

# **The Bookkeeper**

## **#Chapter 131 131: Apex Circle - Read The Bookkeeper**

### **Chapter 131 131: Apex Circle**

Silence filled the distance, broken only by the sound of a gentle breeze sweeping across the desert. The wind was cool and biting as Raiden pushed forward, rubbing his arms together to generate warmth, while Ash rested against Noelle's back as she led the way.

Noelle had been quiet ever since her encounter with Snow and Ekko, and all Raiden could do was stare helplessly. He found himself confused and utterly perplexed about the right words to use; a single misstep could worsen her situation.

And if he were in her place, he would prefer being left alone to wonder and work through it himself.

So he braced himself as they both pressed on, the journey continuing without a word shared between them. Their boats dove deep into the dark water before they fought to drive them back to the surface with raw determination.

Raiden turned eastward as the sun began its slow ascent. He paused to stretch, feeling the pull in his muscles. This was their second day traveling toward Dark City, and surrounded by endless desert, he knew they still had considerable ground to cover.

But Raiden couldn't shake the dryness and bone-deep tiredness. He was hungry, and worse still, his lips had turned pale and begun cracking from the desert air.

But Noelle seemed to be facing the opposite situation, or perhaps she simply didn't have time to dwell on physical discomfort. As Raiden stood adjusting his body, she kept walking, only glancing back at him briefly.

After a moment, Raiden sighed and quickened his pace to join her. But before he could reach her, she stopped, and so did he.

The earth under them started to quake, sand leaping from the surface in small bursts while they stood frozen in confusion.

Raiden triggered Gaze Beyond, his enhanced vision cutting through the distance. Sand clouded the air, limiting his sight, but he was sure there was nothing hostile within a mile's reach. Even so, the tremors felt exactly like a herd of charging bulls bearing down on them.

If anything dangerous were coming their way, his danger sense should have activated, but it lay silent. This left Raiden more confused than ever and questioning whether his ability still functioned. Since his encounter with Zion, which had cost him his sight, he couldn't remember sensing danger even once.

He touched his face reflexively, the doubt consuming him, while Noelle simply continued forward. Was he gradually losing all his senses?

"Or maybe I'm just getting weaker," he murmured. He knew this deterioration demanded his attention, but right now all he could do was follow Noelle's determined pace.

Raiden trailed behind her as dawn broke fully, his restless mind bouncing between theories. His fingers unconsciously traced his lips—had his growing independence from Ash somehow severed their bond? Or was this spiral of doubt nothing more than paranoia?

No answers came to him, and each doubt only birthed new uncertainties. Yet the ground's trembling grew more violent the closer they approached whatever lay ahead.

When they neared the Apex Circle, Noelle suddenly quickened her step and began climbing a sand. Raiden stopped short, puzzled, but after a brief glance at her retreating figure, he shrugged and hurried to follow.

When Raiden finally joined her at the summit, his eyes widened. Relief flooded through him, and he couldn't help but smile. Hands sliding into his pockets, he looked down at MK and Leo below.

They gazed down at a vast field, roughly a hundred meters across, the very spot where they'd first encountered the storm when they arrived at Noor. Leo's mana zone pulsed with life, his yellow aura washing over the entire field below, held in check only by the surrounding mountains.

Leo's mana zone was far more powerful than Raiden's, but that realization came and went quickly. His attention was captured entirely by the intensity and beauty of the fight.

They attacked with determination and precision. Fury burned in Leo's eyes as he transformed his mana into solid flames, while MK wrapped himself in earthen armor. They fought as if their lives depended on it.

Raiden swallowed hard, mesmerized by Leo's reflexes as he evaded MK's attacks flawlessly. He was nothing like the Leo Raiden had known just weeks ago.

However, MK's behavior made Raiden wonder about their fight. Obviously, Leo could only respond to MK's attacks so effectively because of his mana zone. So why didn't MK use his own zone to counter it?

"Is MK just not into mana zones, or couldn't he master it?" Raiden asked, his gaze locked on the fight, tracking their every move.

"Not that," Noelle finally spoke up. Raiden glanced over at her and smiled, surprised she'd responded at all.

"Mana zones would be easiest for MK to pick up." She pointed down at MK. "Watch him more carefully."

Raiden activated Gaze Beyond again. The moment he noticed the thin golden shield surrounding MK's armor, he nodded in understanding.

"For some reason, he chose to make it so thin," she observed.

Raiden narrowed his eyes, studying MK's armor more closely. A smirk crossed his face as he figured out what was happening.

He dug into his pocket, produced an aether cigarette, and flicked it into Leo's zone below.

"Well, well," Noelle said, observing how the aether moved within the zone.

Raiden nodded firmly and grinned. "Look closely and you'll see MK has anchored his boots to the ground with earth magic."

Raiden pointed to MK's boots. Sand completely encased his feet, and his legs moved in sync with them, fighting not to float since Leo's ability had already negated his weight.

"So Leo's running his ability through his mana zone and keeping his flames active too." Noelle giggled softly. "Managing all three simultaneously... impressive."

Raiden shrugged casually. "MK's pulling off the same feat, though."

Raiden felt pleased that Leo had accepted his challenge to grow stronger, though concern nagged at him too. Leo looked pale, dark marks shadowing his eyes, with bandages wrapped around his hands under his rolled-up white sleeves. Despite wearing black gloves, additional bandages peeked through on his fingers.

It was clear Leo had pushed himself hard to gain such power. Raiden examined his own hands, questioning whether he'd made any progress that measured up.

While they observed from above, Raiden noticed something unsettling about Leo's zone. The vibrant yellow was bleeding out of it, gradually turning white.

Raiden's gaze shifted to Leo, who was breathing hard as he attempted to create space between them. But MK pursued relentlessly. Leo had reached his breaking point; exhaustion was taking its toll.

A smile crossed Raiden's face as he watched, eager to see what Leo could pull off when pushed to his limits.

"I knew if I could master concealing my presence entirely, you wouldn't sense me coming." Someone spoke from behind them. Raiden and Noelle both turned in unison, Raiden immediately shifting into a fighting stance, his heart hammering.

Levi appeared in his physical form. "Well, well, golden eyes?" he said with his typical smirk, one hand propped on his hip.

The amusement drained from his face as he studied Noelle and Raiden. "Please tell me you didn't reproduce."

"So you lost your sight fighting some guy named Zion, and Ash... somehow became human?" Leo mused, his finger tapping against his chin as his gaze wandered across the tent walls.

"And once again, you find yourself entangled with organizations you know little about."

"Exactly." Raiden sank onto the narrow bed to his left while Levi leaned against the entrance wall, Speed beside him, arms crossed over his chest.

"I'm tired," he murmured, collapsing onto the bed. Every muscle in his legs surrendered as he exhaled deeply, relief washing over his face in a grateful smile.

But his expression darkened soon after, a sneer twisting his features. "I really want to sleep, but I know my mind won't let me," he muttered.

He knew his body intimately, and despite the overwhelming fatigue that made his muscles ache for rest, the sun's relentless heat and his restless mind conspired to pull him back to his feet.

Taking a deep breath, he turned to them. "How did things go for you guys?"

They all observed him with careful expressions as he relaxed, until Levi spoke up, and Leo turned his seat toward Raiden.

"Oh my," he smirked. "First time you've actually talked to us about your life."

His smile deepened as his eyes darted to the ceiling. "Is it because you're becoming a softie for the new girl, Master?"

Raiden blinked slowly at him, his expression unreadable. "That would've been better, wouldn't it?" His look turned lazy. "You would've finally gotten your chance to be the acting leader."

Levi shrugged. "I already am a leader, my friend."

Speed sighed and shook his head. "Our journey wasn't nearly as complicated as yours, but we still had our problems."

He walked forward, grabbed a chair, and sat down near Leo, touching his mask. "My mask and Soul's enchanted stickers made this a bit troublesome."

He began massaging his head, golden eyes shifting to Raiden. "Children ran the moment they spotted us, and adults were terrified just by our presence."

He turned to Levi and sneered. "And this good-for-nothing here only made it worse, threatening people with our presence."

He shrugged while Raiden narrowed his eyes at him, and Speed's expression softened. "Well, we had our share of fun."

"Levi took us to the Sea of Snakes, where we fought these massive worm-looking creatures with sharp teeth covering their skin and lining their mouths." Speed's description struck Raiden as familiar, catching him off guard.

"They swam through the sand like fish in the sea whenever they detected water." He shrugged. "We met some powerful people there who helped us learn how to fight the snakes."

Raiden smirked, finally understanding. "Wait—those sand worms? They're snakes?"

Speed raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, they look like worms, but everyone said they were snakes."

"I don't know much about Drake's Shell," Levi added, "but I think they use some of those snakes to eliminate the weak ones."

He raised his hands, shaking his head with a soft smile. "Great men like me didn't need to break a sweat. Those snakes couldn't see or sense me to begin with."

Raiden shared his smile. He now understood that Levi could erase his presence entirely, making it seem as though he'd never been there—no footprints, no scent, nothing. Invisible, he moved like the wind.

This was a milestone not just for Levi, but for Raiden as well. With Levi's ability evolving to this level, retrieving the pages might prove easier than anticipated.

Yet thinking about his development only saddened him. He looked at their necks, at their crests and the numbers there, and let out a disappointed sigh.

Both Leo and Levi were at number five now, while he remained at the same level as Speed. What stung his pride most: before they'd arrived, Speed had been at number eight, and now they were equals.

Leo's eyes darted across their faces, then his head dropped. "You guys got to visit interesting places." His voice carried a sad, almost sobbing quality.

"Anyway, why do they call the desert a sea?" Leo turned to Levi. "The place MK and I visited was called the Smiling Sanctum, and they kept referring to the desert as a sea too."

Levi folded his arms across his chest. "That area isn't far from the Sea of Snakes at all." He smirked. "It's the same desert."

But his smile quickly faded. "Why didn't you guys ask the people there?"

They all stared at him, waiting for an explanation to Leo's question. He took a deep breath, ran his hand through his hair, and adjusted his ponytail.

"Everyone knows the Kingdom of Noor has the largest territory of all the kingdoms, but the fewest people."

He raised his hands. "Well, there you have it."

"We have vast lands we can't even use." His face darkened. "But it started with one person, centuries ago, who first called the desert a sea to sail."

"Many know him as the king of the sea, but according to legend, he vanished centuries ago. Before that, he'd conquered the middle of the kingdom, claimed nearly half our land, and named it the Endless Sea."

Raiden rose from the bed, stretching as he yawned. His eyes were already burning with fatigue; he needed to sleep.

"He succeeded, and now everyone wants to follow his example by conquering territory."

"Does the Endless Sea still exist?" Speed asked.

Levi shook his head. "There are still people who believe it exists, though the kingdom took the land back when he vanished."

Leo rose to his feet. "The Smiling Sanctum was hell, frankly." He began cracking his knuckles. "We fought corrupt crest bearers who'd gone insane, but the worst part? We

couldn't complain because everyone there had to maintain this fake happiness and keep smiling."

He turned to Raiden. "You know what? I went through all that hell so I could finally take you up on your challenge and face you, bookkeeper."

Raiden managed an awkward smile as he scratched his head. Sure, he'd challenged Leo to get strong enough to defeat him, but he hadn't expected him to take it literally.

"This'll be the perfect way to pass time until Freya and Aeris get back," Levi said, his smile turning twisted. He was clearly eager to see how much stronger Raiden had become.

"I'll referee," he said, moving toward the tent opening. "Give me thirty minutes to set things up."

Raiden glanced at Leo. The familiar determined expression on his face carried something new this time: confidence. That alone filled him with pride.

This was his doing, and he had to meet Leo's challenge with everything he had. Plus, it would be the perfect way to exhaust himself enough to get some sleep.

#### *Chapter 133: Burns of Raid*

Silence stretched between them.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he watched Leo's direction, adjusting his stance while Leo repositioned his gloves.

Levi positioned himself before them, cocky grin in place, as the others looked on from the mountains encircling the field.

Raiden breathed in slowly, pressing his palms to his head to drive away the drowsiness and steel himself for action.

His gaze swept frantically as his thoughts scattered. He had to find a way to survive this because once Leo unleashed his mana zone, the fight would be finished.

"I'll count to three, then you fight," Levi announced, wearing that familiar smirk.

The instant he spoke, Raiden's lips curved upward. *"I just don't have to give him time,"* he whispered, eyes on Levi as he began funneling mana into his legs and fists.

"One!"

As soon as Levi called out, before he could even withdraw, Raiden exploded forward at Leo, his crushing footfalls launching sand into the air and choking the atmosphere with dust.

Leo's eyes dilated as he glimpsed Raiden's fist streaking toward his face, moving faster than he could counter.

Raiden smiled when his fist slammed into Leo's cheek, the impact wrenching Leo's head to the left. He understood the lethal potential of his strikes, yet he had to bring this to an end.

Before the strike's momentum could launch Leo away, Raiden caught him by the collar, dragging him forward as he hammered calculated hits into his chest, gut, and throat.

In that instant, Leo's eyes became hollow and dazed. He collapsed to his knees, blood trickling from his nostrils, coughed red, and toppled face-first into the earth.

Everyone reeled in bewilderment, especially Levi, who had been sent sprawling by the force of Raiden's charge. The assault happened in a blur—all they perceived were crushing winds and scattered blows before Leo collapsed, barely breathing, in under a minute.

**[ALERT]**

**[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]**

**[+5XP]**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL- 75 /100 XP.]**

**[STAMINA: +5**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +5**

**DRAGON MANA POOL: 1100/5000**

**SOUL OF DRAGON: 65%**

**HEART OF DRAGON: 65%**

**MOON DRAGON'S VEIN: 55%]**

Raiden exhaled and crouched over Leo to feel for a pulse, but the instant he did, stabbing pain ripped across his cheek, and he pressed his hand to it, grinding his teeth.



Before he realized it, blood coated his hand, and he glanced down to discover a slender cut running across his chest.

Raiden raised an eyebrow, startled. Leo hadn't made a single movement throughout the fight. How was this possible?

His hands held no weapons, no blades. Bewilderment weighed down his expression.

*"What happened?"* he said under his breath, rushing to study the wound before it closed up entirely.

*"This is a rough cut. Can't be from a blade."* His eyes suddenly widened as understanding hit. He seized Leo's left hand, studied his knuckles, and broke into heavy laughter.

In the midst of the barrage, Leo had managed a strike faster than Raiden could register despite his unnatural speed, powerful enough to rip through his skin.

Raiden couldn't suppress his reaction to that discovery. With ordinary strikes, Leo would have dominated the fight completely.

While he remained crouched, his laughter gradually fading, the others started hurrying in their direction.

Speed was the first to arrive. He knelt beside Raiden and began checking Leo's condition too.

"At least he's alive," Speed whispered, then glanced at Raiden to find his wound had already closed up.

"Are you hurt? What was so funny?" Speed questioned as Raiden got to his feet with that same smile.

*"He was cleverer than I expected."*

Levi moved in to examine Leo, MK following close behind. Meanwhile, Raiden's gaze roamed the surroundings as the dust finally settled, revealing everything clearly.

On the peak to his left, Noelle and Ash held hands while watching him with expressions he couldn't interpret. Across from them, Soul's crushing dark aura engulfed her and most of the mountainside in blackness.

Soul offered him a bright smile, raising her hand in greeting. Raiden gulped, startled by how dramatically her aura had expanded in such a short time. He forced a strained smile and waved back.

No matter how much his own power had increased, he couldn't afford to dismiss Soul. Her strange and formidable ability meant she would inevitably become important to him.

While Speed and Levi helped Leo back to the tent, Raiden walked toward Soul with his hands buried in his pockets.

The instant he arrived at the summit, her crushing aura surrounded him. He paused, unsure if his night vision would be effective in her dark energy.

*"Get it together. This is Soul, for crying out loud..."* he muttered, exhaling slowly.

He braced himself and entered the dark aura. A smile tugged at his lips as he discovered he could see everything clearly, the shadows having no effect on him. Mildly embarrassed by his doubt, he made his way over to Soul and positioned himself beside her.

"Interesting that my aura doesn't affect your vision," Soul observed, her soft golden eyes turning to his. "You should have simply asked me to join you below."

Raiden grinned and gave a casual shrug. "Don't sweat it. Darkness doesn't bother me."

Soul's mood shifted, her expression turning serious. She settled at the mountain's edge, folding her legs against her chest and embracing them.

"There's something I wanted to discuss with you, though I expected you'd want to recover first," she murmured.

Her demeanor worried Raiden; it had been so long since he'd seen her this withdrawn.

He sat down next to her and softly stroked her head. *"Go ahead and tell me. I'm here."*

Soul raised her eyes to meet his. "Okay," she murmured before looking down again.

"It's my mana zone," she said with a trembling voice. "I'm scared I'll be useless to you when it matters."

Raiden's expression shifted to worry. He looked over his shoulder at the turbulent shadows engulfing half the mountain. If her abilities had progressed this far, why would she doubt herself?

*"What do you mean, Soul?"*

She kept staring down as she inhaled slowly. "Whenever I use it, the range is massive." She motioned to the field stretching out before them. "Roughly double what you see there."

Raiden found himself confused by her concern. His mana zone barely reached a quarter of the field's size, but that wouldn't stop him from deploying it.

She raised her eyes to meet his, her dark hair cascading over her features. Raiden's hand moved to sweep the locks away from her face.

"With that kind of coverage, I can't keep my concentration." Her face fell even more. "The worst part is what it does to anyone who ends up inside."

Understanding flickered across Raiden's face, his gaze growing tender. *"What does it do?"*

"It pulls their souls away," she said, voice trembling with guilt. "The moment I figured out how to activate it, I accidentally took five lives."

Raiden noticed the moisture gathering in her eyes as she struggled to conceal her tears.

"I'm so afraid..." she lifted her eyes to meet his. "Afraid that I'll end up killing you and the others when I activate it."

"But I want to be useful too. I desperately want to help."

Raiden wasn't naturally gifted with emotional moments, but he knew how to handle this and turn it into something that would bring them closer.

He wrapped his arms around her in a tender hug, his hand moving softly through her hair while she rested her head on his chest.

*"You being here is more than enough,"* Raiden murmured. *"You might not notice, but you inspire every one of us to fight harder than we ever thought possible."*

He drew away from the hug and met her tender golden gaze.

*"We need you among us, and Speed especially needs his sister by his side."*

Her eyes flickered with emotion. "But I want to contribute something real."

He kept his voice even, knowing the exact words she needed to hear. *"You can help without using your mana zone, Soul."*

His hands gently placed on her shoulders. *"That aura of yours rivals any mana zone, plus you're a capable fighter on your own."*

"You think so?"

Raiden beamed at her with a determined nod. *"Plus, that mana zone of yours will be a game-changer."*

*"Stop worrying about it."*

Soul studied his face briefly, then drew him into a warm hug.

"Thank you," she murmured.

*"You don't need to thank me for anything, Soul."*

She drew in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry about your eyes," she whispered, hesitating briefly. "But congratulations on the victory."

Raiden wrapped his arms around her while his thoughts shifted to the tactical advantages Soul's mana zone might provide them.

Before long, Soul pulled herself out of Raiden's arms, and her expression fell once more. "Can we talk a bit longer?"

Raiden turned his attention to her, wearing a confused expression. *"Um..."*

She nodded repeatedly, her expression turning somber. "I'm afraid Ash and Noelle would have a problem with my aura."

Raiden's expression softened with understanding, and he let out a sigh before smiling. *"Sure, we'll figure out how you all can live together."*

Soul flashed a big grin as Raiden began to pat her. Although it was a bother for him, he knew better than to be on her bad side.

#### *Chapter 134: Marching Graves*

The sun rose gently from the east as Raiden lay back against the mountain's hard surface, Soul's head resting on his chest, the morning wind brushing softly against them both.

But even as he savored his rest, something kept tapping against his forehead, gentle touches that somehow felt agonizing.

Instinctively, he reached for his head and opened his eyes, stirring Soul awake. His eyes locked onto a familiar face: those piercing, menacing dark eyes beneath a hooded cloak, the black mask, and all that excessive jewelry.

Squinting, he studied the face, starting from the jaw. *"I know you... you're with Chrono, aren't you? A lieutenant, perhaps?"* His voice carried the deep rasp of morning.

"That doesn't matter." He stood upright in one fluid motion. "Captain Chrono wants to see you."

Raiden sighed and pushed himself up to sit. *"Right, I'll be there soon."*

Raiden rubbed his eyes and glanced at Soul, who was still half-asleep, her head lolling gently from side to side. He smiled softly, slipped off his shirt, spread it out, and tenderly helped her lie down on the makeshift pillow.

He stood and began following Chrono's lieutenant, his mind wandering to thoughts of when and how they had both succumbed to sleep.

He turned for one last look at Soul, and seeing the serene smile on her sleeping face, he could tell she was blissfully at peace.

Raiden let out a sigh, hands in his pockets. He remembered how Soul had worried that Ash and Noelle would struggle to sleep with her overwhelming dark aura filling the tent.

While Raiden doubted her concerns—given that Ash shared his nature and Noelle's powers could easily counter such effects—he hadn't argued. Soul had been resolute, leaving them with no alternative but to sleep under the open sky.

Before long, they arrived at the circle. Chrono stood at the entrance, his white turban settled on his head, a smile gracing his features.

"Now Odard, get word to the remaining forces to accelerate their advance," Chrono ordered when they reached him.

Nodding once, Odard brushed past him and ducked into the nearest tent on the wall's left flank.

"Half-dressed, are we?" Chrono looked directly at Raiden. "Quite the build you have there," he said, his tone openly mocking.

*"So, what did you need?"*

"Take it down a notch, would you?"

Raiden continued the staring contest, betraying nothing in his expression. Now that he knew Chrono's true position as the Arsenal Armada's second-in-command, everything had to be reconsidered—their negotiations, their entire interaction. Snow's wariness suddenly made perfect sense.

"Walk with me." Chrono was already moving, retracing the route Raiden and Odard had used. Raiden joined him with minimal delay.

"I take it you know nothing about the lands across the water?"

*"No. What about it?"*

Chrono's expression shifted, and he came to a stop. Raiden paused as well, their eyes fixed on something in the distance.

"Moving between absolute domains means crossing dimensional boundaries," Chrono's eyes narrowed.

"The naked eye can't perceive them because they occupy the thin line separating reality from what lies beyond endurance."

He looked directly at Raiden. "So, unless you're invited in, the Leviathan Path becomes your only way to reach another's domain."

Raiden frowned slightly. He'd heard Chrono reference the Leviathan Path before, yet he still had no clue what it meant.

*"What exactly is that?"*

Chrono smiled at last, though his eyes held that peculiar, faraway look. "Never laid eyes on a leviathan myself, but the stories say they're assembled from numerous familiars by some unknown creator."

*"Aaron?"*

Chrono gave a disapproving shake of his head. "Sorry, but from what I've heard, it was beyond even Aaron's capabilities to create."

Raiden found himself questioning whether others possessed Aaron's combination of intellect and strategic caution. If such individuals existed and chose to hunt the pages, his situation would become far more complicated.

Taking a deep breath, Chrono continued, "If your mana reserves can handle the transportation, then there's no problem." When he turned back to Raiden, his face had darkened.

"The Solace Isle is where we're going initially. It's the domain of the Sleeping Star."

*"Sleeping Star?"* Raiden questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"That's correct. He served as a star in your kingdom in the past, but reached third place at only twelve years old. Too young to advance to maker or judge, yet too powerful to continue as a star."

Raiden watched Chrono carefully, catching the anxiety in his gaze and hearing his voice waver slightly. This task might prove harder than he'd originally thought.

"The most powerful number three ever recorded," Chrono said, turning toward Raiden. "Back when your kingdom was famous for its strength, imagine how insulting it was for the adults to watch a child achieve what they couldn't."

*"I'm betting they went after him, and he was forced to escape."*

Chrono nodded once. "Correct."

He smiled grimly. "The real insult was that he carried a white crest—he was just a supporter."

*"What?"* Raiden's eyes widened in disbelief.

"That was exactly how I reacted the first time." Chrono put his hands in his pockets. "The short version is he managed to claim the island, triggered his absolute domain, and then fell into some kind of eternal sleep."

A wave of cold swept through Raiden's body, but he pushed aside his growing apprehension.

*"What makes that place necessary for our alliance?"*

"The Sleeping Star's domain works like a pact system. Once allied there, you can access other absolute domains freely, but betraying your ally brings punishment unless you handle it through proper channels."

His eyes narrowed to thin lines. *"Like what?"*

"That's when the Tragical Isle becomes relevant."

*"What is that exactly?"*

"An absolute domain under Luci's control," he said with a shrug. "Apart from the name, he's a complete mystery to me."

"There's some kind of connection between the Sleeping Star and Luci's worlds, though." He resumed walking. "Where Solace handles diplomatic settlements, Tragical deals with violent ones."

Raiden's mind jumped frantically between different possibilities.

"Any betrayals between allies must be settled on Tragical Isle by both parties."

"But you have options: either both parties travel to Tragical Isle voluntarily, or one can compel the other's presence." He gave a casual smirk. "Plus, you can drag anyone there, even people from the real world, provided you meet the cost."

His heart started hammering unevenly as Raiden grasped the full scope of what lay ahead: a completely alien world with its own rules. He had the distinct feeling Chrono wasn't telling him everything.

*"Are you implying that Tragical is the only place where combat is permitted?"*

Chrono paused, a smirk crossing his face. "Not quite. Every absolute domain operates by different rules, and combat anywhere else can be a death sentence." His shoulders lifted in a casual shrug. "You can escape alive sometimes, but going to war means you're done for."

*Are you saying that if we don't fight, we'll have a better chance of escaping?*

Chrono changed direction and patted Raiden's shoulder lightly. "Don't kid yourself," he said, smiling with unsettling ease. "We might as well be marching to our graves."

With his hands deep in his pockets, he headed back to the circle as Raiden's gaze followed him.

Raiden clenched his hand into a fist. Chrono's evasion told him everything he needed to know: there were secrets being kept, likely important ones.

Despite everything, Raiden knew Chrono wasn't lying about the dangers. The twenty-eight pages remained his priority, though.

Fear of what lay ahead wasn't going to make him abandon his mission.

While he stood in place, someone called his name with a voice that was soft yet gravelly. "Raiden!"

His expression shifted to puzzlement as he looked left and spotted Freya and Aeris. Freya was waving at him, her soft smile complementing the dark ponytail and black vest that revealed her well-defined arms.

Aeris strolled beside her, hands buried in her pockets, blonde hair flowing behind her as she wore a quiet smile.

A smile spread across Raiden's features. *"About time we can leave,"* he said quietly as they drew near.

Odard and Chrono lingered behind the entrance of the circle with four comrades who bore Chrono's luggage, while Raiden let his aether cigarette rest between his lips,



smoke coiling lazily from its tip. Noelle, taking her own taste of aether, held Ash's hand as they stood together, facing the group.

"As you all know, I'm practically blind now." His gaze swept over their faces.

"I have to constantly channel mana into my eyes to see anything, which means this journey is going to be much harder than we anticipated."

He rubbed his forehead as the question of how they would actually reach the Isle continued to trouble him.

"Like Chrono said, we're going to need a lot of mana to pay for the leviathan's passage and fuel our journey to Solace Isle."

Levi smirked. "You realize he's using us, right?"

Raiden shrugged. "That's all we've got." A twisted grin followed his words. "But I guarantee this bargain will work out in my favor."

Levi giggled as he noticed Leo's expression darkened while he adjusted the weightless luggage in his hands. "Why bother with the Solace Isle at all if we're only going there to form a contract?"

Noelle cleared her throat. "We can't." She said, capturing their attention. "Based on what Chrono told Raiden, it's our safest route between the absolute domains—and it gives us better leverage if they choose to betray us."

Raiden nodded firmly, approving her words. "That's precisely why I need your help."

His voice grew somber. "If I drain too much mana, I won't just go blind again, and I don't want any of you witnessing what comes next."

"Alright! Leave it to me," Soul called out from where he stood apart from the group, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. "I'll help."

Pride surged through Raiden suddenly, his eyes brightening. His carefully planted seeds were finally bearing fruit.

"Thank you, Soul." The relief in his voice was unmistakable.

"You're wasting time," came Odard's cold, nonchalant voice from behind them.

Raiden's face twitched with irritation as Odard's voice began wearing on him more and more. Whenever he spoke, it was as though he were addressing inferiors: no respect, no courtesy.

"Just so you know, this could be extremely dangerous," Noelle warned while Raiden was still fixated on Odard's attitude.

The others nodded in understanding while Freya sneered. "Who gave this bitch the right to speak anyway?" She walked forward, dark eyes blazing as they met Noelle's deep violet gaze.

For a tense moment, they battled with glares alone until Ash tugged Noelle's arm, breaking the standoff.

"You're not worth my time, little girl," Noelle said with a smirk, then turned and walked toward

Raiden looked between them in disbelief, wondering why they were still feuding over a duel from ages past. Then Freya extended her hand, offering him eight enchanted seals.

He was momentarily confused by her gesture, but after glancing at Soul's overwhelming aura, he understood what was happening.

He took the seals and headed toward Soul while the others moved to join Chrono's group, leaving only Speed to wait for them.

When Raiden reached Soul, the young woman beamed at him with eyes squeezed shut in joy. "I'm so happy."

Raiden smiled as he moved behind Soul and began placing the seals over the existing ones. "Is that so?"

"Yes... now I know I can actually help you," Soul said with pride. Raiden smiled and gently patted his head.

"I'm glad you're happy, Soul."

"Me too."

As soon as Raiden secured the final seal, Soul's aura compressed dramatically, now contained within a three-foot radius of his form.

"Thank you," Soul said softly. Raiden extended his hand, and Soul clasped it as they moved to rejoin the group with Speed.

But Speed's expression spoke volumes, contrasting sharply with his sister's cheerful demeanor. "Just so you know, I caught Aeris in some kind of secretive conversation with Odard last night."

Raiden's pulse quickened as he faced him. Was she already planning to betray them?

"Understand this now: if she so much as causes Soul pain, I'll end her. Then I'll come for you." Each word dropped like ice, leaving no room for doubt about his intentions.

"You forgave her for betraying us in the beginning." The pause was deliberate, calculated. "Which makes you complicit in whatever carnage follows."

His hand shot out, yanking Soul away from Raiden as they headed toward the others. Raiden stood there alone, hands covering his face.

Why betray them again? What had Chrono promised her?

He sighed, then straightened. His lie detection would cut through whatever story she'd prepared. Time to get answers.

As he approached, Chrono motioned for one of his subordinates to begin drawing a teleportation circle.

"You sure did take your time," Chrono said, leaning back slightly with a smirk.

Raiden's voice stayed level. "Is something wrong with that?"

Chrono shrugged, a thin smile playing at his lips. "Depends what you two were chatting about, buddy."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he fixed Chrono with an unreadable stare. What were they really planning? Secrets were one thing—he could understand Chrono keeping some things hidden. But their core strategy? That was different.

While he was still processing his thoughts, he noticed a figure at the mountain's summit, waving frantically toward Dark City.

The smallish figure struck him as familiar somehow. He activated Gaze Beyond, sharpening his vision. What he saw was unexpected: someone with no mana crest or aura, but whose blue eyes blazed with excitement above a triumphant grin, a bulging sack clutched in their hands.

Raiden's expression softened into a smile as the memory clicked. Nico. The same kid who'd traded directions to the Apex circle for a simple drink of water.

Without thinking, he found himself waving back, which made Nico's grin grow even wider. Perhaps it was Raiden's way of saying goodbye to the kid who had started it all.

"Come on, Raid, let's go," Noelle called out, snapping Raiden's attention away from the mountain.

The teleportation circle was complete, and everyone stood within its boundaries waiting for Raiden. Without hesitation, he stepped inside to join them.

This was it, the start of their hunt. Obstacles would come from all sides, enemies and allies alike. His fists clenched as he hardened his resolve. Anyone who stood between him and home, between him and his brother's vengeance, was expendable.

They appeared before the vast blue ocean, their boats sinking into the beach sand as they confronted its overwhelming immensity. The wind swept the sea waves in all directions, harmonizing with the quiet that filled the distance.

Raiden and his comrades exchanged confused glances. This wasn't the destination they had expected; nothing in their sight indicated a path forward or hinted at the presence of a leviathan.

"Where are we, Chrono?" Raiden asked, his confusion apparent as he turned toward the other man.

Chrono gestured toward Odard, pulled a note from his pocket, and handed it over to Raiden. Raiden accepted it, confusion still etched on his face as he read.

"You'll need to recite the incantation to call forth a leviathan," Chrono said, shrugging. "Like I said, the leviathan path is a mana pathway."

Raiden took a closer look at the incantation scrawled across the sheet and shook his head in disbelief. "We would need mana to actually summon it, wouldn't we?"

Chrono smiled and moved toward the water. "I don't know much about leviathans, to be honest, but they don't negotiate. They only appear if they think you're worthy."

He crouched down and rested one palm in the water. "This is how it works: you recite the words and channel your mana into the ocean." Rising to his feet, he started snapping his fingers impatiently.

"Come on, chop chop. I don't have all day."

Raiden studied the sheet again and saw that everything was written in Noorian. Since not many couldn't read it, he looked between his companions, searching for someone who could.

Before he could consider his options, Aeris moved forward. "Let me call it."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he met her dark stare. "This is written in Noorian, Aeris."

She smiled and nodded firmly. "I can speak Noorian now," she said, the words flowing easily in the foreign tongue. "I picked it up on my journey."

Raiden watched as red emotions flickered through her white aura, the colors mixing tellingly. She was lying. But he simply shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure, go ahead." He offered a hollow smile, and as soon as Aeris took it and looked toward the sea, his face went dark.

If she was lying, he knew exactly what she was up to. She wanted to ensure her existence wouldn't be rendered meaningless in the long run. As long as this was her only move for now, Raiden had no problem with it since it benefited him. But he still couldn't shake the question of why she would betray them again.

While his thoughts drifted, Aeris crouched down and dipped her hand into the sea.

"Leviathan of the deep, hear me. I offer my strength and carry me across these waters.

Cut through the waves, guide me to the Solace Isle.

I trust the ocean, and I trust you. Come."

She recited as she poured her white mana into the sea. The mana drifted like white flames across the water, spreading in a three-foot radius around her.

They all waited patiently to see if the leviathan would deem Aeris worthy enough to serve her. Seconds turned into minutes with nothing but silence. Raiden watched irritation creep across Aeris's face as she clenched her fist, her hand trembling. Her desperation was showing, and it made him uneasy.

But before he could say anything, a massive wave loomed overhead, racing toward them.

Aeris pulled her hand from the water and stepped back. "It's coming," she said, her voice bright with excitement. "The leviathan is coming."

Raiden's feet moved backward of their own accord. His body trembled and his heart pounded as he pressed a hand to his chest, confused by his own terror.

But when he looked at the others, he realized he wasn't alone in his fear. Even Chrono had his guard up; the leviathan's presence was that overwhelming.

But the instant he faced the ocean again, he forced down his fear. His body went rigid, trembling, even as euphoria pulled his mouth into a disturbing smile.

A massive, serpentine creature burst from the water with surprising agility. It spanned the beach from tide to dunes, a wall of muscle and scale.

Layered dark blue and black scales gleamed wet in the sun, each plate like an armored tile fitted for war. Cyan patterns pulsed softly along its sides, betraying the bioluminescence it used to navigate the ocean's depths.

Massive spines crowned with fin-like appendages lined its back and tail, the latter thrashing against the water's surface. These pale, translucent additions gave the beast an ethereal aquatic majesty.

Armored with jagged, scale-like plating, its head bristled with sharp, horn-like protrusion. Bioluminescent whiskers trailed in glowing blue streams, creating an almost mystical aura as the leviathan swayed its head, sending water cascading down on the group below.

Chrono let out a shaky laugh. "I've never felt this kind of pressure before," he said, his voice trembling along with his body.

"I am the Eastern Leviathan, and I have answered your summons." The creature's voice was cold and deep, resonating directly in their minds.

Raiden kept his eyes fixed on the creature, his body still frozen in place. How were they supposed to ride this thing? They'd die just from being near it.

"How much are we supposed to pay?" Aeris called out, standing fearlessly beneath the towering leviathan.

The leviathan's eyes narrowed. "Are you the one who summoned me?" It lowered its massive head toward Aeris, who began to tremble as sweat beaded on her forehead.

"Yes, I am."

The leviathan looked away from her. "No, you aren't why I came." Its massive head swiveled toward Speed, who had positioned himself protectively in front of Soul. "Her," it said, indicating the pair. "She was the reason I came."

A faint smirk tugged at Raiden's lip—vindication was a quiet, satisfying burn in his chest.

"Why her?" he asked the leviathan.

The leviathan's focus snapped to Raiden, its colossal head angling toward him as confusion flickered in its narrowed eyes. "What are you?"

The leviathan pressed closer, its breath alone powerful enough to send Raiden staggering. While he fought desperately to keep his footing, Ash simply walked over and took his hand with casual ease.

The creature seemed even more confused. It backed away for a moment and shook its head, before leaning toward them again. "Oh, I see."

Its entire body then dropped to the floor, rumbling the ground. "What's it doing?" Raiden muttered.

[Bowing,] Ash responded casually.

"Huh?"

However, the leviathan didn't remain on the ground for long. It raised its body in an instant, and turned to Soul and Speed.

"Everything has a price, and it doesn't matter who or what you are," it said as it extended one of the two protrusions right below its chin toward the ground.

"Our journey begins after I've received my payment." Soul glanced at Raiden, who was confused about what had happened, but still managed to give her the go-ahead nod.

Soul held the protrusion by the tip, which was too massive for her fingers to wrap around. She closed her eyes and began pouring mana into the horn-like protrusions.

While Soul did her job, Raiden bent slightly toward Ash. "Do you know it?"

Ash shook her head in disapproval. [But I do know that it is entirely made of mana and multiple magical creatures, and it needs the mana payment to survive.]

Raiden stood upright and turned to the leviathan. He began to wonder why the creature had bowed. Was it also somehow related to Ash, the moon dragon?

As his mind wandered, Soul turned to him and gave him a smile and a thumbs-up.

"Our journey begins now," it said as it rested its massive head on the floor. "How fast we move will be determined by how much mana you pour in as I move."

Raiden let out a sigh. "So what Soul did was like renting it, and now we must buy fuel for the journey too," he muttered, shaking his head as his hand rested on his face.

The leviathan's mouth gaped open, its reddish tongue extending like a bridge into the sand.

"Enter," the creature intoned.

They all exchanged glances, fear giving way to revulsion at the slummy mouth bristling with sharp teeth. Deep in its throat, horn-like ridges jutted like those outside, and past them stretched absolute darkness.

Raiden's body began to itch as he turned to Chrono. "You didn't mention this part."

He shrugged with a smile, gesturing for his men to take the lead. "The path to an absolute domain isn't something our eyes are meant to handle, so I guess it makes sense."

Raiden sneered at him and glanced at the others. They had all entered, leaving only him, Chrono, and Ash, while MK and Noelle lingered behind.

Without a moment's hesitation, Chrono took the lead. Raiden followed with Ash by his side, and MK and Noelle brought up the rear.

The moment they all entered, the creature's mouth snapped shut. Instantly, everything inside began to glow white—the tissue, the teeth, even the fluid—illuminating their surroundings and banishing the darkness that had stretched behind them.

Freya held one of the protrusions and turned to Raiden. "I will take care of the mana this time." Raiden gave her a gentle nod and she began pouring out mana.

"You've been... useful," Chrono said with a cocky smile.

But Raiden met him with a lazy expression and turned toward MK and Noelle, who stood behind him. He let out a sigh.

"Finally, the journey begins."

The creature's mouth glowed like the night sky, and Raiden's eyes followed the ethereal light within as his head swayed gently back and forth.

The creature's throat descended like a never-ending tunnel, and strangely, the deeper Raiden ventured to explore its nature, the more welcoming the space became. The air grew warmer, filled with a fragrance infinitely more pleasant than the world above.

Raiden looked to the others, who were completely absorbed by the inner radiance, mesmerized as Noelle and Levi ran their hands along the glowing teeth, experiencing their deceptively soft yet blade-sharp surface.

Everything appeared delightful, but it had been over three hours since they'd stepped into the Leviathan's mouth, and Raiden still hadn't sensed any movement that would suggest the beast was in motion.

"Are you sure we are moving?" Levi asked, stepping nearer to Raiden.

Raiden shrugged his shoulders, glancing left as Leo pressed his hand against the teeth.



"I'm not feeling any vibrations that would suggest we're moving," Leo said, also facing Raiden.

Raiden let out a sigh. He believed they had no option but to believe they were moving. "Let's have faith, I guess."

As soon as Raiden spoke, Levi moved nearer. "Have you noticed that we can't use our abilities here?"

Raiden looked at him, his calm expression becoming puzzled. "Really?"

Levi nodded firmly. "I wanted to keep my presence hidden in case Chrono had something planned." He rubbed his head. "I've tried about a dozen times now, but nothing."

Levi's words seemed odd to Raiden, since just a few feet away, Noelle was casually producing flames from her finger to light her aether cigarette.

"Then how is Noelle doing that?"

Before Levi could speak, Ash spoke up quickly. "I think it's because the flames are made of mana."

Levi and Raiden both turned toward her. "So only mana works."

The realization hit Raiden as he reached toward his eyes. "Perhaps that's why I can still see."

No sooner had Raiden spoken than violent vibrations coursed through the creature's mouth, making them all desperately seek shelter. Raiden's pulse quickened as he held Ash's hand in a firm grip, his feet pressed hard against the tongue for stability.

The leviathan slowly began opening its mouth before them, and rays of light pierced through the widening gaps, stabbing sharp pain into Raiden's eyes. He instinctively covered his eyes against the sunlight while his thoughts raced, desperately trying to understand what was happening.

"You have arrived," the leviathan's deep, cold voice resonated through their minds.

Raiden cautiously uncovered his eyes, keeping them narrowed. But before he could take in their surroundings, the leviathan extended its massive tongue, slowly sliding them out of its mouth and onto a coastal shore.

Raiden swallowed hard as waves of peace and stillness washed over him. His body tingled with tranquility, as though every burden had suddenly vanished.

Before them lay an enormous field carpeted with flowers of every kind. The meadow extended beyond sight, its colorful blooms becoming a distant shimmer, while at their backs rolled a vast blue sea.

What drew Raiden's eye most, however, was an enormous gazebo constructed of gleaming white stone throughout, from its towering pillars to its expansive roof. The structure dominated the center of the isle, spacious enough to accommodate well over a hundred people.

Raiden stood motionless, drinking in the vista while trying to understand the peaceful sensation within his body. Before he knew it, the others had made their way down to the ground, leaving him and Ash alone on the creature's tongue.

Ash pulled on his hand as she climbed down, breaking Raiden's trance entirely and drawing him along.

"Summon me when ready," the leviathan said the moment Raiden and Ash stepped off its tongue.

They stared as it slowly retracted its head through what looked like an invisible boundary at the ocean's rim, the rest of its massive form concealed beyond the barrier. The instant its head withdrew completely, the gaping hole in the barrier closed with sudden finality.

MK had his hand in his pocket as he walked toward the barrier. He extended his hand through it, and strangely, his hand emerged several feet to his left instead. When he wiggled his fingers, the distant hand moved in perfect synchronization.

"So it's true... only leviathans can enter absolute domains without invitations," he said with a smirk, pulling his hand back before walking toward Noelle.

The barrier didn't bother Raiden; to him, it was perfectly logical. But something nagged at him. Clearly, the gazebo behind them was their intended meeting place for the alliance. So where was the Sleeping Star, the domain's owner?

"Just so you know," Chrono said, turning toward the gazebo, "no one knows where the Sleeping Star is."

Raiden's gaze followed Chrono as he approached the gazebo.

"We'll be stuck here today and tomorrow with nothing to do." He faced Raiden. "The alliance can only be formed on the third day."

Raiden's mouth opened slightly in shock. "What? Why are you just now telling me this?"

Chrono halted and pressed his hand to his head. "You're feeling it too, aren't you? The tranquility and calm?"

He faced Raiden again with an unreadable expression. "In this place, we can't lie." Chrono's smirk widened. "But that doesn't mean we have to tell the truth either."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he touched his chest. He could sense it; every breath he drew made him calmer still. It was as though all his concerns had melted away.

He watched Chrono alongside his allies approach the gazebo, their faces bright with contentment. "So this is Solace Isle," he said quietly.

Ash dropped his hand and made her way to Noelle and MK. While the others began exploring the island, Leo separated from the group and walked over to Raiden.

"I believe the Sleeping Star is the gazebo," Leo said, his gaze lingering on it in the distance.

Raiden looked toward it for a moment, weighing Leo's suggestion. "Yes, I agree."

Something continued to bother Raiden, though. The absolute domain felt too plain and vacant—something was unsettling about it. "I think it's this way because the Star is sleeping."

Leo turned to him with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean?"

"It's only a theory, but I believe this place seems empty because the Star is sleeping." He took a few steps forward, knelt down, and ran his fingers over the flowers.

Their velvety texture felt absolutely genuine—this was reality, after all. "There's nothing here but flowers, peaceful feelings, and the gazebo."

He got to his feet and looked at Leo. "For someone as powerful as the Sleeping Star is supposed to be, this domain seems too basic. Something feels off."

Leo's eyebrow lifted subtly. "When I think about it, it does make sense." He gazed at the ocean. "It's like this represents what peace looks like in his dreams."

Raiden maintained a serene expression while watching Leo. Obviously, Leo had come to him with something significant to discuss, but he couldn't seem to find the words. It was evident in how Leo avoided making eye contact entirely.

Raiden could tell how to help Leo feel comfortable enough to speak, but he also didn't want to push him.

"It's amusing to consider that there might be animals or humans living on the real island at this very moment, completely oblivious that they're in an absolute domain," Raiden said with a relaxed tone as he approached Leo.

Leo's eyes went wide as the implications hit him, and he placed his chin in his hand. "You know, this world is really frightening."

"In what way?"

"Our own homes might exist within absolute domains, and we'd be completely unaware."

Leo's observation hit Raiden like a wave of shock, his heart rate accelerating. "I think you're right, Leo."

He looked at Leo. "There's no way to find out without an invitation, considering Leviathans can't transport us through land-based domains."

"True," Leo said, nodding as he continued watching the calm ocean.

Raiden studied him quietly for a moment, giving Leo room to collect himself and speak when he felt comfortable.

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air for a moment until Leo abruptly faced Raiden. For the first time, their eyes truly met.

"Can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course," Raiden said with a gentle smile. "I'm listening."

With his head thrown back toward the heavens, Leo's fist trembled from the force of his grip. "Pathetic. That's me, isn't it?"

The question seemed to come from nowhere, though with Raiden, nothing was ever truly random. He'd learned to simply listen and let him work through whatever was on his mind.

"I didn't expect to win against you easily." He turned toward Raiden, his voice cracking as his fists tightened. "I was expecting to hold my own, at least."

His eyes dropped to the floor, flickering with unshed tears as he sniffled silently. "But I couldn't last a minute in our duel."

Raiden wore a soft smile, finally understanding Leo's struggles. But at that moment, he felt no urge to manipulate Leo. His dark thoughts and twisted desires all felt distant the

more he grew accustomed to Solace Isle's atmosphere. It was as if he were becoming a new person.

Yet at that moment, lying was unnecessary. The truth alone was strong enough.

He extended his hand and gently tapped Leo's shoulder, a calm smile on his face. "You did just fine, Leo."

Leo kept his gaze on the ground, as if he knew Raiden was just trying to make him feel better. But Raiden wasn't. He simply wanted to help Leo come to terms with what had happened that day.

"Thank you, bookkeeper." He forced a smile. "You're as generous as ever, I can tell... trying to help me feel better."

His rehearsed smile vanished instantly. "I worked very hard for that duel, but in the end," his tone dropped lower and began to crack, "I still wasn't good enough."

Raiden could feel the pain and disappointment in Leo's voice. The emotions pierced through his chest as if they were speaking directly to his heart.

He pressed a hand to his chest, clutching at the fabric. He had never felt this way before, not even for Jobe, his twin brother—the most important person in his life.

Is this the Sleeping Star's ability?—he thought to himself.

Throughout it all, his smile didn't fade but became more genuine. It felt like he was discovering the best part of himself, a part he had never been able to reach before.

"Do you remember moving at all in those few seconds when I defeated you?" Raiden asked, his voice calm.

Leo's eyes stayed glued to the ground, his somber mood darkening as his face twisted with sadness. It was as if his disappointment was consuming him bit by bit.

"I learned a technique on my journey called wind slash." He looked down at his gloved left hand, his eyes narrowing.

"I thought I'd mastered it, but unfortunately, that was far from the truth."

He dropped his hand and let out a painful sigh. "When I tried to use it... nothing happened."

The moment Leo finished speaking, Raiden burst into laughter. He tried to suppress it, pressing a hand to his mouth and doubling over, but the laughter kept coming.

Leo just stood there, staring at him with widening eyes, completely confused.

After a moment, Raiden finally got control of himself and composed his expression. "Ask yourself," he said, still holding his sides, "how was I able to know about it?"

"What do you mean?" Leo asked, looking even more confused. But it only took a moment for him to connect the dots, and his expression slowly began to light up.

"You wouldn't have known I attacked if it didn't work," he said, voice trembling with excitement. "So it worked... I actually hit you."

Raiden gave him several gentle nods.

"It was so powerful I didn't realize it had happened until moments later." Raiden touched his chest as Leo turned to him, his expression brightening with relief.

"If it had been anyone else, they'd be dead before they even knew you'd attacked."

Leo let out a laugh followed by a scream of joy as he fist-pumped the air. But that very instant, realization seemed to hit him like a cold wave. Raiden watched with perplexed thoughts as Leo's expression darkened.

"The wind slash should have been able to wound you at least if not kill you." He turned to Raiden and locked eyes with him. "But you sustained no injuries."

Raiden shook his head in disapproval. "You did get me."

"Really?"

"Yes, but since you and I haven't spent most of our time together recently, you wouldn't have noticed."

He smiled. "I have a regeneration ability. The wound closed not long after."

Leo's expression shifted once more. "Thank goodness." He grinned. "My training wasn't in vain."

Raiden tapped him on the shoulder. "Your training was never in vain, Leo." He scratched the back of his head, his expression growing uncomfortable.

"I must admit, if it wasn't for my speed, you would have ended the duel easily."

He began to let out an awkward laugh. "You've really become very strong."

"I'm glad you still believe in me, bookkeeper," Leo said with obvious excitement. "I'll be forever grateful for all the things you've done for me these past few months."

He glanced at his left fist once more. "To think I have the ability to wound someone like you." He clenched his fist. "I never would have believed this a few months ago, before I became your apprentice."

Raiden had always viewed Leo in a different light compared to the others. Though he didn't have a contract with him, he had no doubt that Leo was his most loyal comrade.

But now it was different—he saw him clearly for who he was. Someone who would do anything to be by his side.

"You did everything on your own, Leo."

"You are so kind, bookkeeper," Leo said as he turned to their right. A distance away, Ash and Noelle ran playfully through the flowers, big smiles spread across their faces.

Raiden's calm expression dropped. He looked confused about what exactly Leo was staring at. He traced Leo's line of sight and found Ash and Noelle having fun.

His thoughts began to race from one to another. He couldn't fully understand why Ash was so drawn to Noelle now. She had been spending more time with her than she even did with him.

He clenched his fist and began to wonder if he was a bad master to her. Was Ash seeing Noelle as someone more fitting to be around than him?

Just as his mind wandered, Leo spoke up. "Now that I think about it—it's been a while since I looked into Ash's lineage." He turned to Raiden. "What kind of dragon is she?"

His words snapped Raiden back into reality. "Oh yeah, she's a moon dragon." He shrugged his shoulders. "Only God knows what exactly that means."

"I'm sorry; it's my fault for not researching."

"No, Leo. It's okay." The moment Raiden said that, his expression began to shift as realization dawned.

"Now that you mention it, I can ask her all these questions since she's human now." He slapped his forehead in disbelief. "Why did it take me so long?"

"Yes, she can speak and reason now." Leo turned to Raiden with a soft smile. "You can ask her everything."

"Yes," Raiden said with enthusiasm. However, for some reason he didn't want to approach Ash at that moment; seeing her so happy with Noelle hurt him somehow.

He needed to distract himself and wait for her to approach him rather than the other way around. "Tell me about your wind slash."

He dropped to the ground and faced the vast ocean before them. The wind felt gentle as it brushed against his face while the sun slowly began to set.

"Tell me how it works."

"I'm glad you asked," Leo said, joining him.

"It is very simple, but once mastered, it could be deadly." Leo raised his hand and began to concentrate mana into his fingertips.

"Like this, you just have to unleash the mana like the wind." Raiden tried to absorb himself in Leo's words and forget about Ash.

"That's all, but there are earth and water slashes too," Leo added.

The night was gentle, a cozy wind drifting across the distance. Raiden lay on the ground with Leo fast asleep right beside him, while behind them, everyone else was lost in slumber.

Raiden could feel himself slipping into his dormant state, yet he couldn't help but have his senses remain somewhat awake.

His eyes rolled rapidly beneath his eyelids while his breathing remained gentle and slow, close enough to sleeping to fool most, yet not quite deep enough to truly rest.

As he lay there, confusion clouded his thoughts more than it should have as he tried to make sense of what was happening. But in the enveloping silence, all he could see was himself standing in what seemed like an endless white void.

His mind jumped from one thought to another. Was this another side effect from the retinal rift? Or perhaps everyone else was having a similar experience, and this was simply how people slept at the Solace Isle?

While his mind raced, a gentle girlish voice echoed in his head. "It's been a while, bookkeeper." His head snapped in all directions, confused about what was happening.

However, something wasn't right. The voice was too familiar; he knew he'd heard it before, but couldn't place who it belonged to.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten about me already," the voice said again, and this time Raiden caught the familiar tone more clearly.

His confusion began to fade as he sighed. "How exactly are you doing this, Alora?"



She giggled. "I am the dreamwalker, remember?"

Raiden had known that much the moment he realized it was the princess, but that wasn't the answer he was looking for. He was in an absolute domain, so wasn't he supposed to be cut off from anyone in the real world? Unless Alora's ability had evolved to the point where she could bypass an absolute domain.

"By the way, where are you?" she asked, her voice dropping in pitch. "I've been trying to enter your dream, but it feels like there's a powerful force blocking me."

Her voice echoed with relief. "This is what I can manage at the moment."

Raiden began to understand his strange situation. As his eyes glanced around at the endless whiteness, he realized his situation was nothing but Alora's doing.

However, his expression fell in an instant. His heart began to pound while his thoughts spiraled. If Alora was reaching out to him through his dreams, did that mean Klein el Seer hadn't covered for them at all? Was the kingdom aware that they had abandoned their post?

He gulped as sweat began to bead on his forehead. There was only one way to find out. To play along.

"Why must you reach out to me this way?" he asked, wiping his sweaty palms. "You could have come to the mansion."

Alora burst into laughter. "You really thought I wouldn't see through those imposters you left behind?"

"I must admit, they had me fooled for a while."

Raiden's eyes narrowed slightly. "Imposters?" he muttered in confusion, wondering what exactly Klein had done to cover for him.

"How did you make those clones, anyway?" She paused. "I'm curious."

Raiden smirked the moment Alora spoke, relief flooding through him. If Klein had created clones sophisticated enough to initially fool even Alora, then he had nothing to worry about.

"Why did you visit me, though?"

"Seriously?" Raiden could hear the disappointment in her voice immediately. "I'm your future wife. Must there be any other reason?"

Raiden shook his head in disbelief, massaging his forehead as he wondered why she was still clinging to such a manipulative tactic.

"What do you really want, though?"

Alora paused for a moment while Raiden's eyes swept across the endless white void, the brightness already making him uncomfortable.

"Someone came here." Her tone dropped, cold and clipped, instantly catching Raiden's attention—he had never heard her speak this seriously.

"Her presence was overwhelming. She walked with her eyes closed, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword." Raiden began to wonder who this mysterious person was. Did he know her?

"Darkness shrouded her entire form." Raiden could feel the goosebumps running through Alora's body just from her voice alone.

"And I think she wants you, Raiden."

Raiden's heart skipped a beat as unease prickled across his skin. "Me?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "She appeared at your mansion two days ago. Your imposter and I, along with June and the others, tried to fight her."

He could hear the devastation in her voice. "Not even a single attack landed on her, not even June's attacks."

"Worse, she didn't even fight back. She just approached your clone for a moment, seemed to realize it wasn't you, and then left."

Raiden began to massage his head, his mind spiraling through countless thoughts. He didn't know anyone of such caliber, so why would someone that powerful be searching for him?

He tried to think it through, but only came up with more questions. What was going on?

"Who is she?" Alora asked.

Raiden sighed. "I don't know... I've never heard of or encountered anyone like that before."

Alora sighed clearly. "I figured," she said, her tone somehow shifting back to her usual self in an instant, as if she hadn't been the same frightened person speaking just moments before.

"By the way, bookkeeper." Her voice turned light and stress-free. "The FIRMO is in our kingdom as we speak."

Raiden's eyes widened in confusion. "What?!" he blurted out. He'd thought the FIRMO were after the twenty-eight pages, the same as him. So why were they in Persia?

"Yes, they've been around for quite a while, that's why father sent June and me to you, but unfortunately, they haven't approached the book of ashes."

Raiden rested his chin on his hand. If they weren't going for the Book of Ashes, then they clearly hadn't collected all the pages yet. Maybe some of the pages were actually in Persia.

His eyes widened as the realization hit him. "We'll be back in no time."

"You must hurry then, they won't be here forever, obviously."

"Noted." The instant Raiden responded, he found himself released as his eyes snapped open to the dark sky above.

He began to pant heavily, staring off into the distance. If the FIRMO was really in Persia, then once he completed his alliance with Chrono, he'd have to head there and confront them. Maybe he could claim whatever pages they had collected.

He smiled as he lay there, realizing he could beat Chrono's unfair negotiations after all. However, his expression darkened the moment he recalled the mysterious person Alora spoke of.

Who was she? And was there a possibility that Ash knew about her?

He let out a sigh. There was only one way to find out, and he would tackle that the moment the sun rose.

The sun hovered above the horizon as Raiden and Ash stood within the gazebo, examining their surroundings and running their hands along its frame, feeling the texture beneath their fingertips.

"I think this takes three days because of the sensation in the air." Ash said as Raiden turned to her.

"What do you mean?"

"Each day we all grow more and more vulnerable," she said, turning to their right and gesturing toward Chrono and his crew walking in the far distance. "The Sleeping Star wants us to reveal our secrets over time, and they know it. That's why they keep their distance."

Raiden glanced at them, finally understanding the purpose behind their three-day stay. But his mind was on his own concerns rather than what Chrono was trying to hide.

He glanced at his hand as he watched it tremble. He couldn't help but want to be honest with Ash. Even though she looked like a child, voicing his actual feelings was hard for him, regardless of who was listening.

"Ash," he called out as she turned his way. Raiden gave her a soft smile and extended his hand toward hers. The moment she placed her little hand in his, they began walking through the flowers, heading left.

"Do you feel my emotions as well?" Raiden asked gently as his expression slowly shifted.

"No," Ash responded. "I bonded with you; only you can feel my emotions, and I can't feel yours."

Raiden awkwardly scratched the back of his head, offering a nervous smile. If she could feel his emotions too, this would be much easier, but unfortunately, he had to man up.

As they walked, Raiden paused, and Ash stopped with him. "I need to have an important conversation with you, but first, there's something you must know," he said, gazing through the distance.

Ash tilted her head up toward Raiden while he continued to gaze at the horizon. His chest tightened and his heart raced as if he were being chased by a monster. But somehow, he couldn't help but speak.

"I had this weird feeling when I saw you playing with Noelle yesterday." He glanced at her, his golden eyes meeting her blue ones before quickly turning away.

"At first, I wondered if you weren't happy with me anymore, and then I couldn't bear to look at you two anymore."

He took a deep breath. "I think I'm jealous."

Ash fell awkwardly quiet after Raiden's words, making him even more uneasy. Sweat formed on his forehead, and his eyes struggled to look at her, his heartbeat rising while Ash simply stared at him.

After a brief moment, however, she spoke up. "No one makes me happier than you do, Papa," Ash said with a grin.

"When I am with you, I feel more comfortable and at peace," she said, glancing back at Noelle while Raiden still struggled to meet her eyes. He knew Ash wouldn't lie to him, but he couldn't shake the feeling.

"You are different, Papa. I'm okay with Noelle just as I am with Leo and the others," she said, glancing back at Raiden. "We share the same body—that isn't something anyone can replace."

Raiden's expression darkened. He knew all that, knew everything she said was true, but he still felt jealous. What was wrong with him?

"I can't be running around with you like I do with Noelle, Papa." she said gently, "That isn't you."

She smiled. "You'd rather have me lay on your shoulder like I did in my dragon form, or just stay by your side."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he finally turned to Ash, locking eyes with her. "You're right, Ash. I wouldn't want to run around with you."

His expression darkened further. "So why am I still jealous?"

Ash smiled as her white hair danced in the wind. "I don't think it is jealousy, Papa."

This was unexpected for Raiden. He waited to hear what Ash thought it was, certain he'd felt uneasiness when he saw them happy together.

"You are afraid," she said bluntly.

Confusion dawned on Raiden as he squinted. He had been scared before, on multiple occasions, but what he felt didn't seem like fear. Was this some new type of fear he hadn't experienced?

"How?"

"You fear you might lose me," she said with a smile, which made Raiden even more confused. "Don't worry, I feel the same way too."

"Wait, what?"

She gave him a gentle nod. "Those feelings aren't your own... they're mine."

This only confused him more. He crouched down beside her to match her height and held her by the shoulders, his fingers brushing against her pale skin.

"What are you saying? What are those fears?"

Ash shook her head. "I don't know, but I think you can feel it now," she said, reaching toward Raiden's heart.

"My heart must be resonating with yours—it's beating so fast, and my chest keeps getting tighter."

Raiden gulped as he stared at her. If those were her feelings, then why did she seem so happy?

"Why are you feeling this way?"

"I don't know, Papa, but it starts when I see you," she said, squinting thoughtfully. "Maybe I'm afraid of losing you."

Raiden rubbed his temples as he tried to process what was happening. What he thought were his own feelings of jealousy weren't his at all, and they weren't even jealousy to begin with.

"I wanted my time with Noelle to be with you instead, but I knew you wouldn't like that. Something told me to keep my distance."

Her words were making things more confusing than clear. "Why would you feel that way?" He shrugged. "I mean, I have no plans of dying soon."

"I don't know, but I don't think that's the case."

Raiden rose to his feet and began pondering what the possible reasons could be. Was it because of the mysterious person Alora had told him about?

His eyes widened as realization struck, and he began describing the mysterious girl to her.

"No, I can't think of anyone with such an overwhelming presence."

Raiden let out a sigh. The mysterious girl who was after him had been one of the main reasons he'd decided to speak with Ash about this, even though he suspected she wouldn't know her.

If Ash was feeling anxious about losing him, it might be because of that mysterious girl. If so, he would seek answers the moment they left the Isle.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine," Raiden said, patting Ash on the head. He could feel her heart grow warmer.

"Okay, Papa," she said with a huge grin.

Now, all Raiden had to do was make sure they got back home, deal with the FIRMO affairs, and most importantly, discover more about the mysterious girl after him and eliminate her before she eliminated him.

Perhaps Klein el Seer knows something—he thought.

He took Ash's hand once more, and they began to stroll through the flowers.

## Chapter 135: Before Solace

Odard and Chrono lingered behind the entrance of the circle with four comrades who bore Chrono's luggage, while Raiden let his aether cigarette rest between his lips, smoke coiling lazily from its tip. Noelle, taking her own taste of aether, held Ash's hand as they stood together, facing the group.

"As you all know, I'm practically blind now." His gaze swept over their faces.

"I have to constantly channel mana into my eyes to see anything, which means this journey is going to be much harder than we anticipated."

He rubbed his forehead as the question of how they would actually reach the Isle continued to trouble him.

"Like Chrono said, we're going to need a lot of mana to pay for the leviathan's passage and fuel our journey to Solace Isle."

Levi smirked. "You realize he's using us, right?"

Raiden shrugged. "That's all we've got." A twisted grin followed his words. "But I guarantee this bargain will work out in my favor."

Levi giggled as he noticed Leo's expression darkened while he adjusted the weightless luggage in his hands. "Why bother with the Solace Isle at all if we're only going there to form a contract?"

Noelle cleared her throat. "We can't." She said, capturing their attention. "Based on what Chrono told Raiden, it's our safest route between the absolute domains—and it gives us better leverage if they choose to betray us."

Raiden nodded firmly, approving her words. "That's precisely why I need your help."

His voice grew somber. "If I drain too much mana, I won't just go blind again, and I don't want any of you witnessing what comes next."



"Alright! Leave it to me," Soul called out from where he stood apart from the group, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. "I'll help."

Pride surged through Raiden suddenly, his eyes brightening. His carefully planted seeds were finally bearing fruit.

"Thank you, Soul." The relief in his voice was unmistakable.

"You're wasting time," came Odard's cold, nonchalant voice from behind them.

Raiden's face twitched with irritation as Odard's voice began wearing on him more and more. Whenever he spoke, it was as though he were addressing inferiors: no respect, no courtesy.

"Just so you know, this could be extremely dangerous," Noelle warned while Raiden was still fixated on Odard's attitude.

The others nodded in understanding while Freya sneered. "Who gave this bitch the right to speak anyway?" She walked forward, dark eyes blazing as they met Noelle's deep violet gaze.

For a tense moment, they battled with glares alone until Ash tugged Noelle's arm, breaking the standoff.

"You're not worth my time, little girl," Noelle said with a smirk, then turned and walked toward

Raiden looked between them in disbelief, wondering why they were still feuding over a duel from ages past. Then Freya extended her hand, offering him eight enchanted seals.

He was momentarily confused by her gesture, but after glancing at Soul's overwhelming aura, he understood what was happening.

He took the seals and headed toward Soul while the others moved to join Chrono's group, leaving only Speed to wait for them.

When Raiden reached Soul, the young woman beamed at him with eyes squeezed shut in joy. "I'm so happy."

Raiden smiled as he moved behind Soul and began placing the seals over the existing ones. "Is that so?"

"Yes... now I know I can actually help you," Soul said with pride. Raiden smiled and gently patted his head.

"I'm glad you're happy, Soul."

"Me too."

As soon as Raiden secured the final seal, Soul's aura compressed dramatically, now contained within a three-foot radius of his form.

"Thank you," Soul said softly. Raiden extended his hand, and Soul clasped it as they moved to rejoin the group with Speed.

But Speed's expression spoke volumes, contrasting sharply with his sister's cheerful demeanor. "Just so you know, I caught Aeris in some kind of secretive conversation with Odard last night."

Raiden's pulse quickened as he faced him. Was she already planning to betray them?

"Understand this now: if she so much as causes Soul pain, I'll end her. Then I'll come for you." Each word dropped like ice, leaving no room for doubt about his intentions.

"You forgave her for betraying us in the beginning." The pause was deliberate, calculated. "Which makes you complicit in whatever carnage follows."

His hand shot out, yanking Soul away from Raiden as they headed toward the others. Raiden stood there alone, hands covering his face.

Why betray them again? What had Chrono promised her?

He sighed, then straightened. His lie detection would cut through whatever story she'd prepared. Time to get answers.

As he approached, Chrono motioned for one of his subordinates to begin drawing a teleportation circle.

"You sure did take your time," Chrono said, leaning back slightly with a smirk.

Raiden's voice stayed level. "Is something wrong with that?"

Chrono shrugged, a thin smile playing at his lips. "Depends what you two were chatting about, buddy."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he fixed Chrono with an unreadable stare. What were they really planning? Secrets were one thing—he could understand Chrono keeping some things hidden. But their core strategy? That was different.

While he was still processing his thoughts, he noticed a figure at the mountain's summit, waving frantically toward Dark City.

The smallish figure struck him as familiar somehow. He activated Gaze Beyond, sharpening his vision. What he saw was unexpected: someone with no mana crest or aura, but whose blue eyes blazed with excitement above a triumphant grin, a bulging sack clutched in their hands.

Raiden's expression softened into a smile as the memory clicked. Nico. The same kid who'd traded directions to the Apex circle for a simple drink of water.

Without thinking, he found himself waving back, which made Nico's grin grow even wider. Perhaps it was Raiden's way of saying goodbye to the kid who had started it all.

"Come on, Raid, let's go," Noelle called out, snapping Raiden's attention away from the mountain.

The teleportation circle was complete, and everyone stood within its boundaries waiting for Raiden. Without hesitation, he stepped inside to join them.

This was it, the start of their hunt. Obstacles would come from all sides, enemies and allies alike. His fists clenched as he hardened his resolve. Anyone who stood between him and home, between him and his brother's vengeance, was expendable.