondering how valuable the books must be for someone to launch an all-out war against an entire kingdom.

"I heard the gold crest bearers have an organization, so why don't they step up in times like this and help get rid of the threat?"

Levi giggled. "Those people believe they are literal gods. As a matter of fact, there are people who could literally snap and end all this chaos, but they fight for no nation."

He shrugged. "I think some of them don't believe in the Devourer, and some probably think they could kill him if they wanted to."

Raiden's eyes continued to dart toward the ceiling. *"Too arrogant to care, huh?"*

He let out a sigh. "We must prepare ourselves, then. Perhaps this whole thing is just a cover-up to make us drop our guard so they can attack us."

The dream was gone, but something lingered. Something was wrong.

Chapter 67: The Final Battle

The morning was anything but ordinary. Raiden wiped away the sweat streaming down his body from training while Levi, Freya, and Speed worked through their own routines outside.

Two days had passed since they heard from Aeris, and still, there was no official word from King Hannes about the looming war. Yet they couldn't simply wait for such a message before training.

Though they all lagged behind Freya in mana control, Raiden was closest to matching her.

Drawing on his universal understanding of mana and everything Freya had taught him before she recovered her memories, he had learned to scatter his mana throughout his body like air, infusing it into his flesh, blood, and bones.

Though the technique remained unstable, he was beginning to master it.

The moment he finished wiping away the sweat, he began stretching his body as he made his way from the training room to Soul's room. He had to check on her.

He began to reconsider his decision to see her. With the enchanted stickers covering the walls, entering her room was nearly impossible—even her meals were left outside until she opened the door herself to retrieve them.

Raiden kept hesitating and reconsidering, but before he knew it, he found himself standing outside her door. With a deep sigh, he decided to check on her anyway.

The moment he reached her door, he placed his hand firmly on the handle and gripped the door frame with his other hand. He braced himself to open it, knowing that if he wasn't careful, the concentrated aura trapped within the room could send him flying.

The moment he opened the door, the aura burst out like pressurized wind, sending a shockwave through the corridor. It lashed against his bare chest while the force invaded his mouth, nose, and eyes, making them water as it slowly pulled him backward.

He tried to push forward, but it was like fighting the inevitable. Every step he managed only brought him back to where he started as the relentless wind pulled him backward.

Before he could be blown away entirely, he glimpsed Soul's golden eyes piercing through the darkness as she approached.

When she saw him, she paused, watching his struggle for a brief moment before stepping out of the room and sealing the door behind her.

Raiden dropped to his knees, struggling to catch his breath. When he raised his head toward Soul, he saw that she wore her partially torn black turtleneck that barely reached beneath her chest and black trousers.

Her hair had grown along with her height, cascading down to cover most of her upper body, leaving only her golden eyes visible through the dark curtain.

She crouched down next to Raiden and began examining him, clearly unsure of what to do. "Are you okay?" she asked, guilt heavy in her voice.

"Why are you outside?" Raiden muttered, coughing as he finally got a proper look at her. His eyes widened in surprise while Soul offered him a warm smile.

"You... your aura is normal now."

Soul nodded excitedly. "Yes, I've been working on it and I can control it now."

She offered her hand to help Raiden up. He hesitated, about to refuse, but not wanting to be rude, he reached out and took her hand.

"That's great, Soul."

"Sorry, I had to release a lot of energy from my body this time. That's why you had such a hard time," she said, concern evident in her voice.

Raiden shrugged. *"Don't worry about it."*

At that moment he couldn't help but smirk as he rolled his shoulders. With Soul finally comfortable being outside, if the war reached their area, he wouldn't have much to worry about.

"Your brother is outside. He's been dying to see you," he said with a smile. Soul's face lit up with a soft smile before she began running outside.

Raiden stood there for a moment and sighed. Being caring and understanding around Soul hadn't been easy, but he knew it would pay off in the long run.

Once he built enough trust with his comrades, they wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice their lives for him. He was prepared to die again if necessary—he had to return to his world, and if this was the cost of achieving that goal, so be it.

He then took a deep breath and headed outside to join them, putting on a show of happiness for Soul's reunion with her brother, Speed.

The moment he stepped outside, he squinted against the sun's glare, but his attention quickly shifted left to where the others had gathered.

Freya was teaching Levi mana control, shouting instructions while his face twitched with barely contained irritation behind a forced smile.

Nearby, Soul and Speed were reuniting, Speed's eyes sparkling as he chattered endlessly about things his sister obviously had no interest in hearing.

But at that very moment, an enormous teleportation circle materialized on the ground some distance away. Raiden's heart skipped a beat, his eyes widening as the circle pulsed with blue light.

The others reacted similarly, all dropping into defensive positions as they watched the glowing circle.

Before any of them could act on their impulses, over a hundred figures materialized in an instant. Raiden's pounding heart began to slow as he narrowed his eyes and activated his gaze beyond to get a better look.

A wave of relief washed over him, and he exhaled slowly. It was King Hannes, his crown gleaming atop his grey hair as he radiated his royal yellow aura. He was flanked by his daughter Alora and a Star June, both emanating the same golden glow.

Four black-robed elders stood nearby, their yellow auras pulsing in unison, while behind them all stood over a hundred knights in pristine white armor.

Obviously they had come to protect Raiden in case he too became a target, but their unexpected arrival left him uneasy.

He started walking toward them, and the others immediately moved to flank him while King Hannes and his entourage stayed where they were.

"Don't you have any manners?" Alora called out, her smile clearly forced as Raiden and his comrades approached. "How can you appear shirtless before the king?"

Raiden barely registered what she said. His fury was directed at the king, not the peasants surrounding him.

"Don't you think it would have been wise to inform me of your visit?" he asked, his anger reverberating through the air.

Before King Hannes could respond, one of the elders quickly interjected. "How dare you speak to the king that way?"

"Is that the book's key around your neck?" another elder asked, but Raiden ignored them all, his gray eyes boring straight into King Hannes'.

"It doesn't matter who you are... this is my territory, and here, I'm the one in charge."

Hannes finally smiled softly. "I understand your concern, Raiden. This reaction was to be expected from you as the bookkeeper."

He paused and glanced at Alora. "However, I left the communication in Alora's hands, so I assumed you had already been informed."

Raiden's eyes shifted to Alora as she put on a nonchalant smile. "I wanted to give him a surprise visit... we could have caught him red-handed if he were a traitor."

Raiden stared fiercely into her eyes. From their first encounter, he'd known she would be trouble, but he hadn't expected her to treat such important matters so carelessly.

But he knew it wasn't worth dwelling on someone like her; she was nothing but trouble. He sighed, and his expression softened.

"Do you want to come in?"

"No, son," King Hannes said, and Raiden's eyebrow shot up in surprise.

Ever since his father's death, when Hannes had stepped into a paternal role, he'd used that term, but hearing it now made Raiden unexpectedly uncomfortable.

"Captain Kai recently passed away, and we suspect it was the assassins' doing."

Raiden felt a surge of pride for Leo's success in killing Captain Kai, allowing himself a brief internal smile, but his expression quickly darkened. If Leo had completed his mission, why hadn't he returned?

"This remains a secret among a select few within this kingdom because we didn't want to cause panic, but the assassins are waging war on the Kingdom of Aurelia."

He paused for a moment. "I suspect it's all a ruse so they can turn their attention to us. That's why they're eliminating our strongest soldiers like Captain Kai."

Raiden had the same realization, but it was such an obvious strategy that even a child could figure it out. Something felt off about the entire war, but since his only responsibility was protecting his book, he didn't particularly care.

"Well, we can't be certain, but we must remain cautious." He gestured toward the knights behind him. "These knights will establish a camp here and stay until the war ends."

Raiden gave him a firm nod.

"As will Alora and June."

They both started walking toward them, cocky smiles plastered on their faces. But that only made Raiden smile inwardly—they had no clue he was already living with some of the most dangerous people alive.

"The knights are yours to command," Hannes said with a smile.

Raiden stayed silent for a moment, looking uncertain. He had no experience commanding an army and knew this would be challenging.

In an instant, the four elders stepped to the left, arranged themselves in a circle, and began chanting incantations. Soon, a glowing magic circle materialized on the ground.

"I will be leaving now..." He approached Raiden and drew him into a brief embrace, patting his shoulder. "You are growing stronger, son. Keep it up."

A sudden wave of familiarity washed over Raiden, making his body twitch involuntarily as he watched King Hannes step into the teleportation circle and vanish.

Raiden stood frozen for quite a while, his mind spinning as he touched his shoulder. That embrace felt familiar. When he searched through his memories, he had hugged King Hannes countless times, but this... this was different.

He stood motionless for a moment before sighing. He was probably overthinking things since he didn't trust anyone from the palace, so he pushed the feeling aside. But even so, a fragment of unease lingered.

He faced the knights standing before him, waiting for his orders, and a subtle smile played on his lips. He had no desire to command them directly, so he would simply demonstrate his authority and delegate them to someone else.

He took a deep breath. *"I know some of you are honored to be here serving the bookkeeper, while others see me as nothing more than a child."*

He stepped closer, hands in his pockets. *"Whatever you think, you're right... I mean, you're entitled to your opinions."*

His face hardened into something arctic, eyes sharpening to daggers that made the knights shuffle nervously, their hushed voices betraying their discomfort. *"Here, I hold authority."*

His commanding tone cut through the air, extinguishing the soft chuckles and murmurs in an instant. *"And the last thing any of you want to do is cross me."*

The menace in his voice deepened, turning deadly. *"Disrespect me, and it will be the last mistake you ever make."*

A sudden shift crossed his features as he smiled, the expression more chilling than reassuring. *"Trust me, I will get away with it."*

The moment the words left his lips, it seemed the knights were determined to test his limits. One of them let out a stifled giggle from within the group, but his luck had run out—Raiden pinpointed exactly where the sound originated.

Raiden raised an eyebrow as a devilish smile curved his lips. He moved with calculated calm through the crowd, and the moment he reached his target, his hand shot out to seize the knight by his armor's collar.

When he moved to drag the man forward, the knight proved foolishly stubborn—struggling against Raiden's grip, thrashing in a desperate attempt to break free. The resistance only served to fuel Raiden's irritation further.

Without bothering to look at him, Raiden drove his fist into the knight's chest with devastating force. The impact tore through armor and flesh alike, the sound of shattering metal ringing out across the distance.

Terror gripped the remaining knights as they watched their comrade cough up blood and collapse to the ground.

"In this place, we live in constant warfare. You cannot predict when an attack will come, or from whom." Without bothering to confirm whether the knight still breathed, he walked back to address the others.

"To make it out of this place alive, we must rely on each other. I need you, and you need me... but disrespect? That will only ensure your death."

He turned back and motioned for Freya to come forward.

"I won't tolerate any more incidents like this." As Freya reached his side, he gestured toward her. *"This is Freya—you will call her Commander Freya."*

"She will be the one giving you orders, but don't expect any mercy from her either."

The knights remained frozen in place as blood seeped from the crumpled figure's chest and lips, forming a growing puddle on the ground.

"I'll handle them from here," Freya said quietly. "Am I allowed to kill them as well?"

With a smile and an indifferent shrug, Raiden started walking back to the others. As he closed the distance, Alora fixed him with a smile that was clearly forced.

"So you kill your own people without a second thought." Raiden brushed past her without so much as a glance. "Tell me, your apprentice Leo... he was the one who killed Captain Kai, correct?"

Raiden froze mid-step, still avoiding her gaze, as Alora walked past him with deliberate calm.

"He's a prisoner of the Dawnbringers, and frankly, I doubt he's still breathing."

Raiden felt a jolt of surprise, instantly recognizing the urgency of the situation. He turned toward Levi, who had been listening intently, and delivered a firm nod. Levi's arrogant grin told him everything he needed to know.

For a moment, Raiden stood motionless, torn between conflicting thoughts. Leo's predicament barely registered—though he was the sole comrade Raiden could depend on.

What truly unsettled him were these recent disturbances: vivid dreams that vanished from memory, and this strange, nagging familiarity surrounding King Hannes.

What was this feeling?

Chapter 68: The Final Battle 2

The morning was subtle. Raiden lay relaxed on the living room sofa, tossing a Persian coin as Ash roamed over his chest, seeking a better spot to sleep.

He focused entirely on the coin, studying the force of his finger as it pushed the metal into the air, wondering if he could increase its speed by infusing his finger with mana.

He repeated this motion again and again, oblivious to Ash's voice echoing repeatedly in his mind until she grew tired and drifted off to sleep.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally succeeded. The coin shot into the air with boosted speed and pierced straight into the ceiling. But pain bloomed in his fingers, slowly spreading through his entire hands. It was unusual, though he didn't dwell on it.

The achievement made him smile, and that's when he suddenly recalled Ash calling his name. He turned to her instinctively, but she had already fallen fast asleep.

Raiden leaned back into the sofa. Rather than stress himself with endless thoughts about everything happening around him, he decided to dedicate every free moment to training.

His recent achievement left him wondering. All he'd done was channel more mana into his thumb than his other fingers.

He had already learned to distribute mana evenly across his body, as Freya had taught him, but this time he redirected small amounts from his other fingers to concentrate in his thumb—amplifying the attack.

Could he apply the same technique across his entire body to boost his strike speed and movement? he wondered. The sharp pains shooting through his fingers were concerning, but it might be worth the risk.

But just as his thoughts began to drift, June's voice cut through his concentration.

"What are you thinking about, bookkeeper?" she asked, settling into the adjacent sofa, her dark hair spilling across the fabric.

Raiden turned slightly in her direction but offered no response, letting his head fall back against the cushions.

"I don't mind if you respond or not..." She stood up. "You didn't take our fight seriously, so I want a rematch."

"I nearly killed you once, so I get it if you're scared, but you've gotten too cocky, and I want to bring you down a peg," June continued. Raiden still didn't dignify her with a response.

"Well, think about it," she said, then left the room.

The moment she left, Raiden exhaled in relief. Levi had departed the night before for Persia City on his orders—to rescue Leo and bring him home.

Freya was reveling in her new position as knight commander, having spent the day tormenting her troops since Raiden's appointment.

Soul and Speed did nothing but train together in the fields. Now he was stuck in the house with Alora and June, two troublesome girls who he suspected wanted him dead.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Alora entered the living room before he could even finish worrying about the pair. Her white hair swayed behind her as her star-contracted eyes fixed on Raiden.

"So is this all you do as a bookkeeper?" she asked, leaning toward Raiden to lock eyes with him. For reasons he couldn't explain, Raiden found it amusing and smiled.

"I never knew you still had something genuine in you..." she giggled and settled beside Raiden, turning to face him directly. "Especially not a genuine smile."

What Raiden wanted was solitude, but Alora's deliberate positioning made it clear she wouldn't be following June's footsteps out the door.

He'd have to engage with her, though maybe he could extract some valuable information about the palace in the process.

Raiden carefully moved Ash from his chest to the sofa cushions, then turned to face Alora with a manufactured smile.

"I can do more than smile..." he said with obvious sarcasm.

"How charming," she responded with an equally false smile. "I want you to be gentle with me, if you don't mind."

Raiden's eyebrow shot up in surprise.

"Just like how gently you cared for your white dragon?" he said, his tone sharp.

Raiden shifted in his seat and faced her directly. If he was going to play this game, he'd better do it right.

"Why so?"

Alora giggled. "Don't tell me you don't remember."

Raiden's eyes narrowed in confusion. There was nothing to remember—what game was she playing?

"You promised to marry me..." she said, her eyes taking on a lustful gleam. 'How could you forget?

It was a lie. They had never spoken during their childhood, not once—at least nothing Raiden could remember. Yet something about it felt familiar. Could it have actually happened, and he'd simply forgotten?

"My father and yours were walking by the throne room while we followed alongside them, until you suddenly took my hand and ran up those stairs next to the throne room, into the library."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he studied her face. Something that had been completely absent from his memory moments ago now felt startlingly vivid. He could remember it all with perfect detail.

"I was scared," she said, her voice trembling.

"But you took both my hands, looked straight into my eyes, and said, 'I know this is our first time speaking, but I want to marry you someday.'"

A wide smile spread across her face as she spoke, and she gestured to it. "This smile—this was exactly how you smiled that day."

Raiden found himself imagining that very smile on his face as she described the scene. But he quickly dismissed the thought—as Jack, he wasn't bound by Raiden's childhood promises.

"We were such innocent children," he said with a faint smile.

But Alora smiled back at him. "No, this happened two years ago."

The scene came to Raiden with perfect clarity, as if the childhood memory had been false and this was the true one. His expression darkened.

Something was very wrong. His father had died two years ago, making this memory impossible. Was she going to convince him next that his father wasn't actually dead?

That's when it dawned on him. Something else was happening here—he found himself believing everything Alora said, and the memories felt completely authentic. If he were truly Raiden, he would have been completely fooled, but being Jack allowed him to think through it logically.

"This won't work, Alora," he said, leveling a lazy stare at her. "Is this your power or something?"

She smiled proudly, but before she could answer, a memory surfaced in Raiden's mind. Since childhood, she'd been known as the Dreamwalker, and the servants had always kept their distance from her. That was one reason they had never been friends.

"You're the Dreamwalker... you can implant false memories into people's heads and enter their dreams."

Alora's face took on a sarcastic expression. "When you say it like that, I sound like a manipulative bastard."

She stood up, smiling as she started to leave. "I am the Dreamwalker—I make dreams come to life."

Raiden watched her walk away with obvious pride. What had he gotten himself into? He could recall his father telling him how powerful the princess was—that she might one day surpass even the deceased queen.

And her ability was mind manipulation?

Raiden sank back into the sofa. Alora required careful handling, but her mention of dreams stirred thoughts of his own bizarre dreams—the ones that always slipped away upon waking. Was she perhaps behind that strange familiarity he'd felt when embracing King Hannes?

Each thought led to a dead end. To clear his mind, he removed another coin from his pocket and began repeating his previous mana procedure. Each push on the coin repeated the same pain he had felt earlier, but he didn't mind.

There was a war at hand. He couldn't dwell on superstitions.

Chapter 69: The Final Battle 3

Dawn was breaking late, and Raiden lay on his bed with gritted teeth, hands pressed between his legs in agony, while Ash lay beside him, her breath creating a smoky sensation on the sheets.

Raiden felt like his hands were being torn apart. He had experienced a similar sensation during the day, but now it was more intense and breathtaking, just like when Ash first bit his hands to form their contract.

But at that moment, he cared less about where it came from; he only wanted the pain to go away as he fought the urge to scream out loud.

Despite his efforts to calm the pain, it only grew worse. His temperature spiked drastically, his body instantly drenched in sweat as he trembled. Still he held it in, refusing to wake anyone. But the pain didn't seem to care much about that.

In an instant, the pain doubled, causing his eyes to bulge as he clenched his teeth tightly, his entire face turning crimson.

Then, as abruptly as it had intensified, the pain stopped, sending relief flooding through Raiden's body as he lay there breathing deeply through his mouth, hands still pressed between his legs.

[You have to get stronger, Papa.] Ash's voice echoed in Raiden's head as she raised her head slightly toward him. [We must hurry, Papa,] she added, then let her head drop back down as she returned to sleep.

Raiden was too tired to even turn toward her, much less respond. But for a long time, Ash had been asking Raiden to get stronger, and more perplexing still, the pain he felt was similar to what he had felt when she bit him. Too light and yet too painful.

Was there something he wasn't understanding?

He had initially thought that climbing the ranks could give Ash the ability to speak freely and finally tell him why she wanted him to get stronger, but despite getting to number seven, there was still nothing. Maybe he still wasn't there yet. It did seem that way.

He finally adjusted himself on the bed and glanced at his hands. But his expression grew darker, contrasting sharply with what he normally was.

There were faint dark lines spreading from his fingernails, the nails themselves seeming darker. The lines stretched to his waist, where they merged into a single line. Raiden traced it slowly and carefully, watching as it wrapped around his hand like a snake and followed that same pattern toward his neck.

He immediately rose to his feet, headed to the bathroom, and looked at himself in the mirror. Leaning in closely for a better look, he saw the line wrapped around his neck in the same pattern as his hands.

He stood there with his mouth slightly parted in confusion. What was going on?

If the pain was truly from the contract Ash formed with him, then the lines had something to do with her. Though he didn't have much to base it on, he couldn't shake the feeling that it was from her. The timing of her words confirmed everything to him. Still he wondered, what exactly was Ash?

The thoughts alone filled him with overwhelming heat, and he immediately headed outside for more air. Perhaps that would help him think everything through.

He wanted to go back to his world—it was a must—and he also admired Ash, but that didn't mean he was going to sign up for something he didn't truly understand.

The least Ash could do was try to explain whatever it was that made her always want him to get stronger and more powerful, and also what these unexplainable things were.

The moment he stepped outside, he could see the knights camping while a few of them held lanterns, roaming around as they stayed alert, but Raiden simply threw himself onto the grassy field.

His recent days were filled with nothing but confusion—unusual dreams that he totally forgot yet left him with a familiar sensation, the familiarity in his hug with Hannes, and now this pain and what seemed like an unwanted tattoo.

He brought his hand closer to his face. *"Hey, what's this?"* He tried to ask the system, but it offered him nothing but silence.

He began to believe the system itself was somehow related to Ash; he'd had a similar epiphany before, considering he was the only one with a voice and a blue screen.

And since he was also the only one who could speak telepathically with his familiar, it was only natural, but now he had more evidence to believe Ash was involved somehow.

The motion triggered random thoughts that jumped through his mind as he tried to make sense of everything, until at one point he was almost certain that the Dreamwalker, Alora, was playing tricks on him.

However, his mind couldn't spiral forever, and before he knew it, he was fast asleep, his questions still unanswered.

Before long, Raiden woke to sounds behind him and the guardians roaming around. The moment he rose from the floor, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stretched his body to the fullest. But his attention instantly shifted as he glanced at his hands. Was everything a bad dream? He hoped it wasn't there, but luck wasn't on his side.

Raiden's mind filled with more confusion as he realized the black ink was becoming more visible. He stared at it for a moment. What if Ash really understood why he wanted to go back to him? What if everything that was happening was progress toward sending him back to his world?

This was shallow thinking, but he needed something to hang on to until he finally understood what was going on. He didn't want to waste all his time and energy on such thoughts. There were bigger concerns than this confusion.

After standing there for quite a while, he shrugged, stretched his body, and began heading back inside. But at the entrance, just before he could step into the corridor to the living room, goosebumps surged through him, forcing him to pause.

His danger detection was active, and he could feel a swarm of auras heading toward them. There were too many, but their presence was just a tickle; they were still distant before they could reach.

Raiden smiled and brushed his hands through his hair. They weren't wrong after all; everything had been just an act so the assassins could attack Raiden.

It was a relief, but he was also kind of scared. A part of him still hung onto the confusion in his life, while the other part simply couldn't wait for what kind of powerful people he had to fight, as euphoria surged through him and turned his smile more devilish.

Chapter 70: The Final Battle 4

The sun was slowly rising from the east, casting soft rays that glowed on Raiden and his comrades, alongside Alora and June, who held her violin in her hand.

Before them were the knights led by Freya, all awaiting the assassins as over a hundred of them sprinted through the forest, heading their way while yelling out to boost their morale.

"So the war waged against the Kingdom of Aurelia was a lie, after all," Alora said, standing confidently beside Raiden.

Raiden said nothing in return. He simply gazed at the forest, hoping to find stronger opponents among them. Something about the attack didn't sit right with him. The strategy was too simple for people who supposedly wanted such powerful books.

His eyes darted through them but found no worthy opponent. Unless the strongest were behind the army, the only strong people he could see were number 7s, with the rest being eights and, worse, nines.

Before long, the assassins reached the field, and the moment they stepped into the clearing, Freya signaled the knights to charge. They met midway and began fighting.

Raiden's expression was dim as he reached for the necklace around his neck, ensuring he still had the key.

After a brief moment, he turned to Speed behind him. *"I want you to join the fight, Speed, but don't fight to your fullest."*

Speed gave him a firm nod, and the next thing he knew, Speed was gone. His eyes moved slightly toward Soul. *"You stay with me, Soul."*

He turned back to the war. "Something isn't right..." he muttered.

"You can feel it too?" Alora asked as she wore a soft smile.

Raiden barely registered her question. Regardless of what the assassins had planned, it would be unwise to leave the house unguarded. But he also couldn't leave the knights, Freya, and Speed to handle them alone.

Despite their strength, they were bound to be overwhelmed by the assassins—from his perspective, seeing how they still ran into the open, it was as if there was no end to them.

He let out a deep sigh, knowing at that point he had to set his pride aside and involve Alora and June so they could minimize the risk and tighten both their offense and defense.

He turned to his left. *"I want you to join them too, June."*

June's expression darkened as she turned to him, her starlit eyes locking directly with Raiden's gray ones.

"What do you mean by that?"

Raiden exhaled softly. *"Can you just join them? We need stronger people out there—Freya and Speed won't be enough."*

June gave him a lazy look, leaned forward, and glanced at Alora, who simply smiled at her, which was enough to make her smile.

"Make sure you don't die before I get to kill you, bookkeeper," June said with a smirk and headed toward the battle.

"What do you have for me, 'Bookkeeper'?" Alora asked sarcastically.

Raiden's eyes traced the movements of his comrades within the crowd. Speed was barely noticeable, his incredible speed making only the aftermath of his strikes visible, while Freya effortlessly burned the assassins to a crisp with menacing laughter. Still, the assassins just kept coming.

After a brief moment, his mind registered Alora's question as he abruptly turned to her. *"Oh yeah."*

He brushed his hand through his dark hair. *"You're with me—we keep watch so no one gets near the book."*

She smiled. "I never knew I was that important to you."

Despite her sarcastic persona, Raiden indeed needed her. As the Dreamwalker, she could easily manipulate whoever managed to get their hands on the book, though that didn't mean Raiden would fall for her mind manipulation. He barely paid attention to her after his response.

The moment he turned to the war before him, he could see Speed's speed slowing and Freya's menacing expression turning more grim. They were tired.

Most of the knights lay lifeless on the ground while some still stood fighting, but the wounds on their bodies and the sheer despair on their faces spoke volumes.

The only one among them who still had plenty of energy was June. Her violin rested on her shoulder while she played, sending blades of sound waves to split them in two before they could get near her. But with her fingers pressing firmly on the strings for sharper chords, they were bound to bleed in no time.

Raiden needed to think of something. He glanced back to see Soul standing calmly behind him, her eyes fixated on the war as well, but he couldn't ask her to join the fight.

He didn't fully trust Alora since he couldn't tell how far her ability could reach, even though he needed her. Meanwhile, Soul's ability Soul Condemn would be needed in case of an ambush, as well as her overwhelming aura.

And still, the assassins just kept increasing in size. They had grown to over six hundred, and with people of the same rank joining, this wasn't going well.

He stood there snapping his fingers as he pondered, his heart racing as he desperately searched for a solution. Should he let Soul join them so he could handle everything alone? Or perhaps send Alora instead?

The thoughts swarmed his mind, but he was certain something was wrong. With both assassin and dragon instincts, it wouldn't be wise to ignore his intuition.

Before long, what he feared became reality. Alora's hands began hurting as she gritted her teeth in agony, her notes going off-key. Some of the guards managed to run past her, heading in their direction.

Raiden knew it would be best to handle them himself while letting the others rest. He had to trust his ability, heart of dragon. However, before he could step forward, Alora gestured for him to stop.

She smiled at him while Raiden's eyes darted to hers in confusion. "You have to trust the Sound Weaver."

Her smile grew softer and calmer as she turned to June. "She hates seeming weak before her rivals."

Raiden also turned to her, his expression still perplexed. June dropped the violin and, with clenched teeth, clapped her hands, sending a sharp blade of sound that split all the assassins in two.

Raiden's mouth was slightly parted as he watched, startled. But June winked at him with a smile before turning to the enemies before her. She clapped, and four assassins dropped to the floor.

Even the sound of her steps seemed to be a weapon. When enemies fell or strikes landed, she turned those sounds into weapons too.

Raiden felt his mouth go dry, the pieces finally clicking into place. No wonder they were known as the kingdom's Stars.

"The instrument isn't necessary for her magic, but she enjoys using them—says they make her strikes hit harder." Alora's tone carried clear respect.

Everything seemed under control, though Raiden knew fatigue would catch up to her soon enough. But then his danger sense exploded with warning, a shrill alert that made his pulse spike.

He triggered Gaze Beyond instantly, his sight piercing through the forest depths. What he saw made his blood run cold: three people moving through the trees, each one surrounded by an ominous grey aura.

All three sported stylish black outfits and dark hair, though each had their own distinct feature: one bore a red 'FIRMO' banner, another bristled with piercings, and the third maintained a sharp, clean-cut look. They shared the same arrogant smirk as they advanced, trailed by over a hundred assassins who carried an enormous red banner emblazoned with 'FIRMO' in bold ink.

Raiden's throat went dry again, but then euphoria flooded through him, that familiar psychopathic grin spreading across his face.

"They're finally here."

Alora's smirk was knowing. "So this was meant to exhaust us first."