

CLEAVER OF SIN

#Chapter 71: Middle Finger - Read CLEAVER OF SIN Chapter 71: Middle Finger

Chapter 71: Middle Finger

Asher refused to let the pain cloud his focus. Virelass responded instantly, drawing what little blood remained from the slain assassins nearby. His wounds began to mend, flesh stitching itself back together in slow, painful increments.

But not all of them closed.

His own lightning had incinerated the bodies, charring them so severely that there was barely any blood left for Virelass to extract. The recovery was incomplete, insufficient.

To make matters worse, Virelass couldn't be sent to harvest from nearby monsters. He needed her here, by his side, ready for whatever came next.

The assassins could only watch in stunned silence as the blood of their fallen comrades was drawn toward the rapier in Asher's hand. The unnatural sight sent a ripple of unease through them, and without hesitation, they instinctively stepped back.

They didn't understand what was happening, but they knew better than to remain too close.

Every Wargrave soul weapon was said to possess at least one formidable ability. Until now, Asher's rapier had shown none, something they had noted and waited for.

Now that it had revealed its ability, their instincts shifted immediately into caution.

As they continued to observe, the assassins noticed something unsettling, some of the bruises Asher had sustained from crashing against trees and stones were slowly fading, the skin mending itself before their eyes.

Then it clicked.

The Tenth Sun could heal his injuries.

Yet none of them moved. They simply watched, faint smirks curling on their lips, like predators indulging in the final struggles of wounded prey.

But then, the healing came to an abrupt halt.

The rapier ceased drawing in blood.

In that instant, realization struck them like lightning, the blood supply was exhausted. And with it, the weapon's healing ability.

Their smiles widened, not with amusement, but with cruel understanding. The Tenth Sun was no longer regenerating.

"I must admit, this was unexpected, or perhaps... exactly what one should expect from a Wargrave," the assassin who had spoken earlier remarked, his tone calm yet laced with intrigue. "A soul weapon with healing capabilities... how rare. But even such a ability comes with limitations, it seems."

This assassin, clearly the leader of the group, had yet to make a single move. He remained at the edge of the battlefield, arms crossed, watching with a detached patience as the other four executed the assault.

"It appears your rapier requires a source, blood, for its healing to function. And without it..."

He paused, offering a slight shake of his head, a mockery of regret.

"...what a pity."

Yet despite his condescension, he made no move to advance. His caution was deliberate. Controlled.

Though it was widely believed that Wargrave soul weapons possessed at least one ability, those familiar with the bloodline knew better.

As a lineage of monsters, their soul weapons bore a minimum of two, one often concealed until the moment it was truly needed.

That was why the assassin leader had remained at a distance.

He hadn't interfered in the battle, hadn't thrown a single strike. He was watching, waiting, for Asher to reveal the rapier's second ability.

There was no intelligence on what that ability might be. No records, no whispers in the underworld. But his thoughts told him enough. If the first ability was a rare support-type, healing through blood, then the second was almost certainly offensive.

And he wasn't going to be the fool who triggered it.

That was why he kept his distance, leaving Asher to the four assassins under his command. Because he understood a simple truth: cornered prey are always the most

dangerous. And when it came to Wargraves, the line between prey and predator blurred dangerously fast.

His words? Nothing but bait. Designed to provoke. To draw out the second ability.

To an outsider, it might have seemed as though he was wasting precious time by standing idle, doing nothing while the battlefield hung in tense stillness. But the assassin leader knew better.

He had time. Roughly five hours remained on the clock. All he needed to do was prevent the rapier from claiming another life, thus denying it blood to fuel its healing. That was a simple enough task.

After all, this was the True Awakening, a sanctioned hunt, where assassins were granted a rare and coveted opportunity: to kill a Wargrave without fear of retribution from the family.

Right now, he held every advantage.

Even if his target somehow regenerated miraculously, Asher's stamina was still drained. His movements were sluggish. His Astra reserves? Dwindling. At best, he was surviving. At worst, he was cornered prey waiting to fall.

The assassin leader could feel the rapier had been drawing Astra from the air after the death of the black panther, and it was definitely not for healing.

He had guessed it had something to do with Asher's rapier second ability.

Still, he made no move. Charging headfirst into the unknown was the mark of a fool. If it came to that, if Asher forced his hand, he would simply use one of his men to test the waters.

Sacrifice was the nature of their craft. They were assassins. They held no sentiment for the lives of their own.

Asher, who had been sprawled across the ground, finally rose with a low groan, his body a canvas of injuries etched into him like a second skin. Every muscle throbbed with pain. Yet, amidst the agony, his mind remained sharp, he understood precisely what the assassin was attempting by pointing out his weapon's flaw and maintaining a safe distance.

And the assassin had been correct. Without drawing blood, Virelass' Crimson Pact was little more than dust, an ability rendered utterly useless. That was one of its inherent weaknesses: deny it the chance to kill, and it became nothing.

Another flaw Asher had uncovered over the past six months was even more frustrating, he had no control over the order in which his injuries were healed.

Virelass acted on her own accord, mending wounds at random. Were it up to him, he would have prioritized the gaping slash across his chest before the blood drained completely.

Asher had spent his time looking for his own weaknesses, he didn't just train like a mad man and forgot to check for holes in his own ability and power.

'No other choice, huh?' Asher thought grimly as he rose unsteadily to his feet, legs trembling, barely holding him upright. It was sheer will that kept him standing, nothing more.

His body screamed with exhaustion, every muscle steeped in a deep, aching burn. Waves of pain surged through him, yet his mind did not falter; he had spent the past six months learning to endure pain, to welcome it like an old companion.

Turning his back to the assassin, Asher took a staggered step forward. The assassins watched in silence, unmoving. They could tell, he was moments away from collapsing.

He slipped behind a massive tree, its broad trunk concealing him completely. There, hidden in the shade of its bark, Virelass hovered gently above him, its presence marked by a faint, sorrowful hum that whispered through the silence.

"It's useless, Asher Wargrave. It seems this is where it ends." The assassin leader's voice was calm, final, as he gestured for one of the four assassins behind him to finish the job.

With steady, unhurried steps, the chosen assassin advanced, a massive axe resting against his shoulder. As he neared the tree where Asher had taken cover, the world abruptly shifted, bathed in a searing, otherworldly purple light.

Before the man could so much as blink, Virelass moved.

It surged forward in a blur of speed, a phantom of silver vengeance. In a flash, the assassin's head was severed cleanly from his shoulders, the strike so sudden he never even realized he'd been attacked.

As for Asher, lightning surged violently across his form, shrouding him in a storm of crackling purple. In an instant, he erased the distance between himself and the assassin leader, moving faster than the eye could follow.

One moment, the leader stood composed. The next, Asher appeared before him, his body fully healed, arcs of lightning dancing across his skin, his gaze cold and resolute.

'How did h—'

The thought barely formed before Asher's hand drove through his chest with brutal finality, piercing flesh and bone.

He had relied on distance, calculated caution, but it hadn't saved him. He died wide-eyed and wordless.

"You talk too much," came Asher's hoarse voice, laced with exhaustion and quiet contempt.

The remaining three assassins froze in disbelief, horror flickering in their eyes as they processed the loss of two comrades in mere seconds. But hesitation gave way to instinct, they attacked in unison.

Asher only smiled.

He raised a single middle finger in reply, calm, mocking, and in the blink of an eye, his form vanished, streaking away in a trail of silver light.

He had activated Position Marker.

The assassins were left standing in the oppressive silence, swallowed by the crushing darkness he left behind.

Chapter 72: Reactions

Within the Wargrave estate, the family members watched in absolute silence. They watched as five assassins encircled Asher. They didn't blink, they simply observed with calm eyes and steady breaths.

Then it began. They saw how Asher was gradually being pushed back, further and further. His mind was able to keep up with the situation, calculating every motion and strike, but his stamina did not allow his body to follow through. They watched as attacks rained in from all directions, left, right, above, from every possible angle.

Hammer. Axe. Whip. Dagger.

They watched his movements closely. They could see the fluidity, the calmness, and the efficiency in each step and swing, like he had been training in the art of battle for decades. But it wasn't long before Asher's chest was torn open, right in front of their eyes.

Still, none of them reacted. Many of them had suffered worse injuries in the past, had lost limbs, had endured horrors far worse than a torn chest. To them, a wound like that was barely worth mentioning.

Deep down, none of them wanted Asher to die, simply because he was their family member. Yet even if he were to perish, none of them could intervene. The law of the family forbade it.

They watched as the hammer crashed against his rapier with crushing force and weight, before a whip lashed viciously across his chest. The soft smiles that had graced their faces when Asher fought earlier had long since vanished, as if they were never there to begin with.

Their cold, neutral expressions returned. They watched as Asher ricocheted from one tree to another, as if he were a mere bouncing ball with no will of his own.

They could see his injuries now. The bruises. The torn flesh. The broken bones on his right hand that no longer looked like a hand, it resembled pulp, mangled and useless.

The glowing blue orb on the table displayed everything with chilling clarity, as though they themselves were right there in the forest beside him. They watched as the youngest Wargrave's body tore a trench into the ground and remained there, unmoving, as though he were dead.

But with their keen, experienced eyes, they could see the subtle rise and fall of his chest. He was still breathing.

They continued to observe as Virelass drew blood from the corpses scattered across the battlefield, but his injuries barely healed. The dead simply didn't have enough blood to fuel his recovery.

They knew, deep down, it was almost over. Asher had spent all his Astra fighting that monstrous black panther. His Astra veins were literally empty now. His weapon could no longer heal him, not without a source of blood. His stamina was completely depleted, bottomed out.

They had expected the assassins to act immediately, to deliver the final blow while Asher lay there in such a state. But they didn't.

The Wargaves, sharp and calculating in moments like these, could tell what the assassins were thinking. And, truth be told, they had the same thought as the assassins. The way Asher hadn't used any flashy ability until now made it seem as though his weapon possessed only one trick, one ability. Nothing more.

They heard the assassin leader's monologue, but none of them reacted. None of them listened. Their minds were elsewhere. They were in the moment, consumed by the tension as a single question echoed through each of their thoughts:

'Was a Wargrave about to fall here today?'

They watched without flinching. Their emotions, chilled to the bone, refused to surface. No one dared to speak. They simply watched as one of their own, a member of the Wargrave bloodline, stood at the edge of death's door.

'Was the youngest going to survive after barely holding out for two whole hours?'

Another question echoed in their minds. But this True Awakening was unlike any other. Their gazes shifted toward Azeron, who sat with remarkable calmness, so calm, it was as if this deadly trial were no different than an ordinary day at the park.

But Azeron could feel their gazes. He knew why they were looking at him like that. Still, he did not react. He didn't move, and he didn't blink.

During any Wargrave's True Awakening, the Sun or Moon participating would have their movements tracked and fed to the assassins. This ensured that the Sun or Moon wouldn't just hide the entire time.

However, pinpoint locations were never given. Instead, the assassins were provided with a radius. They had to search within that radius to find the participant.

This system granted the Sun or Moon some breathing room, because the Wargraves knew how brutal and unforgiving their own True Awakening trials were.

But Asher's case was different. His exact location had been given to all assassins, no radius, no searching, no breathing space. Just a direct path to the target.

The rest of the Wargraves weren't fools. They could tell that Asher's position had been compromised at the exact moment Asher had realized it himself. And the responsibility of placing the marker on the Sun or Moon always fell to the Primarch.

It was through this marker that they could watch everything unfold in real-time, projected on the heads-up display before them.

They knew who was responsible.

Azeron.

The youngest had been placed in an impossible situation, no rest, no pause, just two hours of relentless fighting and movement at monstrous speeds.

Deep down, Azeron felt anguish. He had changed this little detail, this cruel alteration, to push Asher to the brink. But he wasn't in anguish because of guilt.

No. Azeron's pain came from seeing Asher in that broken state. And yet, he did not panic. He had no fear for Asher's life. He and his first son had already discussed the contingency plan to save Asher.

That discussion had led to this last-minute change to the marker's function.

They watched as Asher, somehow, rose to his feet. His legs were already trembling, threatening to give out. His entire body shook with exhaustion as he staggered forward, eventually collapsing behind the trunk of a tree.

They watched, hearts bleeding, as family tradition and ancient law bound them to their chairs like invisible, invincible chains.

The Wargraves could never fall to a human enemy without consequence, but now, it seemed even tradition had betrayed them.

Malrik was already prepared to move the moment Asher reached the point of death. He hadn't interfered even now, just in case the youngest still had one final card to play.

They watched as the axe-wielding assassin strode confidently toward Asher, who was panting like his very life depended on each breath.

Then, their eyes widened in shock.

Asher's injuries were healing, right before their eyes, with no blood.

They watched as Asher moved instantly with unbelievable speed, burning through the last drops of his stamina.

They watched as his rapier took care of the axe-wielding assassin, while Asher himself personally eliminated the talkative assassin leader.

Before their shock could even settle, they watched Asher raise his middle finger toward the remaining assassins, with a cheeky smile, before vanishing in a streak of silver light.

They didn't fully understand what that middle finger meant, but their shock ran deep. The youngest Wargrave had just vanished.

Their eyes remained fixed on the heads-up display. It adjusted a moment later, repositioning itself to show Asher's new location.

And once more, shock.

They recognized the place. And in that moment, smiles and grins spread across their previously expressionless faces.

'The youngest has a teleportation ability.'

The thought echoed in all of their minds. They didn't know the limits of that ability, how many times he could use it, how far it could go, but in that moment, none of them cared.

Chapter 73: Sleep

In a flash of silver streaks, Asher and Virelass appeared on the branch of a tree. The very moment they reappeared, Asher collapsed to his knees as his body completely gave out. He had been in peak, constant movement for two full hours without rest, and now it showed.

Immediately after their arrival, snakes, as usual, lunged at them, but Virelass wouldn't allow anything to get near her master. However, she didn't kill them, as Asher had ordered her not to.

She simply severed the branches they were on, instantly dropping them to the ground. The snakes, startled and terrified, slithered away in fear.

Asher's current location was the same spot where he had woken up at the beginning of the trial. It was the tree he had climbed for the first time, the place where he had killed the first snake.

Unknown to all, Asher had left a Position Marker on that very tree, just in case a situation like this ever arose.

The Position Marker allowed him to mark up to three different locations. His first was his room; now, this tree had become the second. The third remained unspoken, reserved for another unknown contingency.

Asher now laid on his back across the branch, panting heavily, his chest rising and falling with every breath. The last attack he made was nothing more than a gamble, one based entirely on the element of surprise.

If it had failed, he had planned to teleport immediately, but it hadn't. It had succeeded. Asher stared at the pale moon in the sky above as he lay there motionless, like a fallen log.

'System, how much time is left?' Asher asked mentally.

[Four hours and thirty minutes]

The system replied without hesitation, its voice calm and efficient.

Over the past six months, while Asher had been grappling with the weaknesses in his ability, he discovered that blood was one of the major limitations. Without blood, Crimson Pact was utterly useless. But Asher had found something else, Virelass could also store the blood it drank.

Virelass didn't necessarily need to use the blood she had consumed immediately. She could store it for future use, and this discovery had been critical.

During his preparation for the True Awakening, Asher knew that it would involve numerous injuries. He knew pain would be a constant companion. So, anticipating the worst, he made sure to fill Virelass with blood in advance, just in case something happened.

And something had happened.

That was why, earlier, when he stood up and hid behind the tree, it wasn't only to prepare an ambush. It was also to hide and heal, because if the assassins had seen him healing, they wouldn't wait and simply kill him instantly. This had been his trump card all along.

Virelass could still heal him using the blood of fallen enemies, without tapping into her stored supply, which was exactly what she had been doing throughout the True Awakening until now.

Asher didn't yet know the full limit of Virelass' storage capacity, but to him, it seemed almost infinite. Virelass had been drinking blood nonstop for over a month without showing any signs of reaching her limit.

'I have an hour and a half to two hours to rest and recover,' Asher thought, his gaze still fixed on the moonlight filtering through the forest canopy.

Returning to this location was a strategic move. Although the assassins now knew where he was, they still had to make their way back here. And they had just spent two full hours chasing him at near full speed.

That meant he had approximately two hours before they could return, unless they chose to sprint with all they had.

But Asher knew better.

Some of them might consider it, using Astra augmentation and abilities to cover the distance quickly, but doing so would be foolish. Upon arrival, they'd be exhausted, with stamina and Astra reserves nearly depleted or halved.

So Asher was confident they wouldn't. Even if they spent two hours tracking him back here, they still had two more hours remaining to eliminate him. They wouldn't risk arriving completely drained.

It was all calculated, from the very beginning.

Asher stared at the moon once more. He was slowly regenerating stamina, but if he wanted to reach his peak faster, he would need to do one thing — sleep.

He weighed the decision he was about to make. To sleep in an enemy's domain, at his weakest state, surrounded by threats... it was reckless. But he had no other choice.

His Omni Perception would alert him to anything nearby. Though it had weaknesses, it didn't mean it was useless simply because it wasn't infallible. And besides, Virelass was there, floating silently above him, like a quiet, ever-watchful guardian.

Another thought crept into Asher's mind, and a faint smile formed on his lips. Then he laid down more comfortably and slowly closed his eyes.

His mind drifted to the huge bed and feathered duvet back in his room. The temptation to teleport there just to sleep was overwhelming. After all, even as an orphan in his past life, he had never once slept in a forest teeming with assassins and wild beasts.

He thought of Lyra, wondering how she was doing in this moment. But the thought was fleeting. It vanished just as a natural phenomenon called sleep claimed him.

Even in this state of unconsciousness, his mind remained half-active. His ability; Instinctive Adaptation seemed to reach its peak during such a moment.

Virelass floated gently above Asher, her entire form humming like an ethereal sentinel. She was ready to shred anything that dared approach her master, to rip it apart down to the smallest atom.

Deep within the forest, the assassins moved with agile and fluid motions. Their figures tore past trees, the world turning into a blur in their vision. Each step echoed with frustration and fury. They cursed beneath their breaths.

They had waited so long for the Tenth Sun to reveal a second ability, only for it to turn out to be a teleportation skill instead of an offensive one.

And what baffled them even more, they couldn't understand how the Tenth Sun still had Astra left.

Their minds raced with questions. They concluded that the rapier had likely been gathering Astra for the teleportation earlier.

That would explain it. Otherwise, why wait for that particular moment to gather Astra and teleport? Why not teleport at the beginning before the injuries had piled up?

They wanted to increase their speed, to dash through the forest at maximum capacity. But they knew better. This was a battlefield. Anything could happen. They needed to conserve stamina. That was rule number one. So, they didn't use their abilities, nor did they tap into their Astra reserves.

They estimated it would take an hour and a half to two hours to reach Asher's new location. But they weren't worried. They still had two hours left to kill him. In their minds, there was no way the Tenth Sun could recover in just two hours.

Ironically, their thoughts aligned perfectly with Asher's own calculations and strategy.

But the real question was, when the assassins finally arrived, who would they meet?

Would it be the same Asher they had left behind, low on stamina, battered, barely breathing?

Or... would they meet something else entirely?

Perhaps they wouldn't meet him at all.

Chapter 74: Awake

Beneath the shrouded canopy of trees in the stillness of the night, Asher lay motionless, fast asleep atop a thick branch, as though the weight of the world held no claim over him. His breathing was soft and steady, the gentle rise and fall of his chest barely noticeable in the moonlit gloom.

If word ever spread of what Asher Wargrave, the Tenth Sun, was doing at that very moment, few would believe it. During the True Awakening, a brutal ordeal where every Wargrave was fated to lose at least a limb, he had chosen to sleep, despite bearing what was widely known as the most harrowing trial.

And at that very moment, the Wargraves who watched from afar could scarcely believe their eyes. None among them had ever dared attempt such a thing during their own trials, sleeping during the True Awakening was unthinkable.

Quite simply, not a single one of them would have.

Virelass remained still and vigilant. If she possessed eyes, they would no doubt be flickering restlessly within their sockets as she swept her gaze across the forest, tirelessly surveying every shadow and rustle.

Time slipped by, and an hour and twenty minutes passed in silence.

Then, Asher stirred.

With slow, deliberate movement, his body shifted upright. He settled into a seated position upon the branch and opened his eyes, calm and unhurried, as he took in the dark expanse of the forest around him.

'System, how long was I asleep?' Asher asked silently.

[An hour and twenty minutes, Host]

The system's response chimed crisply in his mind.

'They should be arriving any minute now,' he thought, eyes narrowing slightly.

Virelass began to hum softly as she floated around him, her movements inquisitive, almost anxious, as though silently asking if something was wrong.

"I'm fine. Stop panicking." Asher murmured with a sigh.

At his words, her humming quieted, gradually fading into a soft, contented resonance.

He took a moment to assess his condition. His stamina had returned, not fully, but well enough. It was more than sufficient for what was to come.

'My Astra has finally recovered,' he noted internally.

His Astra veins were now overflowing with Astra as he had only needed to recover only seventy percent. 'Even Virelass' Astra has recovered' his thoughts continued.

Asher dropped from the tree with fluid grace, landing soundlessly as his feet met the forest floor. The mist coiled around him, thick and restless, shifting like a living thing eager to consume all that dared enter its domain.

He knew the assassins would arrive soon.

And he had no intention of running.

There was no point in hiding, not that he could, even if he tried.

Though he had only left three assassins behind before falling asleep, Asher was certain more had arrived during his rest. Reinforcements, no doubt. But it didn't matter. Their numbers were irrelevant.

It changed nothing. The outcome was already decided, at least, in his mind.

As if reality itself had heard his thoughts, a volley of throwing needles suddenly cut through the mist, whistling toward him from the front.

Asher didn't flinch.

Virelass surged forward in a blur, her form flickering through the air like a phantom. With effortless grace, she deflected every needle, their sharp points scattering harmlessly to the ground.

But the threat hadn't passed.

Several assassins had already closed the distance under the cover of mist. Among them was the same woman who had slashed open Asher's chest earlier. Her twin daggers gleamed with deadly intent as she lunged, this time aiming for his throat.

Still, Asher didn't call Virelass back.

He had no intention of blocking.

His body shifted smoothly, feet gliding across the earth with controlled grace. He moved like wind through tall grass, evasive, fluid, untouched. Each strike missed by mere inches, not because they lacked speed, but because he had already slipped past them.

But the assassin was relentless. She moved in perfect tandem with him, her steps fluid, calculated, each motion devoid of hesitation. Her daggers struck only with purpose, never once aimed at a fatal point without intent. Every slash, every thrust, sought to dismantle his combat prowess piece by piece, crippling his movement, dulling his reflexes.

Eyes. Brain. Chest. Lungs. Legs. Thighs.

She targeted them all.

But Asher saw through her as if she were an open book. Unlike before, when exhaustion had dulled his edge and robbed him of his movement, this time, he could read her every move... and now, he could respond.

In the very next breath, Asher's hand blurred into motion as his legs surged forward, his fist already hurtling toward her abdomen like a thunderous echo.

The assassin was caught off guard, her eyes widening at the sudden shift in his momentum.

A sharp boom resounded as his fist landed, but Asher felt... nothing. No resistance. No impact. No flesh. No bone.

His hand passed cleanly through her.

Her form dissipated into smoke.

'So this is how she passed through Virelass...' Asher's mind raced, the memory flashing, 'This must be her ability.' He recalled the earlier moment, when she had injured him.

The assassin instinctively stepped back, but Asher was already there, closing the distance in a flash. He had read her movement before she even made it. His leg whipped out in a sweeping arc, a low kick meant to destabilize.

She leapt, graceful and swift, evading it with ease.

But the attack was a feint.

In an instant, Asher's body surged upward, his fist snapping toward her head with lethal intent. The assassin shifted into her smoke form, attempting to slip through the strike, but this time, it was futile.

A surge of purple lightning danced across Asher's fist as it collided.

The impact was immediate.

Her body was launched backward, a blur of motion and pain, her scream torn away and swallowed by the roar of thunder that followed.

Before her body could even touch the ground, the earth beneath Asher surged upward and twisted unnaturally, an attempt to trap him in place. Stone bent like muscle, clamping around his legs.

But Asher shattered the restraint with a single step, his legs moving with effortless force.

Yet that brief moment was all the opening his enemies needed.

The hammer-wielding assassin was already upon him, the whip-user trailing closely behind like a shadow. The wind cracked with violent intensity as the blunt side of the hammer cleaved toward his skull.

Asher didn't block.

He slipped past the strike with a fluid sidestep, his motion ghostlike, impossibly clean.

In his hands, twin daggers gleamed, taken from the very assassin he had just dispatched.

Closing in on the assassin's flank, Asher's hands moved with lethal intent, aiming to sever the enemy's wrist. But his Omni Perception flared, catching the whip slicing through the air from his blind side.

Without hesitation, Asher abandoned the strike.

He launched into a series of five rapid backflips, each one precise, creating space between himself and the advancing duo.

Off to the side, Virelass held her ground, keeping another assassin at bay with ruthless efficiency, preventing it from drawing close, even as the rest began to converge on Asher.

Asher's breathing remained steady and controlled, his purple gaze swept across the battlefield, reading every movement, every intent, every heartbeat of the assassins encircling him.

Then, slowly, a smile formed on his lips.

He was enjoying this, far more than he would ever admit.

His knees bent forward ever so slightly, his muscles coiled, as if ready to erupt like a spring, but before he could....

Chapter 75: Blind

Before Asher could so much as move, his vision vanished, swallowed whole, as though the very world of Crymora had chosen to erase all color from existence. His body froze, muscles coiling in instinctive tension the instant darkness claimed his sight.

'This has to be another ability... one of the assassins,' he thought, his mind racing to keep pace with the sudden shift in reality.

An ability that induced blindness would be dismissed by most as trivial, useless, even. But in Crymora, there was an old saying: "There are no useless abilities, only useless wielders."

And now, in this moment, that saying rang true.

To strip a combatant of their sight at the height of battle was no mere trick, it was a death sentence cloaked in simplicity. Even seasoned warriors, honed by countless battles, could be reduced to prey with a single, well-timed use.

No matter their experience, no matter their instinct, blindness, when wielded with efficiency, turned veterans into helpless fish laid bare upon the butcher's board.

'It's not a mind-based ability, if it were, the system would have nullified it,' Asher reasoned, his thoughts sharp despite the sudden loss of sight.

The assassins didn't hesitate, they knew each other's abilities as they all came from the same organisation, they all pushed forward with immense speed, weapons raised with lethal intent

But Asher was no ordinary opponent.

Under Elowen's relentless guidance, he had refined his Omni Perception through six months of rigorous motion and balance training. He had fought blindfolded, disoriented, even with his perception sealed, forced to survive with nothing but instinct and muscle memory.

Though deprived of sight, Asher could still see.

His Omni Perception unfolded around him, painting a detailed image of his surroundings within its radius. Whatever ability had robbed him of vision, it could not suppress what lay deeper, his cultivated sixth sense.

'System, notify me the moment this ability fades.'

[Affirmative, Host]

With that thought, Asher closed his eyes.

Almost instantly, he felt the air shift, attacks rained down from all directions, targeting nearly every inch of his body. Deadly strikes meant to overwhelm and dismember. But Asher was no fool; he wouldn't waste his strength trying to block them all at once.

Instead, Astra surged through his legs.

With a single, fluid motion, his figure blurred, vanishing from his position and reappearing meters away in the blink of an eye, his body gliding backward as if reality itself had bent to accommodate his retreat.

The assassins, momentarily taken aback by the evasion, didn't falter. Confusion flickered in their movements, but it passed quickly. In the end, it didn't matter, Asher was still their target.

Asher refused to give them the initiative, this time, he moved.

In a flash, he erased the distance between them, as if space itself had folded at his command. The dagger in his grip swept forward with clinical strokes, slicing clean through the eye of the nearest assassin.

A scream burst from the man's throat, sharp, panicked, but it was cut short a heartbeat later. Asher's blade followed through, gliding across his neck in a seamless arc, silencing him with a single, elegant stroke.

Blood sprayed into the air, but Asher was already gone.

His movement was serpentine, fluid and unpredictable. He twisted to the side, momentum coiled into his next strike. In one swift motion, his dagger flashed upward, burying itself beneath another assassin's chin and erupting through the top of their skull.

With a dull thud, two bodies collapsed to the ground.

Asher moved like a shadow, silent, swift, and devastatingly precise. He never needed more than a strike or two; every motion was calculated, every kill clean.

To any onlooker, the roles would have seemed reversed. Asher didn't resemble the hunted, he was the predator. The assassin, not the target.

Behind their masks, the remaining assassins frowned. Confusion crept in, sharp and unwelcome. He was supposed to be blind, crippled by the very ability they'd deployed. Yet here he was, navigating the battlefield with fluid grace, as though sight had never left him.

And then there was his weapon.

He was known to wield a rapier. Now, he carved through them with a dagger, as if it had always been his blade of choice.

None of it made sense, and that made him all the more dangerous.

As Asher tore across the battlefield, the massive hammer came crashing down once more.

This time, he didn't dodge.

Instead, he shifted subtly, seizing one of the assassins and hurling him straight into the weapon's path.

With a sickening, bone-crushing impact, the hammer collided. The assassin's head exploded into pulp, reduced to little more than a red smear in the air.

The hammer-wielding assassin faltered, caught off guard.

But by then, it was already too late. Asher was behind him. His eyes remained closed, his breath calm, his steps ghostly in their silence. In a blur, his hand moved, clean, deliberate.

A flash of steel.

A soft whisper of flesh parting.

Then, the assassin's head soared into the air.

Before it could hit the ground, Asher felt the whip cut through the air once more, its intent murderous.

His body responded instantly. Feet lifted from the earth, he spun, pivoted, and lashed out with a kick that met the airborne head mid-flight. With brutal force, it rocketed toward the whip-wielding assassin like a macabre projectile.

Seeing the severed head hurtling toward her, she had no choice but to retract her whip and evade, the motion sharp and instinctive.

But Asher was already in motion.

His legs carved through the soil beneath him as he surged forward, relentless. From behind, he sensed the whip lash out again, curving toward him like a serpent intent on devouring its prey.

He didn't hesitate.

With a burst of momentum, he leapt into the air. His body twisted mid-flight with fluid movement, a dancer's grace wrapped in a killer's intent. He landed behind her in a single, silent motion, deft, controlled.

His daggers flashed forward, twin arcs of silver, aiming straight for her back.

But she was ready.

Her figure blurred, reacting with speed honed through countless battles. She didn't dodge, she attacked. The handle of her whip reversed course and shot toward Asher's neck like a striking fang, aiming to bring him down with her now that he had closed the distance.

But Asher had seen this technique before, the Black Panther had used it.

And no matter who wielded it now, it wouldn't work on him a second time.

His movement shifted with fluid precision. He stepped back, posture calm, but the air around him crackled with rising tension.

Lightning surged into his palm, forming a spear of concentrated energy.

In the next instant, it launched, an arrow of purple fury tearing through the air with blinding speed and raw force.

The assassin barely registered the thunderclap in her ears before the searing light struck her chest. A heartbeat later, it detonated, an eruption of power that consumed her in a flash, tearing her body apart like a balloon under pressure.

Nothing remained but fragments, scorched and scattered in the air.

Asher could already feel the shift in the air, the faint tearing of space as the assassins moved. They didn't hesitate. No words. No pauses. Just pure, lethal intent.

His hand closed around the fallen whip, instinct guiding his grip.

In his mind, the memory replayed, how the assassin had wielded it earlier, the flow, the weight, the range. His battle intuition ability filled in the rest.

Lightning crackled across the length of the whip, veins of violet energy pulsing through it like a living thing. Then, Asher moved.

His arm blurred, and the whip lashed out in a storm of arcs, slicing through the air in a sweeping dance of destruction.

The assassins reacted instantly, forms flickering as they stepped back, vanishing from the whip's immediate reach in bursts of speed.

But not all of them were fast enough.

Three were caught in the tempest.

The whip struck, blunt force laced with elemental wrath. Their heads burst like overripe fruit, exploding into sprays of crimson and shattered bone, painting the air with gore.

For a brief, morbid second, the battlefield gained a flash of color, blood red against a world painted in death.

From the lingering haze of smoke left in the wake of his last strike, Asher emerged, his steps slow, deliberate.

Each footfall echoed like a war drum in the ears of the surviving assassins, steady and unrelenting, as though heralding the end.

[The Host's vision has returned]

The system's chime rang clearly in his mind.

Asher's eyelids lifted.

In that instant, Virelass, who had already claimed the lives of four assassins, vanished from where she stood, then reappeared in her master's hand as if summoned by will alone.

The air grew heavier.

The hunt had truly begun.

Chapter 76: No More

Only one hour remained on the clock, and Asher was fully aware, he had asked the system to notify him with each passing hour.

A wide grin stretched across his blood-smeared face as he stood, knees slightly bent, body coiled with tension like a predator ready to pounce.

He hadn't spoken a single word since the beginning of this True Awakening, yet he relished every moment of it. Virelass reveled in it. The Absolute Physique thrived on it.

With that, Astra coiled beneath his feet like a living serpent, then surged across Virelass in a gleaming arc. Smiling, Asher launched himself forward like a cannonball, his body ripping through the air with a sharp, whistling shriek.

The assassins did not flinch. They were dancers on the edge of death, professionals who had long accepted that one day it would claim them.

But not today.

Not by the hand of a seventeen year old boy. With cold resolve, they channeled their Astra, which roared to life across their bodies as they hurtled forward to meet him.

The forest erupted into a storm of motion, blades flashing, shadows twisting, and Astra manipulation so dense it blurred the very air.

With a heavy clang, weapons collided in a burst of sparks, then again, and again, and again. The relentless thunder of steel echoed through the forest as countless blurs converged upon a single figure. Yet Asher faced them all with the grin of a madman carved into his bloodstained face.

His hand never faltered. Not once.

A streak of silver cut through the darkness like moonlight on water, and in its wake, a head soared silently into the air.

His rapier moved as though fate itself guided its path, fluid, inevitable. He struck without hesitation, his precision measured to the beat of a heart. Each motion was flawless, each attack turned upon its origin, as if he danced with death and led the rhythm. He never aimed for where they stood, only for where they were doomed to be.

His Battle Instinct ability allowed him to read their attacks as if they were laid bare before his eyes, movements, intentions, and weaknesses exposed in the split second before action.

At the same time, Instinctive Adaptation surged within him, enabling his body to twist and weave through strikes at impossible angles, as though he perceived the moment just before it unfolded.

Together, the two abilities moved in flawless harmony, turning Asher from the prey of the True Awakening into its most merciless predator.

Asher's smile never once faded, it had taken root the moment it appeared. His heart thundered like war drums in his chest, pumping blood with wild urgency.

Through his veins flowed not just blood, but Astra, both surging in tandem as he tore through enemy ranks like an gigantic axe cleaving through a sandcastle.

Sheer exhilaration bloomed in every fiber of his being. He streaked forward, a trail of purple light trailing behind him, while Virelass hummed in utter, primal satisfaction.

She had tasted blood before, had drunk deeply from beasts slain over the past six months. But those were creatures captured by Lyra. All Asher had done then was raise his rapier and thrust once.

But here... here, she could move freely. She could dance. She could rend flesh, shatter bones, tear through sinew, and split skulls. Every vibration through her blade was ecstasy. The thrill of the kill surged through her like wildfire.

If Virelass had a face in that moment, she would wear the same maddened, euphoric grin that lit up Asher's.

In a single, fluid motion, both partners, human and weapon, boy and rapier, descended into the brutal embrace of death's waltz. They moved as one, their wills seamlessly entwined. In that moment, their efficiency reached its peak, flawless, instinctive, deadly.

Asher made a decision.

His stamina would not burn out. Even if he ran at full speed for the entire remaining hour of the True Awakening, he would not falter. And with that resolve, he chose to run wild.

No more restraint.

No more calculated movements to conserve strength.

No more holding back.

No more anything.

No more nothing.

They would all fall before him.

They would all fall before Virelass.

Bodies piled in grotesque heaps as Asher pressed forward without a moment's pause. He moved with the grace of a panther unleashed in a pigsty, predatory, merciless, and far too fast for anything to stop him.

Blood arced into the air like crimson rain. The once brown earth beneath him changed color, turned into a gruesome canvas, blood its only paint. Even the silver moon above seemed to blush red under the ceremony of slaughter... this unholy bloodbath.

Trees fell like tofu before a blade, no matter the thickness of their bark or the strength of their trunks. Asher moved like a phantom born for the night, leaving nothing but flickering afterimages in his wake.

His purple eyes gleamed under the moonlight, bright and cold. Purple hair, scattered and wild, swayed with his motion, untamed as the boy himself.

And in the final moments of the assassins' lives, all they ever saw were those glowing eyes and the flash of white... before their world spun, and hell laid claim to their souls.

Abilities flared to life one after another, but to Asher, they were meaningless. His mind moved in perfect synchrony with his body, neither outpacing the other, neither falling behind.

His gaze tore through the intricacies and limitations of their abilities as if he were the one who had granted them those abilities to begin with.

Panic began to creep into the assassins' hearts.

And Asher welcomed it.

He seized the moment, harvesting every flaw, every misplaced step, every gap in formation, every tremor of fear his mind and eyes detected.

His purple eyes flickered with calculated intensity, dancing in their sockets as he processed dozens of attacks simultaneously, his brain functioning like a living supercomputer.

Every movement he made was a prelude to execution, a silent promise of death. The glint of his rapier wasn't just light; it was a beacon of finality, a quiet herald of doom.

His swordplay was poetry in motion, fluid, effortless, breathtaking. It flowed like ink across parchment, each stroke deliberate, each motion graceful. He moved like a moon-cast shadow, untouchable, ever-present, and impossible to predict.

His rapier didn't merely cut; it sculpted. Each strike was a deliberate act of artistry, a creation born of violence. The very air shimmered in his wake as his blade carved arcs of deadly beauty. It wove through the battlefield like silk between the fingers of a master tailor.

Thrusts, cleaves, and slashes bloomed like dark flowers beneath the forest canopy, each one blooming only to devour all in its path.

The darkness thickened, oppressive and alive, as though hell itself had opened its gates, welcoming its new Grim Reaper with open arms.

Chapter 77: Loyal Even Beyond Death

The stench of blood was so thick it clung to the air, saturating every breath with a metallic tang that lingered on the tongue. Asher walked forward, each step squelching softly beneath his boot.

Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish.

The sound echoed through the darkness, unnaturally loud against the silence of the ravaged forest. The dense fog that once cloaked the woods had long since been torn apart by the fury of battle, leaving the world around him eerily bare.

Blood had gathered into stagnant pools, spreading like crimson lakes beneath his feet. Corpses were strewn across the terrain like fallen leaves, lifeless heads resting with the permanence of stone.

Despite the toll the fight had taken, Asher's breath came slow and steady. His stamina was worn, but not broken. He still had more than enough left for anything... or anyone.

Virelass pulsed once, subtle, yet commanding. In response, the blood that soaked the battlefield began to stir. Whether it belonged to assassins, beasts, or the unfortunate monsters felled by the sheer force of Asher's onslaught, it obeyed.

Like crimson threads pulled by an unseen loom, the blood rose into the air, writhing as though granted sentience. One by one, the strands were drawn into Virelass, her form absorbing them with silent hunger.

As they vanished into her, the minor wounds that marred Asher's body mended, flesh stitching itself together with unnatural grace. The excess was stored within her, waiting.

At this moment, Asher could no longer sense the presence of any assassins, as if each one had already succumbed to the edge of his rapier. His gaze rose toward the silver moon suspended high in the night sky, its cold light glinting off his blood-slick form.

The stench of death clung to him, as naturally as the sweat seeping from his pores.

Suddenly, Asher's senses stirred. Something shifted in the periphery. His eyes fell from the moon and turned toward the source, emerging from the shadowed brush, an old man stepped forward. Unlike the masked assassins before him, this man walked calmly, unmasked and unhurried.

Asher's sharp gaze swept over the figure from head to toe. There was no need to raise his guard, it had been at its peak since the moment he awoke in this dark forest.

"I must say, you are the most dangerous and talented Wargrave Crymora has ever known," the old man said, his voice calm and composed.

A rapier rested at his side, his posture relaxed. But there was no mistaking the contrast, he didn't carry himself like the others, who fought in silence and died before they could even scream beneath Asher's blade.

"It seems you've been watching from the start," Asher replied coolly, a faint smile brushing his lips. "I hope the show was entertaining."

Though Asher generally held disdain for villainous monologues, he had respect for those whose strength earned them the right to speak. This man, from the way he moved, from the way the air bent around him, he had earned it.

"Indeed, I've been watching," the old man continued. "According to our records, you are the first Wargrave to eliminate every assassin before the True Awakening even concluded. Not a limb lost. Not an organ grazed or lost. A truly extraordinary feat."

The man wore a black breastplate devoid of any crest, greaves protecting his legs from knee to ankle, and vambraces shielding his arms. His white hair, undeniably the mark of age, contrasted with the taut strength in his frame. Despite the passing of two centuries, time had failed to dull the sharpness of his form.

He stood like a knight.

"If there's a reward that comes with such praise, I'd gladly accept it," Asher replied with a smirk, somehow finding humor even in a moment like this.

The words mattered little to him. What mattered was the time, thirty minutes remained. Whether this old man could kill him before that window closed was a question Asher already felt confident answering.

"You laugh and jest even after what you've endured," the old man noted. "Such will... such mindset."

Asher held the man's gaze, then turned back toward the moon. His voice was quiet, but steady. "So tell me your story. I'm certain you have one. You walk and speak like a knight, yet here you are, acting under an assassin's creed."

The old man stared at him in silence for a moment before speaking. "I was once a knight of a fallen noble household. I may be over two hundred years old and still stand only at the Spark Brightstar, but I served faithfully, and was honored to do so."

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle before continuing.

"But the First Sun, Malrik, destroyed that noble household, reduced it to ashes, because my young master dared glance at the Second Moon. And the Emperor refused to act. No punishment. No justice. No evidence, they said."

The man's voice never rose. He did not shout. He did not weep. Yet the sorrow, the rage buried beneath centuries, carried clearly through each syllable.

"So, I joined the Assassin's Guild. I drowned myself in missions and silence... until you came. Until you were born."

"So killing a Wargrave is your grand revenge?" Asher asked.

"Indeed," the old man replied, his eyes now drifting up to the same moon. "And once I kill you, I will take my own life, to join those I served in the land of the dead."

Asher remained silent. Despite the man's low rank and advanced age, the aura surrounding him brimmed with danger. Asher did not dare underestimate it.

Surviving for over two centuries with such meager power could only mean one of two things, either the man possessed a terrifying ability... or he was simply that lucky.

And Asher did not believe in luck in world like Crymora.

"What's your name, Mister Knight?" he asked, a flicker of genuine respect in his voice, for a man who had remained loyal even beyond death.

"You may call me Hillary," the old man replied without hesitation, unbothered by revealing his name.

Asher gave a small nod and fell into silence again. Sensing the pause, Hillary continued. "Though I now wear the title of assassin, I still carry the heart of a knight. You will see no cheap tricks from me. Let our rapiers decide life and death."

The atmosphere thickened, as though the air itself recognized the solemnity of the vow. Hillary's gauntleted hand moved to his blade. As he drew the rapier from its sheath, the metal hissed, slicing through the stillness of the forest.

Asher didn't flinch. No killing intent leaked from the man, yet his purpose was unmistakable, he had come for nothing but Asher's life.

In a blink, Virelass materialized in Asher's hand.

Purple eyes locked with deep, unreadable black. Their presence surged, saturating the air, bending wind and sky alike beneath the weight of their will.

A single leaf drifted downward, twirling on the breeze.

And the moment it touched the forest floor;

Asher and Hillary vanished.

Chapter 78: Romanticized Nonsense

In the blink of an eye, Asher and Hillary materialized at a single point in space, rapiers drawn, their rapier gleaming with lethal intent. Like twin cobras striking in perfect synchronicity, their hands shot forward, both aiming for the same point, at the same moment.

A sharp clang shattered the stillness as the tips of their rapiers collided. The very air at the point of impact shrieked in protest before erupting outward in a concussive burst.

Their garments fluttered violently from the shockwave, yet neither combatant yielded ground. Eyes locked, they stood as mirrored reflections, two minds sharing one rhythm, one intent, one moment.

Though their feet remained rooted, their arms blurred into motion, unleashing a relentless storm of thrusts. Each strike was met with another, a flawless counter, as steel kissed steel again and again in a savage ballet of speed and strength.

Within a single minute, their rapier had clashed over a thousand times. The ground beneath them had sunken under the strain, a crater forming from the sheer intensity of their duel. Earth and stone erupted outward, flung aside by the explosive force of their confrontation.

With a thunderous boom, the earth caved in further beneath them, the sudden collapse breaking their rhythm and disrupting their successive exchange. Yet even as their footing faltered, their gazes remained locked, unbending, unblinking, bound by unspoken challenge.

In the next instant, they vanished from the fractured ravine, their figures blurring into motion as they surged into the forest beyond.

No Astra. No elemental power. Just the raw, unfiltered mastery of rapier combat.

Their forms sliced through the woodland like phantom blades, each movement a testament to lethal efficiency. Trees, stones, anything unfortunate enough to obstruct

their path, were annihilated in an instant, obliterated as gaping voids tore through their centers, remnants of the sheer velocity and force behind every step and strike.

Beneath the waning glow of the moon, two streaks of light carved through the air, gliding across meters as if space itself dared not hinder their path. Each pass birthed a storm of sparks, scattering like burning embers and casting the night sky in hues of molten orange.

They moved like phantoms, ghostly, untouchable, yet devastating. Blades whispered through the air, slicing reality as if cleaving through the very fabric of existence.

Every clash of their rapiers resounded like the toll of a distant bell, solemn, resonant, heralding not merely combat, but the collision of two indomitable wills. It was more than a duel. It was a reckoning.

Though Asher had heard Hillary claim he was now an assassin who still bore the heart of a knight, he refused to entertain such romanticized nonsense.

Trusting a man like Hillary, even for a moment, could mean death. Even now, despite their ongoing duel being devoid of Astra, Asher's gaze never wavered from Hillary's entire form, watching with ruthless stare for any sudden or hidden maneuver.

Virelass screamed in his grip, the blade vibrating with eagerness as Asher moved in perfect sync with it. He feinted, his rapier carving a serpentine path of deception through the air. Hillary adjusted to defend, but the moment he committed, Asher's trajectory shifted with surgical accuracy.

And yet, Hillary responded, not with surprise, but as if he had foreseen it from the very beginning.

Hillary's rapier shimmered, then vanished into a blur of motion. In the next breath, hundreds of crescent slashes materialized around him like conjured wind blades, as if the sheer force of his movements had compelled reality itself to obey.

Asher's eyes narrowed, the purple hue in his gaze gleaming with focus. He had never witnessed this technique before, but his battle instincts were honed beyond reason. His body responded before thought could catch up. Muscles coiled. Virelass rose.

The moment the swirling cuts closed in, Asher moved, fluid and precise, mirroring the technique with uncanny accuracy. Together, he and Virelass unleashed the same devastating motion.

In an instant, a storm of cutting wind erupted from him. Hundreds of phantom blades tore through the space between them, meeting Hillary's in a violent symphony.

Sword marks ravaged the earth. Trenches split the terrain, stretching for meters. Trees, mighty and tall, were diced into clean fragments, reduced to logs as if sliced by invisible executioners. The forest groaned under the weight of their destructive power.

But Asher didn't remain still.

The moment he executed the technique, his Perfect Muscle Memory had already committed and refined it, flawlessly. What had taken Hillary years to master, Asher adapted within seconds.

He and Virelass moved again, their synchronization absolute, one body, one mind, one blade.

His arm blurred into motion. The air howled in protest, but it was forced to yield beneath the weight of his will.

Hundreds of razor-sharp wind slashes bled into existence once more, but this time, they carried a different purpose. No longer a mirror or a defense, they were an assault. Sharper. Faster. Ruthless.

Each cut tore through space like a predator unchained, seeking Hillary with deadly intent.

Hillary wasn't surprised by the sight before him.

He had been watching Asher for the past five hours, ever since the True Awakening began. He had seen Asher carve through veteran assassins with ease, reducing years of honed skill to fleeting moments of futility.

He had watched him wield daggers with stolen precision, mimicking their techniques flawlessly. Even the whip, an unfamiliar weapon, had bent to Asher's will on the first attempt, as if it had always belonged in his hand.

So no, Hillary wasn't shocked that Asher had replicated the wind-cutting technique so perfectly. And yet, a silent thunder echoed in his chest, a sensation long buried beneath layers of experience and detachment.

When was the last time he had felt this?

When was the last time he stood against another rapier wielder, someone who could challenge him with raw talent and unrelenting instinct?

His expression remained stone. He said nothing.

Words had no place in battle, not for him.

Just action.

Without a word, Hillary shifted into stance, silent, sharp, absolute. His presence deepened, pressing down on the world like a rising tide. Then he moved.

In the blink of an eye, his form vanished into a streak of black light, erupting outward in a burst of blinding speed and overwhelming force.

His rapier clashed against the incoming wind blades, not with hesitation, but with dominance. Each arc of his blade shredded through the attacks as though they were made of paper. He cut, he cleaved, he dismantled the very air around him.

Over a century of battle-hardened instinct blazed in every motion. This was no longer mere combat, it was art formed through war.

A massive dust storm erupted, surging upward in a chaotic spiral that swallowed the battlefield whole. Amidst the swirling haze, only twin flashes, one black, one silver, could be seen, streaking through the smoke like gods of war unleashed.

And then, silence.

The lights vanished, consumed by the rising veil of dust, leaving behind only stillness and a world holding its breath.

Asher's eyes pierced through the churning dust storm, unblinking. Though the haze clouded sight, his senses blared within his mind like sirens, warning him, guiding him. He dared not remain still.

In an instant, his body vanished in a streak of purple, retreating backward with fluid grace and sharpened instinct.

Then it came.

Hillary erupted from the heart of the dust like a sniper's bullet, silent, deadly, unstoppable. His form was a flash of darkness, hurtling forward with singular focus. There was only one target: Asher.

Asher's eyes tracked the descent, reading every nuance in a heartbeat. From above, Hillary's rapier fell like a meteor, blazing, merciless, ready to tear reality into ribbons.

But Asher met it head-on.

Virelass surged forward in his grip, gleaming with intent. With a swift twist of his wrist, his blade rose to meet the descending strike. Timing and technique blended in perfect harmony as he deflected the blow with an expert parry, redirecting the killing force with surgical motion.

Steel kissed steel, and the air trembled in reverence.

Chapter 79: Savage

As they moved in tandem, Asher quickly realized that Hillary's speed was escalating with each passing moment, his rapier flashing like fleeting bolts of silver. The rhythm of their exchange, once measured, had abruptly shifted without warning, as if the battle had taken on a tempo of its own.

In a blink, Hillary's rapier darted forward. Asher's instincts flared, he moved to intercept, but his blade met nothing but air. The strike had already come and gone, too swift to track.

Then came the sting. Steel met flesh in a single, seamless motion, clean and sharp, like a knife sliding through butter.

A fresh gash split open across Asher's skin, but he didn't so much as flinch. After enduring countless wounds over the past five hours, his body had grown numb to pain.

But Virelass responded without hesitation, the sentient weapon pulsed once, and the torn flesh stitched itself shut as though it had never been touched.

But Hillary remained undeterred, he had anticipated Asher's regenerative ability. What he didn't fully understand, however, was the extent of Virelass's healing. Still, he had a theory.

In all the time Asher had clashed with various assassins, he had never sustained damage to a vital organ, for example something as delicate as the eye. Perhaps it was because Virelass couldn't mend what required absolute efficiency.

With that possibility in mind, Hillary's posture shifted. In a single, fluid transition, his attacks grew savage and ferocious. Then, like a lightning bolt rending the heavens, the tip of his rapier shot forward, aimed directly for Asher's eye.

Asher watched the rapier streak toward him, the glint of its edge mere centimetres from his eye. There was no time to raise Virelass, no room for parrying. His head snapped to the side in the last instant, narrowly evading the fatal thrust.

A thunderous boom followed, the wind exploding against his eardrums like a concussive wave. His sense of balance wavered, thrown into disarray by the sudden pressure.

Hillary didn't hesitate. In a heartbeat, he exploited the opening, his leg lashed out like a whip, driven by brutal momentum and flawless timing.

Before Asher could regain his footing, a piercing ring surged through his skull, throwing his senses into chaos. In that instant of vulnerability, a powerful force struck his ankles with maddening precision.

He didn't even have time to blink, gravity seized him like a predator, dragging him downward with merciless intent.

He crashed into the earth with a resounding heavy thud, the impact rippling out as cracks spiderwebbed beneath him. But even within that fleeting heartbeat, Asher's mind recalibrated. Instinct and battle-hardened reflexes surged back to life.

As clarity returned, so did the brutal reality, he turned just in time to see a rapier thrust screaming toward him.

Instinctive Adaptation flared to life once more. Asher rolled to the side in a blur of motion, a frantic dodge that shifted seamlessly into a light, graceful somersault. He landed on his feet with feline poise, rising like a shadow reborn.

A heartbeat later, Hillary's rapier pierced the spot Asher had just vacated. The ground erupted violently, the thrust detonated with such force that it carved a gaping crater, as though the very abyss had opened its jaws to swallow the world.

Agonizing pain surged through Asher's frame, his ankle had swollen grotesquely, ribs cracked beneath the skin, and scattered fractures screamed with every movement. The impact had been nothing short of brutal.

But Virelass was already at work.

She needed no command, no spoken plea. The moment pain bloomed, she responded, an extension of Asher himself. Bound to him by more than will, she pulsed with silent purpose, mending torn flesh and shattered bone with instinctive accuracy.

Hillary rose to his feet in a single, fluid motion, his presence now dangerously sharp. His head turned toward Asher, and for a moment, his obsidian eyes looked almost inhuman, like twin voids housing demons.

He began to walk forward with measured, deliberate steps, yet with each stride, the air thickened, as though the very atmosphere strained under the pressure of his intent.

Then, just as his foot hovered above the earth to complete another step, he vanished. Not with speed, but with silence. It was as though reality itself had erased him from existence in that instant.

Asher's eyes widened, instincts screaming in alarm. He sensed it, a presence blooming behind him like death incarnate. A heartbeat too late, and a rapier was already there, lunging toward his spine like a phantom's dagger in the night.

'Movement Technique,' Asher thought, the thought echoing through his mind as Omni Perception illuminated everything around him with perfect clarity.

Astra surged through his specialized veins, igniting like a storm within his body and multiplying his speed in an instant. With explosive force, Asher shot to the side, his body a blur. He evaded the fatal thrust at the very last moment, but not without cost.

The rapier grazed his back, tearing through flesh once more, yet even as blood splashed, the wound was already sealing shut, Virelass mending him with unwavering precision.

Without pause, Asher launched backward, his movement a controlled explosion of speed. Virelass gleamed in his hand as he shot upward, vaulting onto a bent, crooked tree.

He landed with feline balance, body coiled and perfect atop the unstable perch.

Hillary was right behind him, silent. Like a phantom, he surged up the same bent tree, his black eyes locked onto Asher with unblinking gaze. He caught the slightest twitch, Asher's left hand moving toward his back.

A flicker of insight sparked.

Asher's hand dove into a pouch he'd taken from one of the fallen assassins. In a single sweeping motion, he hurled a volley of throwing needles, each one laced with explosive force as he surged backwards.

But Hillary didn't hesitate, he dove headfirst into the storm of needles without so much as a blink. As they closed in, his arm rose in a blur. With calculated motion, he angled his vambrace, deflecting each projectile mid-flight. Sparks danced across his frame, but none pierced him.

He closed the distance in a breath, his rapier thrusting toward Asher's throat with unnerving lethality, a strike so cold and calculated it bordered on the mind of a killer.

But Asher was already there.

He met the attack with one of his own, Virelass roaring forward in a mirrored thrust. The clash was instant, a collision of power and technique.

The resulting shockwave shattered the warped tree beneath their feet, splinters and bark bursting into the air like shrapnel.

Gravity took hold, and both fighters plummeted from the sky. Yet even in free fall, the battle didn't stop, their weapons danced midair, strikes and counters flashing with terrifying speed as the world blurred around them.

Thrust met thrust.

Slash collided with parry.

Feints were answered with razor-sharp deflections.

Slice clashed against slice, steel singing in the air.

The shattered remnants of wood fell with them, only to be torn into dust by the fury of their exchange. These were not mere warriors, they were two forces chasing death, unforgiving and absolute.

Then — impact.

With a thunderous crash, their feet struck the earth, the ground trembling beneath them. Dust flared outward like ripples across water, but neither staggered. Their stances held firm, unshaken, eyes locked. In that moment, nothing else in the world existed, only the one standing before them.

And then, as if in perfect synchrony, it came.

A surge of purple lightning crackled across the battlefield, snaking around Asher's frame like a living storm. It danced across his body, casting his figure in flashes of violent brilliance, raw power crackling with each breath he took.

At the same time, searing crimson flames erupted around Hillary, blazing to life with a regal fury. They wrapped his form in fire, casting him in a knightly silhouette, upright, composed, and deadly, the embodiment of controlled destruction.

As though fate itself had sounded an unseen signal, they moved.

Both figures vanished, blurring from sight in titanic bursts of speed. Space rippled in their wake as gods clashed beneath the sky.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

LET THE WORLD BURN UNDER PEAK ACTION

Chapter 80: Freeze

The waning darkness that had cloaked the forest began to dissolve entirely, giving way to the violent bloom of crimson flames and purple lightning that tore into existence.

With a deafening roar, both elements collided, an elemental clash so potent it threatened to cleave the forest in two.

The resulting shockwave surged outward in a brutal tide, hurling trees, earth, boulders, and stone alike into the air. What wasn't flung was utterly annihilated, swallowed whole by the overwhelming forces at play.

A deep tremor reverberated through the land, as though a meteor had struck the heart of the forest. Lightning crackled violently, twisting through the air with serpentine madness, each thunderclap sharp enough to rupture eardrums.

Flames raged with searing brilliance, the heat distorting the very air, rising to a fevered pitch, as if reality itself might melt under its wrath.

Gaping ravines tore open the earth, their jagged mouths stretching toward the heavens. The ground beneath glowed with molten fury, transformed into a river of lava, while the merciless lightning scorched everything in its path, leaving nothing but blackened ruin.

Within the veil of darkness and swirling fog, two titanic figures, one wreathed in crackling lightning, the other engulfed in roaring flames, collided with a thunderous impact that shook the world.

Their forms, lost in motion, became silhouettes of raw elemental frenzy, one painted in searing crimson, the other in radiant purple.

There was no restraint. Each warrior drove the other to the brink, every clash of their weapons echoing in a blaring crescendo that tore through the silence like a scream from the abyss.

Smoke curled into the heavens, thick and suffocating. The surrounding beasts, seized by primal fear, fled in desperate retreat, instinctively knowing to run, lest they be incinerated by the flames or torn apart by the shockwaves that shattered the air around them.

Their blades met with the fury of a tempest, sparks erupting as though the very air recoiled from the violence. Steel screamed against steel, each strike a war-drum's beat, echoing like thunder beneath a storm-choked sky.

They moved in a symphony of death, blades flashing like lightning bolts wrenched from the hands of an enraged god.

They did not pause to breathe.

They did not pause to blink.

They did not pause to think.

They did not pause to speak.

They simply moved.

Their bodies flowed with ruthless grace. Eyes sharp, hands precise, feet relentless, they were no longer men, but forces of nature bound in mortal flesh.

Fatigue held no dominion here. No, exhaustion dared not lay a finger upon these godlike beings as they tore into one another with cataclysmic clash, each blow threatening to reshape the world around them.

Another overwhelming force surged between them as their rapiers clashed once more, yet neither yielded. Their feet remained anchored to the earth, unmoved, as though the very ground bowed to their resolve.

The air before them detonated with absurd force, yet they didn't flinch, didn't blink, unshaken by the chaos erupting around them.

They traded thrusts like poets weaving verses, each strike a stanza, each cut a line of elegant brutality. Their movements danced like silver rivers under moonlight, fluid, graceful, and deadly.

Parries and slashes wove together into a seamless tempest, a duel so precise it blurred the line between violence and art.

They met and parted like waves crashing upon an eternal shore, every collision pulsing with the raw, untamed force of nature itself.

Asher's rapier moved with rapturous impulse, Virelass streaking forward like a spear of judgment. Lightning enveloped his entire form, wild, radiant, and unyielding, dancing along the blade in arcs of crackling madness.

Opposite him, Hillary's flames surged in response, flaring with demonic intensity as his own rapier flowed like the firestorms of the underworld.

Each clash released a cacophony of sizzling energy and shrieking sound, lightning snarling against flame, steel howling against steel, as the two combatants weaved destruction into every movement.

In mere minutes, the forest bore the scars of their conflict, entire swaths reduced to smoldering ruin. Trees lay in charred heaps, the earth was split and burning, as they drove each other forward with nothing but pure, lethal intent.

Hillary's figure blurred as he launched backward, crimson flames trailing behind him like a comet streaking through the dark. He came to a sudden halt, planting his feet as his rapier rose, its tip leveled at Asher with precise, silent intent.

In a single motion, his arm recoiled, flames surging violently around him, then he vanished. His form tore through the air, surging forward like a blazing arrow loosed from a divine bow. The thrust that followed was sharp, deadly, and merciless, a technique honed for the kill.

Asher's senses flared, danger screamed in his bones. Whatever Hillary had just unleashed, it wasn't ordinary. It was a technique, and a fatal one at that. Instinct overruled thought. He didn't dare parry. He didn't attempt to block.

Instead, he moved.

A thunderous crack split the air as Asher's form became a streak of purple lightning, vanishing from sight in a bolt of raw speed, evading death by a breath.

The moment Asher vanished, Hillary's thrust erupted with cataclysmic force. A torrent of flame exploded outward, devouring the space Asher had occupied, like an all-consuming beast unleashed.

The inferno surged forth, its tendrils licking and incinerating everything in their path, carving a smoldering void into the heart of the forest as if reality itself had been torn open by the sheer ferocity of the strike.

But before the embers could settle, Hillary's senses flared, something was behind him.

His body moved before thought could catch up. Shoulder, foot, and arm snapped into perfect alignment, his center of gravity shifting with fluid movement honed by countless battles.

His rapier screamed upward just in time, meeting Asher's descending blade in a blinding clash. The impact roared like a thunderstorm's outrage, Asher's strike descending like a judge's gavel with undeniable finality.

The force rampaged through Hillary's frame, threatening to break his stance apart, but he held firm.

The earth beneath him cracked and sank under the weight, but Hillary didn't flinch. Not even for a second.

They vanished and reappeared in flashes of devastation, each movement a storm of unrestrained power. Astra surged through their veins with relentless fervor, as if they wielded an infinite wellspring of energy drawn from the cosmos itself.

Blows rained in rapid succession, thrusts, slashes, cuts, and counter-thrusts, each technique crashing against another in a duel of relentless mastery. Every strike was met with its equal, every motion born from instinct sharpened into perfection.

Their footprints marked the scarred earth, etched deep into the ruined forest like echoes carved into the sands of time.

Their feet danced across the battlefield, brushing the ground with divine efficiency, while their rapiers met and parted, again and again, like the ceremonial kiss of a sacred vow, sealed in steel and sanctified by the heavens themselves.

The sun began its slow ascent, inching above the horizon as if the heavens themselves sought to remind them; time was slipping away. The darkness and fog that had veiled the battlefield began to retreat beneath the golden tide of morning, light bleeding softly into the ravaged forest.

Hillary, catching sight of the rising dawn, made a choice.

For the first time since the battle began, he broke his silence.

His lips parted, and his voice rang out, not merely loud, but thunderous, a sound that cut through the clash of steel and the howl of flames. It carried the weight of authority, of power, of finality. A single word, yet it seemed vast enough to drown the storm that surrounded them.

"FREEZE."