

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 71: The Final Battle 5 - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 71: The Final Battle 5

Chapter 71: The Final Battle 5

The three of them—Raiden, Alora, and Soul—positioned themselves at the mansion's entrance while the gray crest bearers advanced through the sea of assassins. Raiden clutched his necklace, double-checking that the key remained secure as he locked eyes with the approaching figures.

His hands felt oddly weighted, fists clenched tight as he glared at the assassins. They moved with cocky assurance, completely unbothered, their arrogant swagger broadcasting their inflated pride.

"Don't you think we should spread out?" Alora asked with a raised eyebrow.

Raiden kept his gaze fixed on them, heart pounding as the thrill of taking them all on single-handedly sent tremors through his body.

"Yes, *but not yet.*" He triggered Gaze Beyond, focusing on their crests. All bore the number six. "*Gray crest bearers supposedly wield chaotic magic—if we split up now, they could easily overwhelm me while you're too far to help.*"

He looked toward Alora. "*They're number six—all of them. I wouldn't stand a chance if they coordinated.*"

Alora flashed a brilliant smile. "Words of the Bookkeeper," her saccharine grin widened while her eyes went sharp. "...so very thoughtful."

Raiden turned back toward their approaching foes, dismissing Alora's sarcasm. The rush of excitement was slowly draining from his thoughts.

Despite facing powerful enemies, Raiden found their strategy surprisingly shallow for an organization of this caliber. They had successfully split the focus of all four kingdoms through the war, but still, were they so desperate for the books that they'd fallen back on such an obvious tactic?

Finally, he sighed as the assassins reached an optimal distance and stopped. Their stance reeked of arrogance, with two yellow crest bearers positioned behind them, gripping red banners that bore the word 'FIRMO.'

A devilish grin spread across Raiden's face as he looked at Soul. *"Take the clean-cut one. Do whatever it takes to kill him."*

Soul nodded firmly and started walking left. The clean-cut assassin caught the signal and moved toward her, his predatory gaze fixed on her body as he advanced with disturbing eagerness. Soul's expression twisted with revulsion.

Before Raiden could speak, Alora cut him off. "I'll handle the pierced one." She shot him a wink. "And if you're planning to die, at least keep the key safe."

Raiden scowled at her comment as she headed right. The assassin with excessive piercings followed suit, displaying more restraint than Soul's opponent but carrying the same arrogant swagger.

Once they were gone, Raiden loosened his shoulders and advanced toward the banner-carrying enemy, his excitement to kill the man barely contained. But before he could get close, his foe flashed a confident smirk and snapped his fingers, instantly warping Raiden a meter back from where he'd been standing.

Confusion flooded through him—how had he been teleported back? Was this his enemy's power? Before he could process it further, Alora's scream cut through the air from his right.

She clutched her ears while shadow wolves materialized from her opponent's body, the man's mouth gaping as he unleashed an ear-splitting howl, sending the dark creatures charging at her.

Just then, a thunderous explosion boomed to his left, jerking his attention that way. Soul's disgusting opponent had driven his hand into the earth, triggering a massive fireball that engulfed a 30-meter radius around him, keeping Soul at bay.

Soul remained frozen in place, her legs trembling as she stared at the explosion. The sight made Raiden's throat tighten with worry, though irritation flickered through him as well.

He couldn't afford to stand there watching the other fights—he needed to end this quickly and assist them. His twisted grin widened as he clenched his fists, but before he could advance, his enemy snapped his fingers again, instantly warping Raiden backward.

"I was hoping for a challenge—something that would push me to my limits. Instead, I get you?" Raiden's opponent sneered as he walked closer, disgust written across his face.

"I mean, I didn't expect you to match my strength, but you could at least put up a fight." The irritation in his voice was obvious, dripping with insufferable pride.

Raiden sighed, feeling the euphoria gradually fade from his system. His opponent was undoubtedly powerful, but next to fighters like Seth and his father, the man lacked true ruthlessness.

He needed to calm down and think clearly. He closed his eyes and looked up at the sky. Rain began pattering down—the explosions from Soul's enemy had been intense enough to disturb the weather.

Rain struck his face as he steadied his thoughts. The assassins had clearly studied their capabilities beforehand—if they'd deployed these particular fighters, it meant they believed these three could actually defeat them.

But they still hadn't seen everything—hadn't witnessed just how dangerous he could become. He started to laugh.

"Oh, you're laughing now?" The enemy chuckled along with him, then abruptly cut off. "Just so you understand—you can't get close to me. Either come up with a real strategy, or everything you do will be pointless."

Raiden heard every word, but he refused to just stand there. His opponent couldn't snap his fingers indefinitely.

He faced the assassin, who was positioned about three meters away. Raiden drew in a deep breath, then, without exhaling, he stepped forward and launched himself into the air for a spinning kick. Before the strike could connect, his opponent smirked and snapped, instantly warping Raiden backward to crash into the ground.

Searing pain lanced through Raiden's hands, forcing a scream from his throat. He looked down to see the dark lines across his knuckles deepening in color. The agony was brief, but the assassin laughed at his cries, assuming they were from the harsh landing rather than something far more significant.

The pain wasn't nearly as severe as it had been at dawn, yet Raiden knew he had to endure it and take down the arrogant bastard in front of him.

"What did you do to me, Ash?" he growled, fury building as he forced himself upright.

Each time he pushed against the ground, the pain flared worse, but he refused to give in. He hauled himself upright despite his hands feeling like dead weight, every tiny movement in his fingers sending new jolts of agony through him.

Nevertheless, he clenched his jaw, hunched slightly forward, and forced himself toward the assassin. His anger wasn't reserved for his opponent alone—it extended to his white dragon, Ash, since she was responsible for his current agony. All he wanted was to land one solid punch on the bastard's face.

He advanced toward his opponent, only to be teleported back again and again, but he refused to give up. Each forced retreat only fueled his rage further.

But his anger subsided as he looked down at the ground, puzzled. He'd unconsciously noticed a pattern in the assassin's power. Teleportation seemed to be his only ability, and he could only move Raiden one meter back from where he'd been standing.

Raiden turned toward his opponent, confusion and amusement warring on his face as he suppressed a laugh.

"Are you admitting defeat?... The name is Pope—be grateful I'm the one who gets to kill you." The assassin said with arrogant satisfaction.

"Bookkeeper, they're weak!" Alora called out. "Their abilities only look impressive."

As soon as her words hit Raiden's ears, he grinned—they'd come at the perfect moment, right as the pain in his hands subsided and validated his suspicions.

Pope's face immediately shifted to concern as alarm crept into his features.

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Nothing made sense, yet Raiden was forced to deal with them anyway.

Pope stood before him, trembling as he tried to flee, knowing his little charade was finished. The sight of him acting this way only made Raiden's blood boil with excitement.

Pope might be pathetic, but he could still teleport a meter away, and that was obvious. Still, knowing she could defeat him, Raiden was going to get him regardless.

The moment Pope turned and started running, Raiden went invisible and ran after him. But Pope kept teleporting back while he ran, snapping his fingers repeatedly.

Raiden gritted his teeth in irritation as he wondered what to do. That's when it hit him—Pope had stopped teleporting and was almost emerging into the crowd. His eyes widened as he realized there was a limit and Pope couldn't teleport over long distances. Worse, his snaps were now teleporting random people in the crowd.

In that instant, Raiden knew exactly what to do. He dropped his invisibility and charged into the field on his right to intercept Pope through that route.

He bypassed Alora, who had already beaten her opponent to a pulp. She had a hand on his head, reading his mind before he could finally take his last breath.

Still, Raiden was so focused on catching Pope that he didn't spare them a glance. He maneuvered through the battlefield, killing anyone in his way, even striking down a knight who was his ally. He wanted Pope, and everyone else was just an obstacle.

Before long, he reached the forest's edge and immediately activated Gaze Beyond as he searched through the trees, his heart pounding because he couldn't bear to lose him.

His fists clenched tightly as he scanned the area. He had never been this eager to kill someone before. He needed to pour all his frustrations into this.

The moment he spotted Pope, his eyes widened with satisfaction. He needed to approach unnoticed, so he reactivated his invisibility and dashed through the forest.

His footsteps made no sound, nor did his breathing, not even when his body brushed against leaves. Yet what troubled him most was his overwhelming desire to scream—that would definitely be heard, and that's what worried him.

Still, he bit down on his lip, suppressing that urge as the rain pounded against his body.

Before long, he approached Pope. Pope knelt there, the banner discarded, rain pelting his body as water streamed from his soaked hair while he gasped for breath.

Raiden's body shook with excitement as he approached Pope casually, that devilish smile spreading across his face. Without a moment's hesitation, he seized both of Pope's hands from his knees, confusion flooding Pope's expression. Raiden wasted no time twisting both hands, snapping them instantly as Pope screamed in agony and crumpled to the forest floor.

Raiden crouched beside him and planted one knee on Pope's chest, clamping a hand over his mouth as he turned visible.

"Have some manners—you're making noise."

Raiden's menacing smile stayed fixed as he brutally struck him over and over. Pope's face became drenched in blood while Raiden laughed. Each blow not only fed his soul but sent waves of excitement through him.

But it didn't take long before he came to his senses and paused his fist mid-strike. *"What am I doing?"* he muttered.

He had left the house unguarded just for revenge. What if someone had made their way into the house?

His expression darkened as he gritted his teeth. *"You bastard!"*

He immediately struck his chest, tearing through ribs and ripping out his heart. The blow not only killed Pope but also shattered Raiden's fingers. But he had no time to dwell on the pain; his regeneration would handle the damage.

He started running back to the house, and his heart began pounding the moment he cleared the forest. In the distance, he could see dark energy seeping from the storeroom entrance. He had been tricked, exactly as he'd feared.

He desperately hoped the person was caught, and driven by fear and urgency, he subconsciously poured most of his mana into his legs. Just as he had practiced, he began running faster than he'd thought possible, covering about 50 to 100 meters per second. Before he knew it, he had already covered the two miles between the forest and the house.

He stopped the moment he reached the entrance and found Alora with a captive in her grasp alongside Soul. Relief flooded through Raiden as he leaned forward, hands on his knees, panting heavily from the run.

"I never knew you could run that fast," Alora said, but Raiden barely registered her words. "By the way, this guy was trying to steal the book."

Raiden gave her a thumbs-up before straightening up. *"He didn't get it, right?"*

Alora giggled. "Don't forget I'm the Princess. I already know where the real book is, and no, he didn't get close to it."

Raiden's expression darkened. Why had the king shared such a confidential detail? Were they that reckless?

Alora's eyes narrowed, her face flushed with rage as if she'd read Raiden's mind. "Don't talk down on my father... I suggested the idea of a second room and designed it myself."

The sarcastic tone she normally carried was nowhere to be found—she genuinely hated the idea of her father being looked down upon.

However, Raiden simply stared at her, hoping she would set aside the trivial matters for what was important.

"Well..." Her expression shifted to its usual tone. "This guy here happens to be working for the Dawnbringer Family."

Raiden's eyes widened. This was a great opportunity to finally put some dirt on the Dawnbringers, and he could also gather information on Leo, who was supposedly still their captive.

But before he could speak, Alora snapped his neck, finishing him off completely.

"*What?! Why?!*" Raiden shouted, enraged.

Alora wore a sarcastic smile and ran her fingers through her white hair, flicking it back through the rain. "Using him against the Dawnbringers won't be as good as you imagine."

Raiden sighed. She wasn't wrong and wasn't right either; the future was unpredictable. But now the intruder was dead, and there wasn't much he could do. He still had to make sure all the other assassins were killed.

He turned to Soul, who had been silent all this time. "*Kindly help them finish this off, Soul.*"

She gave him a firm nod without saying a word and began heading toward the battle ahead.

Raiden turned toward the battle, watching everything unfold with his hands tucked into his pockets as the rain finally stopped. "*What did you find in the assassin's mind?*"

Alora also turned toward the battle. "They didn't have much in mind, but for now, we can say the war is over."

Raiden's expression darkened. "*Over?*"

Alora gave him a soft nod. "Yes. They were told to keep you busy while the others headed to the Kingdom of Aurelia."

She took a deep breath. "And according to the memories of the man the Dawnbringers sent, the war in the Kingdom of Aurelia is over and the book is safe."

Raiden shook his head in disbelief. This wasn't right; the war couldn't be over. Not because he wanted it, but because to him, none of this made sense.

Just as he had suspected, the assassins' strategy was very weak and transparent. How could an organization that had been planning for four years and had already stolen two of the four books use such a shallow approach?

Alora let out a sigh. "You can overthink this all you want, but the remaining books are safe and the assassins are dead."

She flashed Raiden a huge, pretend smile as she headed into the battle. "Let the kingdoms have this victory... maybe you and I could make our marriage official through this time."

Raiden sneered as he watched her head into the fight. Out of the six hundred assassins who had entered the war, only about a hundred remained, and the knights had been reduced to around twenty. With Soul and Alora joining the battle, they were bound to finish the assassins soon.

Raiden watched them for a moment. His belief that there was more to all of this remained, but if this was the victory they all wanted, then so be it. It was going to help him either way.

With less responsibility, he could finally focus on what was happening to him: his bizarre dreams and lost memories, understanding Ash better, and also finding a way back to his world.

He exhaled slowly and smiled. *"Yes... let's have this victory."*

[ALERT]

[BODY STRENGTHENING SUCCESSFUL]

[+5]

[MANA CONTROL +10]

PHYSICAL STRENGTH +10

STAMINA +5

DRAGON AURA +10

SOUL OF DRAGON 25%

HEART OF DRAGON 30%]

Chapter 73: Ceremony

The sun rose slowly above the horizon. Raiden stood at the center of the courtroom, the six elders positioned behind their respective counters around him, the king presiding from the highest seat.

Raiden's gaze moved through the yellow auras before him, confusion clouding his thoughts. He didn't know how he could have gotten there. The very last thing he remembered was speaking to Alora... His head dropped to his chest instantly as he shook it in disbelief. He had fallen for Alora's manipulation.

He let out a sigh, wondering why she would want him brought before the high court. He couldn't think of anything he'd done worth their attention.

The irritation of most elders toward him was obvious enough, and understandable considering he had forced his hidden truths painfully upon them.

While he was caught in thought, King Hannes spoke. "We are glad to have you, Raiden Night."

Raiden tilted his head upward and nodded to him. He might have been summoned after all, though clearly in an unusual way.

King Hannes' expression darkened. "There are over a hundred knights currently at your post, and I suppose your comrades are there to assist, so there's no need to worry about your duties."

Raiden wasn't worried about that; he hadn't even thought of it. Still, knowing about it gave him a sense of relief.

"And about your comrades..."

Raiden looked startled.

"Among them is a very infamous figure across the Kingdom of Noor, Freya Pasha." King Hannes' expression grew darker, and his voice dropped. "How exactly did you get in touch with someone as notorious as her?"

Raiden gave him a deadpan look. They could have raised this question the last time they met, but chose to wait until the war was over before requesting an answer.

He let out a sigh. *"Freya is a very loyal comrade. I have limited knowledge of her past, but I can vouch for her present and future. Just as she shed her blood fighting with us yesterday, she will continue to do the same."*

Silence filled the room for a moment. For the first time, the elders didn't have anything to mumble about him. This was typically when they would start discussing how disrespectful he was, but now they remained silent like actual adults, though their irritated expressions were deafening.

King Hannes smiled. "With such words, I don't think knowing how you two met matters."

Raiden gave him a nod as he prepared himself to leave. Levi had yet to return from his mission to retrieve Leo. No words. No signs. It wasn't a good thing, and he wanted to get more information about them now that the war was over.

Little did he know there was more to be discussed with the court.

King Hannes cleared his throat and rose to his feet, as did the elders. "Raiden Night."

This should have been the moment for goodbyes, but something was off about them rising to their feet.

"The high court of the Kingdom of Persia appreciates the loyalty, courage, and compassion you've shown for the kingdom throughout these tough times... and with that, you've earned the absolute respect and devotion of the court to aid you in your duties as the bookkeeper."

He slammed his fist into his counter, and the six elders followed suit; then they all took their seats.

Raiden's expression was etched with confusion. He was glad the court would be serving him, as they had been all along, but an outright claim like that meant they were willing to do more. Still, why this sudden change? He had simply done his job, nothing more.

"We recently learned through Alora that the assassin organization is named 'FIRMO.' What it means is a mystery to us."

Hannes paused for a moment. "But we do know that you've fought all along while doing your duty, even when you were declared a traitor to the kingdom by this very court..."

Raiden smirked. They had always known he was doing his duty, but they simply wanted him out of the way. That had nothing to do with his devotion to his work.

"You had only a hundred men against over six hundred assassins, three corrupt crest bearers among them, and you still emerged victorious."

Raiden silently shook his head in disbelief. Though some words held true, the corrupt crest bearers they encountered were no warriors.

One's explosives looked impressive, but when Soul was caught in the blast, all it did was singe her clothes.

The one Alora faced was all bark but no bite—the shadowy wolves emerging from his body were nothing but pets. Raiden's opponent seemed threatening, yet couldn't teleport anyone farther than a meter away.

Was Alora so desperate for the kingdom to have this victory that she would lie?

"You've done well, just like your predecessors." King Hannes braced himself as his tone grew steady.

"Therefore, we are hosting a royal speech with the entire kingdom to apologize for how badly we've treated you, and afterward, a ceremonial event in your honor."

Raiden managed an awkward smile, sweat forming on his forehead.

"This would be our way of making amends."

It wasn't bad, since it would give him a good reputation, and he wanted to see the entire court grovel before him. But this was too sudden and would interrupt the peace he'd hoped for.

He took a deep breath and calmed himself. This was necessary, and he might even meet powerful people who could become allies and help him return to his world.

After a brief moment of thinking, he smiled. *"I accept your apology, King Hannes."*

"It's settled then. Everything happens tomorrow and the day after."

Raiden gave them an awkward smile.

Hannes smirked, rose to his feet, and slammed his fist into his counter, and the elders did the same before they all began leaving the room, following King Hannes' lead.

The moment they left, Raiden let out a sigh of relief, turned, and began leaving the room. But right at the entrance, he met Alora.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" She smiled sarcastically.

Raiden sneered. *"What did you do to me?"*

"Take it easy, Bookkeeper." She gave him her rehearsed smile. "I'm just trying to forge something between us... you know, fill in all those missing pieces from our childhood."

Raiden shot her a lazy look, puzzled by her obsession with their childhood. He didn't bother waiting for her response and brushed past her.

"Your familiar's in the library. Figured you'd want to know."

Chapter 74: Dream 3

The full moon blazed with unusual intensity, and Raiden found himself standing in a smoky mist that shrouded the entire landscape. The wind itself seemed touched by the same mystical quality as it caressed his skin. All of it—every sensation—made him feel like he'd finally come home.

He started looking down at himself, seeing the dark lines on his hands transform into something he knew completely.

Dark line tattoos glowed across his hands, tracing up his knuckles and wrapping around his wrists, maintaining the previous pattern. The markings on his fingers flowed

smoother, like veins of energy, while spherical lines emerged on his neck, curving from his jaw down to his collar and covering every inch of skin.

He couldn't see his face, but he could feel something there as he reached up in confusion. A dark, large sigil marked his forehead—symmetrical and arcane, like a rune with wing-like extensions spreading across his brow. Sharp, angular tattoos stretched outward beneath both eyes, resembling stylized lightning bolts.

His hair had transformed entirely to pure white, radiant as light itself. It appeared wild yet peaceful, fluffy and free-flowing as it spiked loosely in every direction with a flame-like texture. The full moon's glow made its brightness impossible to ignore.

A faint, mist-like aura emanated from his entire body. Raiden couldn't understand what was happening, though he felt like he'd experienced this place before.

Normally, smoky corpses would have been trying to devour him by now. He instinctively spun around, looking for any sign of them, but found nothing. The place was surprisingly peaceful compared to his previous encounters.

However, as he stood there, eyes darting in confusion and wondering what was happening, he noticed a dark mist swarm concentrated in one specific spot, unlike the other areas.

He felt an irresistible urge to approach it, and without hesitation, he began running toward the mist. As he drew closer, he paused and caught sight of a shadowy figure.

It had the shape of a child, and he couldn't shake the sense of familiarity. He observed it from a distance, his eyes widening instantly as realization hit him.

"Ash?!" He rushed over to check on her. His heart began pounding as he reached out to touch her, but the figure was nothing more than smoke.

His eyes continued darting around in confusion and growing frustration. He started stepping backward, mouth slightly agape, as each retreat seemed to thicken the mist around him.

What was going on?

This wasn't his first time experiencing this, he realized. But where was he? And why did he feel like Ash had been there?

As confusion washed over him, the mist surged around him, and before he knew it, he was being consumed entirely.

He jolted awake, panting as sweat streamed down his face. He found himself in the library, slumped over the desk. It was a dream again. He examined his hands to see that the dark lines on his body and his mysterious white hair had all disappeared.

He smiled. He could remember this dream now. The confusion still lingered, but after struggling with this for so long, he could finally recall it.

However, his sense of victory was short-lived as he suddenly remembered Ash. She was there. He looked around for her and spotted her lying on the desk, sleeping while releasing low, smoky breaths.

Raiden smiled again and leaned back into his chair. He now understood why Ash had been leaving smoky stains on their sheets. But he still needed to understand what was happening.

Where had he been? Since Ash could materialize darkness into chains, was that place somehow her domain?

He attempted to reason through it, but each answer only led to more questions until Ash finally stirred awake.

[Bloom, Papa.] Her voice resonated in Raiden's mind, pulling him from his thoughts.

Ash's voice sounded tired and weakened, but what she said perplexed Raiden more than anything, though he dismissed her hoarse tone as the result of sleeping too long.

"*Huh?*" He asked, confused.

[Bloom.] Ash repeated.

"*Bloom?!?*"

The instant the words left his mouth, half of the library transformed into smoky darkness—the seats, desk, and even the shelves. It lasted barely a second, but Raiden saw it. His eyes widened in shock and confusion.

He needed to see it again, so he repeated himself. "*Bloom.*" The darkness appeared once more, confirming what he thought he'd witnessed.

Raiden looked at Ash to ask her questions, but it was too late; she had already fallen back asleep.

He sat there, torn between being glad that Ash was finally displaying the traits of a powerful dragon and dwelling on the fact that he didn't understand anything.

After a moment of thought, he decided to let it rest for now. Ash had only asked one thing of him: to get stronger. Though he had yet to attain the strength required of him, she had been generous enough to grant him her soul and heart, and now this—bloom.

Though the confusion and unexplainable pains had been overwhelming, he had to stay calm and focus on getting stronger. The last time she spoke before today, she sounded desperate—like she was running out of time.

But regardless of what it was, he had to comply and get stronger. It would help him either way.

It was still dawn, and Raiden needed sleep since the coming day would bring psychological stress. He pushed through the endless thoughts and managed to sleep.

Before long, morning had arrived. Raiden stood at the ceremonial balcony within the palace, Ash resting on his shoulder, alongside King Hannes and the elders, while thousands of citizens gathered in the courtyard below, awaiting the king's royal speech.

Using the king's royal call, which he used to address the kingdom directly from the throne room and hold confidential meetings, they projected the meeting across the skies. Green screens hovered above and throughout the entire kingdom for those who couldn't attend.

Raiden wasn't comfortable with this. Publicity hadn't been common before, and considering their current situation, it was reckless. But he wanted the elders to grovel before him. The satisfaction he would get from watching their faces as they addressed the kingdom and apologized for branding him a traitor was all he wanted.

Soon, King Hannes spoke up, and with the royal call's assistance, everyone could hear him perfectly as the crowd rejoiced upon hearing their king's voice.

"These have been challenging years for our kingdom, and though not all of you were directly engaged in addressing our troubles, your devotion and steadfast support meant more to this realm than you could know."

Raiden maintained a hollow smile, but his focus soon wandered elsewhere. The events of dawn still churned in his mind, and despite his decision to let the matter rest, he found himself unable to dismiss it entirely.

He observed each elder and the king in turn as they made their statements, offering apologies and warm words in his direction. Yet he derived little satisfaction from what he'd anticipated enjoying—his mind was elsewhere, consumed by his own thoughts, and soon the entire royal address began to feel unsettling.

Luckily for him, the proceedings soon drew to a close. He released a deep sigh. It was finished, yet something far more daunting awaited him—the ceremony.

Chapter 75: Ceremony 2

The palace had never looked busier—from the royal family to the lowliest servants, everyone was in motion. They all rushed about, preparing for Raiden's ceremony that evening.

Raiden, however, was restless. With Leo and Levi absent, he felt strangely bored—an emptiness that had been building for a while. Despite never viewing them as anything beyond useful tools, he was forced to acknowledge that he'd become more reliant on them than he'd ever anticipated.

Raiden wandered through the palace, watching the preparations and giving out strained smiles as he attempted to pass the time until it all ended.

"Eighteen, huh?" Raiden murmured, stepping into the ceremonial hall.

He observed the servants arranging tables, with others bustling up and down the grand staircase that dominated the entrance. Portraits of the kingdom's golden ages adorned the steps, walls, and floor alike.

Raiden was turning eighteen today, it seemed. He hadn't known his birthday coincided with the ceremony—he couldn't recall his last one. This would actually be his first birthday celebration ever.

In his previous life, he'd only tracked years, never months or days. His parents had deemed such celebrations meaningless, convinced he could die at any time.

The realization made him crave Leo and Levi's presence even more desperately; his mind began spiraling from one thought to the next.

He remained there for several minutes before releasing a heavy sigh and turning away, slipping his hands into his pockets as he walked.

On reflection, he didn't just accept his parents' rationale for avoiding birthday celebrations—he believed it had genuinely saved him from unnecessary stress.

The ceremony was burdened enough, and now it coincided with his birthday? Alora really meant to destroy him prematurely through her scheming.

After some aimless roaming, Raiden started making his way back to the library. Near the courtroom, by the staircase to the upper floor, he caught sight of Freya, Soul, and Speed.

His expression darkened in an instant as he strode quickly toward them.

"Hey..." Freya waved at him with excitement.

"What are you doing here? Who's guarding the book?" he demanded, confusion written across his face.

Freya's hand dropped slowly. "What?... We heard there's a ceremony for us, and it's your birthday."

Raiden smacked his forehead in exasperation, finally understanding why he needed Leo and Levi around.

"I mean the book... Who's protecting it?"

"Oh, June is."

Having June protect the book wasn't necessarily a poor decision. She'd shown sufficient strength to prove her capability, but Raiden would have been more comfortable with at least one of his own comrades present. He didn't trust June enough to completely delegate his responsibility to her.

Before he could say anything, Speed interrupted. "Soul and I don't want to be here, so we're returning soon."

Relief washed over him as he smiled, but he questioned whether he truly cared about the book or was simply stressed and seeking a distraction.

"But can I speak with you before we leave?" Speed asked as he motioned toward the corridor to Raiden's right, which led to the entrance of the throne room.

Speed's request puzzled Raiden at first—he wasn't usually one to seek private conversation. But he gave him a firm nod, and they started walking away from the others.

But Raiden's expression darkened as he finally absorbed what Speed had said earlier. *"Wait... are you two leaving because you're corrupt crest bearers?"*

Speed looked startled. "Not really, but we can't rule it out entirely since the kingdom hates our kind."

"Then?"

"Well, I don't personally want to be here, and you know Soul isn't great with people."

That made sense. Soul had always had difficulty connecting with people—apart from Raiden, Speed, and Levi, she couldn't even talk to Freya. Speed's reluctance was likely due to his scarred face, and he had no intention of removing his mask. Raiden could understand their reasoning, but loneliness still gnawed at him.

Soon, they arrived at the throne room entrance and stopped for a moment.

"About Soul, thank you," Speed said, bowing his head slightly.

Raiden wasn't confused; in fact, he'd been anticipating this for some time.

"I know I told you before that we wouldn't be your slaves—something I still stand by—but despite that, you went out of your way to help Soul."

They started heading outside the palace. "Not only do we get to eat and sleep somewhere luxurious, but you've done more for Soul than I ever have as her brother."

Raiden smiled.

"Now she can use her ability. Not perfectly, but still better than before, and that's all because of you."

Raiden smiled internally. He had successfully gained Soul's trust and devotion, securing Speed's loyalty as well, despite Speed's lingering doubts. It was as if he could predict Speed's words before they were spoken.

"I won't be your slave, but you should know that so long as Soul trusts you, I will too. And I want to repay you in my own way." He stopped walking for a moment, and Raiden did the same as Speed's voice grew colder and more threatening, his golden eyes boring directly into Raiden's gray ones.

"But hurt my sister, and trust me, I don't care if I'm your contractor—I will kill you with my own hands."

Raiden held his gaze for a moment. His nervousness about the evening's ceremony kept him from even managing a masked expression, much less offering Speed an appreciative response.

He merely offered a faint nod, his face unreadable, and they started wandering aimlessly through the palace with neither saying another word.

Raiden was absorbed in wondering how he could learn anything about Leo and Levi, and even if he hadn't been preoccupied, his pride wouldn't have let him bring up a topic unless absolutely necessary. Speed was similar—after his emotional moment, his ego prevented him from being the one to start talking.

Soon they were back at the courtroom's entrance, where Freya and Soul were waiting for them. As soon as they arrived, Speed signaled to Soul that it was time to go, and she waved at Raiden over her shoulder as they left.

"Show me around, Raiden," Freya said with excitement. "This is my first time in this palace, and it's absolutely huge."

As soon as the words hit Raiden's ears, he felt a wave of listlessness, but he knew returning to the library would just make him overthink things.

"Okay," he said, starting to walk with Freya following behind. *"I'm going to hate this day,"* he muttered under his breath.

Chapter 76: Day of Ceremony

Raiden positioned himself on the central landing of the bifurcated staircase, Ash resting on his shoulder. From there, he could see King Hannes and Alora making their way down the left branch.

Raiden was dressed in a black suit with white inner sleeves, the black cravat at his throat pressed snugly against his neck. His dark hair, gently brushed back, gave him a sharp, formal appearance that contrasted with his usual look.

The nervousness that had plagued him during the day paled in comparison to what he felt now, and he couldn't help but fidget with his fingers while staring down at the royals and nobles who gazed up at him from the hall below.

Seeking to distract himself, he glanced left again, and this second look at Alora made him question her identity.

She wore a deep green gown, its bodice adorned with intricate gold embroidery. A heart-shaped necklace with an embedded gemstone lay at her throat, and the skirt flowed to the floor in rich emerald and deep teal hues, her white hair flickering behind her.

This was the first time Raiden had seen her dressed this way, and he had to admit she looked elegant, though he still couldn't see her as anything other than a manipulative prick.

King Hannes, however, barely caught his attention. The only difference in the king's appearance was a deep purple half-cape sweeping from one shoulder and a ceremonial sash worn across his chest.

"Hey, birthday boy, don't hog all the beauty," Alora teased, giving Raiden a rehearsed smile. "I think those below want a piece of me, too."

Raiden simply shook his head in disbelief. King Hannes smiled at them and took the front row, positioning himself between Raiden and Alora.

He began to wonder if this was his ceremony or Alora's, but maybe that was for the best. At least he didn't have to worry about the crowd.

"It's time to descend, Raiden," King Hannes whispered. "You must meet the visitors."

Raiden took a deep breath and braced himself. Before he could take a step, Alora extended her hand toward him. "Come on, be a gentleman."

Raiden clenched his fist in irritation, but King Hannes was already a few steps ahead. If he delayed any longer, the attention would be more than he could handle.

With an obvious sneer across his face, he placed Alora's hand in his, and they descended the stairs together. The audience's admiring glances made Raiden's face twitch with irritation.

The moment they reached the bottom of the stairs, he immediately let go of Alora's hand, while she giggled in amusement and covered her mouth gently.

King Hannes took a glass of wine, cleared his throat, and commanded the attention of everyone present.

"Tonight, we gather not just in celebration, but in gratitude—for life, for peace, and for those who carry the quiet weight of duty with grace."

A servant offered a tray of wine to Raiden, but he declined, while Alora graciously accepted a glass, though she didn't drink from it.

"To the one who has kept our histories safe, our secrets guarded, and our future steady—"

King Hannes continued. "To the Bookkeeper, Raiden Night, may your years be many and your burdens light."

Raiden forced a practiced smile as he looked at the visitors' faces.

"Let us raise our glass in honor—to wisdom, to service, and to you."

The moment they raised their glasses, Raiden understood why Alora had taken the wine. It was too late now, so he tucked his hands into his pockets to avoid any awkwardness.

"To the Bookkeeper!" King Hannes announced, and the others joined in.

Raiden had to quickly pull his hands from his pockets the moment they finished the toast, as people began approaching to shake hands with him.

For a moment, he actually enjoyed it since all he had to do was shake hands and offer a rehearsed response. His uneasiness disappeared before he knew it.

As it turned out, most of the people there hadn't come because of him at all—they had their own agendas and began networking with one another, while the few who actually approached him either thanked him for his service or wished him a happy birthday.

He took a deep breath and smiled as he stood there. His first-ever birthday wasn't as bad as he had imagined. All he had to do was stand still and smile.

But clearly his peace was short-lived. Just as he stood there, Alora grabbed his hand and led him as they maneuvered through the crowd to the center of the hall.

Confusion washed over Raiden. For the second time, he seemed to have caught everyone's attention as they all turned to look at him and Alora.

The lights in the hall instantly dimmed, leaving only a spotlight trained on them. Raiden's heart immediately began to race as sweat formed on his forehead. He knew what was coming: a dance. And he couldn't dance, not that he could remember.

Music began playing immediately, and Alora wrapped him in her arms, leading the dance. She seemed completely absorbed in it, and Raiden's fear started to fade as he realized he could actually dance.

Thank you, Raiden—he thought with a pretend sad expression.

Whatever Alora was planning, he wasn't going to make it easy for her. From the faces around them, everyone seemed to see Alora's actions as genuine—the smiles, the sparkles, the confident expression she wore—but Raiden knew what was really happening. She was up to something.

But he didn't let it bother him much as he started enjoying it more than he should, chills surging through his body as they danced through the cold wind.

Everything was going well as their dance encouraged many others to start dancing, but Raiden's expression shifted to confusion as he suddenly stepped away from Alora. She nearly fell but managed to keep her balance.

His heart began racing, chills shooting down his spine as he stared directly at an elderly woman dressed in a white and blue maid's uniform.

They locked eyes, staring at each other while the woman wore a faint, sarcastic smile. It was her—the woman from his last mission as an assassin.

However, just as he was lost in his daze, Alora tapped him on the shoulder, snapping him back to reality. All it took was a blink, and the woman was gone.

He ran toward where she had been, completely ignoring Alora as he searched for her. Each second that passed filled him with mixed emotions. He didn't know whether to be happy or confused.

However, his mixed feelings shifted to disappointment as he failed to find the woman, encountering his mother, Yara, in the crowd instead.

"Hey, Raiden," Yara said awkwardly. "Happy Birthday... I wasn't sure I'd catch you since you were so busy, but I couldn't miss your eighteenth birthday for the world."

She kept rambling, her blue aura fluctuating from nervousness, but all Raiden felt was disgust. She had interrupted his search just to act like a caring mother?

Even though he had manipulated her into abandoning the Night family name, she had still done it willingly. She had suggested it herself—she was no different from his previous mother, Jane.

Just as she spoke, Raiden turned and started walking away. She tried to stop him, but Raiden glanced back at her with a menacing expression before slipping on a masked smile.

"Don't draw too much attention to us, Mother... otherwise, you might have to leave," he said with polite menace. *"Don't push your luck..."*

Yara instantly released him, her mouth falling open in shock.

Raiden then tucked his hands into his pockets and began walking out of the hall. His mind raced over what he had seen—was the woman real, or had he imagined her?

His eyes stayed on the floor until he almost accidentally collided with someone, nearly causing Ash to tumble from his shoulder. He glanced up to see a gold crest bearer who had activated his domain, his aura forming a sphere around him.

He looked around in confusion because it seemed like no one else could see the domain. Anyone who walked through it emerged with their jewelry dropping to the ground. He was a thief.

Just as he stood there, a gentleman in a black suit with gray hair approached, his yellow aura flowing around him. He brought three guards who restrained the thief and stripped him of all the stolen goods.

He moved toward Raiden, who remained frozen in bewilderment.

"You are the bookkeeper, right?" he asked with an offered handshake, but Raiden caught the smirk playing on his lips and refused to take it.

He let his hand fall. "You can see auras, can't you?"

Raiden looked at him curiously, wondering why this man was approaching him so familiarly when he'd already met everyone who mattered.

"Not everyone can see that, including the domains, so don't be surprised by their obliviousness."

He turned back to Raiden. "By the way, my name is Alex, and I'm a Dawnbringer."

Raiden instinctively put distance between them, his thoughts spiraling. Had they killed Leo and Levi? Otherwise, what would make his family's greatest enemies speak to him so casually?

Alex raised his hands in a calming gesture. "I may be a Dawnbringer, but I'm not your enemy." Raiden's expression told him everything.

He let out a sigh. "Okay, you enjoy your day. We'll talk later." He smiled and walked away.

Raiden let out a sigh too, confusion clouding his thoughts. Minutes ago, he had supposedly seen the woman who might have killed and transmigrated him, yet when he searched for her, he met his mother—and now a Dawnbringer approaches him?

He stood there briefly, then finally made his way outside the hall as he had first planned. He needed space to think.

Once he got to the corridor, he began wandering, trying to find solace in the quiet around him.

After thinking it through, he dismissed seeing the elderly woman as one of Alora's manipulations. Perhaps that was her goal all along: to play with his mind.

He hadn't even spent half a year in this world, but he had experienced things that would take others a lifetime to encounter.

There had been so many problems: adapting to this world, his duties, and even understanding his familiar, Ash.

Though what weighed on him most was going back home, the others still couldn't be ignored while he lived in this world.

But now that peace had finally come to the kingdom, he would enjoy it while it lasted and try to find a way back home, just like he'd always wanted.

It was his birthday, after all—something he'd never celebrated before. It would be worth enjoying for once.

He started back toward the ceremonial hall, and right at the entrance, he encountered Freya, who was stuffing cakes into her mouth.

"Hey, Bookkeeper," she said through a mouthful, walking toward him.

Raiden stared at her in disbelief. She didn't look like she was here for a royal event at all, dressed in her usual black suit.

"I've been looking for you... go get me some beer. They say they won't give me any more."

Raiden couldn't say a word before she began pulling him inside. He smiled as he tried to let the moment settle in. Maybe it was better that way.

"Maybe it's okay... just for tonight." He smiled, a genuine smile that warmed his heart.

[End of Volume 1: Keeper of Ashes.]

Chapter 77: The Forest

Raiden moved with deliberate precision through the forest, pressing himself against the thick trunks as he sought concealment in the shadows. A single misstep would give him away.

However, he focused most of his mana into his lower body and right hand. Drawing measured breaths, he moved like a predator poised to exploit the smallest vulnerability in its quarry.

The instant he spotted his chance, he took it, exploding into motion and crossing sixty meters in under a second, the displaced air swirling in his wake.

He buried his right fist deep into his opponent's heart, striking before they could even turn to face him. Raiden let out a measured breath and smiled grimly as warm blood speckled his cheeks in the biting cold.

"You damn goblin..."

[ALERT]

[+5XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 7: LEVEL- 75/100 XP.]

MANA CONTROL: 100

DRAGON MANA POOL: 925/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 305

STAMINA: 300

DRAGON AURA: 115

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 90%

—Euphoria: 65%

FAMILIAR TRUST: 102%

—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON

CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 5.

—Name: [ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SPEED]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SOUL]

—Bond Type: Devotion Pact.

NEW ABILITIES:

—Soul of Dragon: 30%

—Heart of Dragon: 30%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

Raiden looked down at the fallen goblin with a satisfied smile before turning away, stripping off his white shirt as he walked. The key hanging from his necklace felt ice-cold against his bare chest while he cleaned the blood from his skin. The shirt was ruined, regardless, so he had no use for it now.

In a brief moment, Raiden's eyes began darting around in confusion—he was lost. It had been just over a week since his birthday, and he had spent that time training and strengthening himself with mana to gain experience points and advance in rank. Hunting goblins proved to be the most efficient method, earning him 5 experience points for every five kills.

Driven by greed, he had somehow managed to slaughter every goblin he could find in the forest within four days. Today, while tracking the fifth goblin needed to complete his point threshold, he had wandered deep into unfamiliar territory without keeping track of his path.

He let out a sigh and tossed his shirt to the ground, tucked his hands into his pockets, and began walking forward without hesitation. He just had to look for the white slimes—perhaps that might indicate how close he was to home.

It didn't take long into his walk before he found himself lost in thought. It had been quite a while longer than he had initially anticipated, and both Leo and Levi were due to return from their mission.

Leo—Raiden could understand the possibility that he was still held captive, but Levi? The shadow of Noor? His invisibility had been flawless, so were the Dawnbringers truly powerful enough to see through the invisible?

These thoughts had become his constant burden, casting shadows over his own troubles.

As his mind wandered, his danger detection kicked in, and his head instinctively tilted to the left. He didn't spare a second before turning invisible, remaining perfectly motionless in his current position.

He could sense the figure approaching him, even through his invisibility. Whether it was a fluke or not, he remained calm with his fists tightly clenched, ready to strike the moment he was discovered.

The assassins of FIRMO were said to be out of power, so whoever this was would most likely be a Dawnbringer.

His breathing was shallow as he watched the reddish heat signature of the approaching figure, slowly infusing concentrated mana into his hand—enough to end everything with a single strike if things escalated.

The moment the figure came within reach, he watched as it slowed its pace as if it could see him. His heart rate began climbing as he adjusted his body, taking a proper fighting stance.

However, the figure paused at a distance from him. "Bookkeeper?" the figure called out in a confused tone.

Raiden stepped back, bewildered by how effortlessly they had detected him. But who were they? Friend or enemy? Their aura seemed peaceful, and his danger instincts weren't screaming as they would if this person meant harm.

"I didn't know you could turn invisible—it's me, Alex," he said with genuine concern.

Raiden squinted his eyes slightly. He had heard the name Alex before, but couldn't quite recall who it was. For a moment, he contemplated whether to turn visible, but since he was already spotted, there was no point in remaining invisible.

The moment he deactivated it, he saw a gentleman with gray hair in a black suit, his yellow aura radiating with quiet dignity as the number six gleamed on his yellow crest. He wore a soft smile as he regarded Raiden, who met his gaze with a confused expression.

Raiden narrowed his eyes as he studied him. The man looked familiar, but he couldn't quite grasp where he had seen him before.

"You obviously don't recall... that's understandable," he said, his smile turning sheepish. "I was the Dawnbringer who spoke with you during your ceremony last week."

Raiden's expression softened in recognition. He could remember him now, but Alex still wasn't in the clear as far as he was concerned. Though he had claimed not to be an enemy, Raiden couldn't bring himself to trust a rival.

"*What do you want?*" he asked, his tone flat and dry.

Alex smiled slightly and gestured behind him. "By the way, your mansion is this way."

Raiden met his gentle eyes with a flat, uninterested stare. Alex knew immediately that Raiden wasn't in the mood for games and needed a real answer.

He exhaled slowly. "Listen to my proposal. If you don't like it, you're free to end me right here."

Raiden's eyebrows shot up in surprise, caught off guard by the dramatic offer.

What's this guy up to?—he thought

"That's how crucial this is to me," he said, his face betraying nothing.

Raiden remained silent for a moment. He didn't sense anything deceptive about Alex, and considering this was the second time he had approached him for a peaceful conversation, it seemed he genuinely had something worthwhile to say. Perhaps he could even learn something about Leo and Levi's whereabouts.

He let out a sigh and began walking in the direction Alex had gestured toward earlier. Without missing a beat, Alex followed.

"How did you see me?" Raiden tilted his head slightly toward Alex as leaves brushed against his bare torso.

Alex pointed back toward where Raiden had abandoned his clothing. "When I saw the goblin's corpse and the blood staining those clothes, I realized someone had to be close."

"I channeled mana into my eyes and swept the surroundings," he continued. "That's how I spotted you."

Raiden let out a derisive sound. Now he knew the extent of the Dawnbringers' abilities—if Levi had been captured, this technique was likely the reason.

Chapter 78: Bloodline Ritual

Raiden and Alex emerged from the forest to stand before the vast grassy field, Raiden's house visible in the distance.

Raiden wouldn't let Alex get any closer to the mansion, not from fear but because he didn't want him in his domain. Alex didn't mind—as long as Raiden would hear him out, that was enough.

"Your hatred toward my family is valid... that's the main reason for a rivalry, isn't it?" He smiled, though Raiden didn't spare him a glance.

"Well, let me get to the important matters..." He sighed. "I want you to help me get rid of my family."

Raiden turned to him with a confused expression, his perplexed thoughts clear on his face.

"I know I sound ridiculous, but I have half of my family to support me on this." Alex looked away, avoiding Raiden's gaze.

Only one thought consumed Raiden's mind: what was happening here? How could someone from a family that despised his own stand before him and speak with such boldness?

"This rivalry started as a way for both families to push themselves to grow stronger." He shook his head slowly. "But in recent years, everything has become about power."

Raiden narrowed his eyes. *"And why would you want to betray such a legacy?"* His voice hardened. *"I know I won't."*

Alex's voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "I'm not abandoning our legacy. I'm making things right."

"How so?"

Alex took a deep breath. "Ever since my family discovered that being the bookkeeper meant nearly unlimited wealth, spending directly from the kingdom's coffers, they became power hungry."

Raiden narrowed his eyes. He knew he could spend whatever he wanted, but he'd never thought of it as unlimited wealth. When it dawned on him, he smiled and began nodding repeatedly.

"My family has been divided for years now." He copied Raiden's stance and tucked his hands into his pockets. "The strongest line, and the worthiest line."

Raiden glanced at him once more. He wanted answers about what Alex meant by getting rid of his family, the Dawnbringers—not a history lesson spanning centuries.

"The strongest line believes that with your family's unlimited wealth, they don't need us—the worthiest line..." He paused, letting his words sink in. "They think we're too weak and kindhearted."

Raiden's expression grew darker. He knew that based on how much the Dawnbringers envied his duty, this would all be about wealth and power. Considering Alex's gentle demeanor and willingness to help, he was undeniably kindhearted. But weak?

"What do you mean by weak?" Raiden's confusion deepened. *"You saw through the thief's domain at the ceremony, and you detected my invisibility just now."*

His eyes dropped slightly. *"And you're number six."*

Alex scratched the back of his head nervously. "Well, I was just using one of the simplest mana techniques in my family. It's called sight."

He raised his eyebrows and pointed to the star-shaped yellow crest on his neck. "Well, numbers don't really determine strength... it's all about mana control and ability."

Raiden shook his head in disapproval—he didn't quite understand what Alex was saying. He knew that mana and abilities, while connected, functioned separately.

To advance through the ranks, you had to master mana control in specific ways for each realm. Since mana was tied directly to physical capabilities, each realm made you stronger.

However, his eyes widened in the middle of his thought, and he began to smile.

To progress through each realm, you had to meet specific requirements: broadening your range of usage and understanding.

But the realms didn't limit them to one or two mana techniques. Just like Freya infusing her flames into her mana at number seven, everyone could do the same. They could learn as many techniques as they wanted, and that diversity was where true strength lay.

"You understand me, right?"

Raiden forced a practiced smile, humbled, as he gave Alex a steady nod.

Alex let out a sigh. "My bloodline carries a heritage that neither my line nor the strongest faction of the Dawnbringer family is willing to abandon."

He turned to Raiden. "This is why my side of the family wants to make sure your family never loses the bookkeeper position. Otherwise, it would be the downfall of us all."

Raiden tilted his head slightly toward him. *"So what do you want—war?"*

Alex shook his head in disapproval. "Waging war against my family would be a suicide mission... and that's exactly what they want from you."

Raiden raised his eyebrow, prompting Alex to reveal everything he had to say.

"Two of your comrades are already in custody at my estate."

Raiden let out a sigh. As he feared, both Leo and Levi had been captured. Now he had no choice but to listen carefully to Alex if he wanted them back.

"They're expecting you to launch a rescue mission because they think this is your territory. They believe striking first might hurt them, especially since you just eliminated the Jasper family."

He added, "The moment you attempt a rescue, you'd be dead, and the duty would automatically fall into their hands."

Raiden stared at him. Even with all his hatred for his previous parents, Jane and Jake, betraying them this way was unthinkable to him. Yet Alex did it so casually.

"You've already killed Captain Kai, so making a direct proposal to the king to free your comrades would lead to you facing the three Judges."

Raiden nodded in understanding.

"And obviously, you can't lie to the judges—it would end in your execution."

"I'm still waiting for your suggestion."

Alex nodded. "Right..."

He cleared his throat. "I suggest you propose the bloodline ritual to the high court."

Raiden frowned in confusion. He hadn't heard of such a ritual before.

"Oh, I guess you don't know about it." He smiled awkwardly. "The bloodline ritual is an ancient tradition that was used to bind the royal family, the Romanovs, to the throne... so no one can be king unless they have Romanov blood."

Raiden waited for more explanation. He was the last member of his family, the Night family. So what happens if he dies?

"This is going to be rejected, and you know why..."

Alex wore a subtle expression. "If you're worried about being the last member of your family, that isn't a problem."

"How so?"

"The bloodline ritual is designed in such a way that, when the last person in the family dies, it automatically chooses a new worthy family."

Raiden smirked as soon as the words hit him. This was a brilliant idea, and he believed he could present it to the high court in a way they'd find hard to dismiss. Not only would he eliminate his greatest rivals, but he'd get his comrades back and finally focus on what truly mattered to him.

Everything sounded too good to be true, but he still wasn't going to let his guard down. Alex was a Dawnbringer after all.

"That sounds good... but why should I trust you?" His expression darkened slightly.

Alex smiled gently. "Fair enough..."

Alex reached into his pocket and withdrew a badge depicting a lion with two swords clashing behind it, his name "Alex" engraved on it. He tossed it to Raiden.

"This is a badge of pride in my family." His expression softened. "As a Dawnbringer, this identifies me, and it's my duty to protect it with my life."

"And... what should I use it for?"

"If this turns out to be a trick against you, you can either take this to the Judges or the high court, tell them everything we discussed, and my family will be charged with conspiracy to kill and executed."

Raiden looked at the badge again, realizing how much influence it represented.

"Or, you can give it to the other half of my family, and it's bound to cause war." He shrugged. "We'd end up killing each other."

Raiden was both impressed and confused. He could easily go for the bloodline ritual and turn the badge in to the Dawnbringer family. He'd keep his duty that way and eliminate his rivals. Did Alex really trust him that much?

"What do you think?"

Raiden looked from the badge to Alex. With everything going on, he needed time to think and figure things out, so he had to avoid conflicts at all costs.

He let out a sigh, thinking about how much fun it would have been to watch the Dawnbringers destroy themselves.

"This isn't enough."

Alex wore a startled expression. This was as vulnerable as he could possibly be.

"I want you to bring my comrades back... and if I don't see them in less than a week," he said with a menacing smile, "I'll enjoy watching you slaughter one another."

Alex went still, taken aback by the predatory gleam in Raiden's eyes.

"Don't worry," he said. "I will bring them to you."

Alex held out his hand. Raiden paused, then slowly placed his own against it, sealing their agreement.

This marked a turning point for Raiden, yet he had to know why none before him had suggested this course before beginning the ritual.

Chapter 79: Bloodline Ritual 2

Alora took her place on the opposite sofa, watching Raiden with hungry eyes over the rim of her coffee cup.

"Your family, huh?" he said while she made a thoughtful expression. "The Night family relished their feud with the Dawnbringers. That's why they never suggested the bloodline ritual."

Raiden held Alora's gaze through the tense silence. He hated being trapped in her living room, and the glaring white walls combined with the searing light from the chandelier above sent pain shooting through his skull.

"This is all I know, I guess."

The instant her words ended, Raiden got to his feet. *"I'll be going then. The high court is expecting me."*

Alora stayed where she was, her tousled white hair shifting against her shoulder, a smile playing on her lips as Raiden walked away, never once glancing back at her.

Once outside, Raiden stopped and pressed his finger to his bottom lip, thinking. Yesterday, he had requested an audience with the high court about the bloodline ritual.

They had consented to meet, and if what Alora said held true, the process might unfold easier than expected.

But her smile... he shook his head, clearing his thoughts. Deciphering Alora was like attempting to comprehend the entirety of existence—impossible and maddening.

Without delay, he headed for the courtroom down the hall. Upon entering, he found the elders positioned in their raised seats as expected, all awaiting the arrival of King Hannes.

Raiden glanced at each elder in turn, their expressions making it clear they had no fondness for his presence.

This only broadened Raiden's smile. Age was confused with intelligence, which was the sole reason the elders remained in court—they provided nothing except misguided advice, corruption, and financial waste.

Something he knew everyone would do if they ever discovered what the six elders they worshipped were really like.

Before Raiden could voice his thoughts and undermine his reason for being there, the king walked into the room, instantly capturing everyone's focus.

Everyone turned his way with barely concealed deference, watching as King Hannes settled into his seat at the room's longest table.

He cleared his throat. "What brought you here?" he demanded as soon as he was seated.

Raiden smirked and took a deep breath, clearing his throat as he steeled himself for the inevitable.

"The constant threat from the assassins has ended, and this brings good news not only to me, but to the kingdom as well."

He paused for a moment to collect himself, and his expression immediately darkened.

"But I am not happy," he continued. The elders traded puzzled looks while King Hannes kept his eyes fixed on Raiden.

"From where I stand, I could die at any moment." His eyes became slits as he stared at them menacingly. *"And the instant that happens, you people will already have a bloodline prepared to assume my duties."*

Murmurs began rising among the elders.

"This situation gives these families, who are certain that my duty will fall to them the moment I die, a clear motive to want me dead."

His voice darkened further. *"And yeah... most of the elders know the family I'm referring to, considering they're already collaborating with them to orchestrate my death."*

An elder slammed his hands on the table as he rose. "How dare you bring such accusations against the six elders?!"

"Silence, Elder." King Hannes declared. "Let him speak."

The elder gradually settled back into his seat as Raiden suppressed a laugh of excitement.

"If this strikes such a nerve, then prove your innocence..." A faint smile crept into his threatening tone.

"I need a bloodline ritual."

The elders' eyes went wide with shock, as though his words were blasphemous.

"The Dawnbringers want me dead," he declared bluntly, his voice raw and unfiltered.

"And what's painful is that this very court knows of this but will do nothing but wait until I'm corpse to act remorseful."

He shut his eyes for a moment, released a long breath, then prepared to settle this matter once and for all.

"I risk my life daily for this kingdom, and I think I'm entitled to some guarantee that when I die, my position won't pass to those who've worked against me and hunger for power."

His gaze sharpened slightly, but his tone grew gentler, a contradiction to his typical presence.

"Regardless of whether you're conspiring with my enemies, this is simply the logical choice to prove the kingdom cares about the pride of its servants."

He lowered his head a fraction. *"If my enemy claims victory upon my death, it dishonors my bloodline and everything we've sacrificed in service."*

"This is the very least this kingdom owes my family."

Raiden finally raised his head and looked at the others. His words sank in as the elders' murmurs grew louder. In that brief moment, he resembled a condemned man awaiting his fate.

King Hannes cleared his throat, immediately capturing everyone's attention.

"You consistently demonstrate your dedication to your responsibilities, and this shouldn't be ignored."

Raiden held the king's steady gaze, noting the soft smile on his lips.

"Even I, the king, sometimes encounter unusual threats against my reign."

King Hannes rested his hand on the surface before him. "Enemies will continue to emerge whether you undergo the bloodline ritual or not."

Raiden searched for hidden meaning in King Hannes' words but came up empty. The uncertainty left him on edge, unable to determine if he'd succeeded or failed.

"It goes without saying that the bloodline ritual is beneficial and will ensure your family's legacy continues." The king smirked. "My own family underwent the same ritual centuries ago, so I believe it lives up to its reputation."

He sighed deeply. "Are you certain this is your desire? This won't make you an enemy of just one family—it'll make you an enemy of the whole kingdom, since everyone becomes a potential successor."

Raiden paused to consider. King Hannes had a point. The bloodline ritual would randomly select a family to receive his position as bookkeeper once the last member of his bloodline perished. With everyone eager to try their luck, and him being the sole survivor of his family, it was essentially putting a price on his own head.

But he craved this peace. The Dawnbringers' constant pursuit forced him to remain vigilant, robbing him of the time he needed to focus on truly important matters.

"Does the public need to know about this ritual?"

King Hannes gave him a gentle nod. "Yes, Bookkeeper."

"By law, binding a particular bloodline to royal duties must be publicly announced, as no other family can claim that role unless the bound lineage dies out."

The decision weighed heavily on Raiden. He hadn't viewed it from this perspective. If the public reacted poorly to this ritual, it could create more problems than he already faced. But what if they supported it?

After a moment of consideration, he decided.

"Alright... I still want the ritual."

He had to go through with it without dwelling on the consequences. The citizens wouldn't strike right away, and most would be deterred by the realization that his luck couldn't be controlled—only fate could determine the outcome.

"Very well," King Hannes said, standing. "The court has heard your petition, and we must consider it carefully before providing you with our decision."

He struck his fist against the counter, and the six elders mirrored the gesture as they stood and followed King Hannes out of the room.

Raiden exhaled in relief. The decision hadn't been easy, but with returning to his world still a possibility, it was worth the risk.

Chapter 80: Dream 4

Dawn had barely broken, the early morning light throwing shadows onto the building while Raiden and Soul shadowboxed in front of the house.

Raiden stood bare-chested, his muscled torso exposed as he embraced the day's chill, while Soul mirrored his movements in her black turtleneck, enchanted stickers adorning her hair and skin.

Raiden shivered with every strike he threw into the air. He was growing weak, and he knew it. Trembling in temperatures barely below six degrees, when he used to train in subzero conditions each morning in his past life. He needed to reconnect with the cold once more.

It wasn't long before he paused and looked at Soul. Even with her hands and stomach exposed to the cold air, she didn't appear to be struggling the way he was.

His expression turned grim. *"Do you not feel the cold?"*

Soul's expression remained soft. "I don't get cold..."

"What?" Her response caught Raiden off guard.

"Um..." she said quietly, "since my crest turned black, my body has stayed warm."

"Really?"

She gave Raiden a gentle nod.

Raiden gave her a subtle expression as they both began their training anew. He wondered if it was her mana or perhaps some other magical force, given that she hadn't obtained her corrupt crest through the usual means—by consuming devil milk. But he held back from asking; she might be just as uncertain.

Not long after they resumed their training, Freya burst outside with a huge smile on her face. Her dark hair was scattered as if she'd just rolled out of bed.

"Raiden, can I speak to you?" He muttered as she tried to catch her breath.

Raiden was confused because ever since she'd recovered a memory, the only times he'd seen a genuine smile on her face were when she bargained with Speed to help her in exchange for restraining and stabilizing seals, and when she got the chance to torture the knights before their battles with the FIRMO assassins.

But this smile seemed more natural compared to the others. Raiden then stopped training and excused himself from Soul.

Freya motioned for them to walk a bit farther from Soul. "There's something you have to know."

Raiden gestured for her to continue.

"I had a dream today, about the arch hell phoenix."

Raiden's expression darkened. The title sounded familiar, and he had heard a creature call themselves that before, but who?

It didn't take long for his eyes to widen in realization. It was Freya herself during her fight with Axel, from the Jasper family. The moment before she burned him to a crisp.

"As it turns out, Free is an arch hell phoenix."

Raiden narrowed his eyes slightly. That much was obvious because when she spoke during the fight, she didn't sound human, and it being her familiar was the only logical possibility. But still, there was a little confusion.

"What is that?"

Freya's smile widened. "I don't really know. I've been dreaming, and each time I find myself in this hell."

A sudden chill shot through his spine. He had been having similar dreams, which his familiar Ash called Bloom. He'd thought he was the only one, at least something connected to Ash alone.

"There were flames everywhere, and for some reason, I never got burnt."

Raiden's expression fell in disappointment. There were no flames where Ash led him, just darkness and shadows.

"I think I will be Free in this manner. I don't want to conjure him out of mana or even resurrect him." She giggled lustfully. "This is best."

Raiden gave her a lazy look. *"And why are you telling me this?"*

Her obsessive expression disappeared in an instant, and she locked eyes with Raiden. "Free wanted me to tell you that the arch hell phoenix is at your service."

Raiden's expression became more listless. *"Weren't you the same person who said you didn't want to be considered a servant?"*

"These aren't my words; they're from Free, and he was quite serious about it." Her voice became steady. "He believed this information would be relevant to you."

The information was more confusing than relevant. He believed Free wanted to speak with Ash directly, and since Free possessed her heart and soul, he had confused the two of them. But Free knew nothing about Ash, which meant the information would be even more irrelevant if delivered to Ash.

"I don't understand what's going on, but okay?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Can you get more information about this for me?"

Freya shook her head, her expression dimming as she began a practiced sobbing. "He said he would meet me again when the time is right..."

Raiden slapped his forehead in disbelief. What kind of people had he contracted with? Why was she this oblivious? At least she should have asked more questions.

Raiden let out a sigh. *"Okay... I've heard you."*

Her expression was truly saddened this time as she began playing with her fingers. "Have you heard about Levi?" She failed to meet Raiden's eyes. "It's been a while. Should I go and save them?"

Raiden was confused by her sudden shyness, but it had been two days since he met with the high court to discuss the bloodline ritual, and he still hadn't heard anything. Worse, his agreement with Alex still stood, and he had less than three days to comply.

He reached for his pocket, touched Alex's family badge, and smirked. *"Don't worry, someone will be bringing them soon."*

Freya's expression shifted in an instant. "Well, I'm leaving."

Raiden stared at her as she walked away, still confused about her sudden mixed emotions. But he shrugged it off, and to his surprise, Soul had already left, probably because they'd been taking too long.

Raiden then tilted his head upward in frustration. He had been trying to ignore his confusion about Ash for quite a while, at least until he received a response from the high court and Alex had honored their agreement.

But now, Freya's words reopened the wound, and he couldn't stop thinking about it. What exactly was Ash? Not a primordial dragon or any known dragon species for that matter—so what?

This wasn't about loyalty or trust; even sometimes the strongest relationships shivered when there were too many secrets. He needed to understand.

He let out a sigh and glanced left, where the grassy field lay.

"Bloom." He muttered.

Everything within a twenty-meter radius turned into a dark, smoky sensation—the grass, the earth, even the air and sky—but it barely lasted a second.

Ever since he was introduced to this by Ash, he had tried over and over to get it to last longer, but there was no luck. Worse, Ash had been sleeping for quite a while now. She would wake for a brief few minutes and sleep again—no meals, nothing.

And now the arch hell phoenix has a message?

Whenever this got this complicated, he began to remember why he was still with her: to return back to his world and nothing more. So if this was the price he had to pay for that to happen, then so be it.

He stretched his body with a lazy yawn. *"Not easy to tolerate, but for the sake of home..."* He smiled.