

The Bookkeeper

Chapter 141: Alliance

Throughout the next few hours and into the early morning, Raiden carefully briefed his trusted allies—Noelle, Freya, and Leo—on FIRMO's presence in Persia.

It was bewildering news, but slowly, they realized Raiden's suggestion was sound. A retreat back to the kingdom was necessary.

The sun rose slowly against the horizon as Chrono and his comrades waited in the gazebo's center, expecting Raiden to emerge and cement their alliance at last.

Raiden approached from afar, flanked by Freya and Noelle. "Hope you still have the key to the book?" Freya asked. Raiden's hand moved to his chest, feeling the warmth of the golden key that hung on its cord around his neck.

"Yes, it's safely guarded," Raiden replied, his gaze fixed on Chrono's gentle smile, while behind them Aeris leaned against a pillar, legs crossed and arms folded across her chest.

They had ignored him completely since their arrival, and this marked the first time he'd even seen Aeris' face since then. It was starkly obvious she was complicit in whatever they were planning, but what?

Worse still, he couldn't simply execute Aeris for conspiracy, not after he'd made it clear he had pardoned her past betrayals. Such an act would damage his reputation as a leader.

He squinted the moment they entered the gazebo, his stare locked on Aeris, but her eyes avoided Raiden's entirely, focusing only on the ground beneath her feet.

"You did take your time," Chrono said with a cheerful smile, motioning Raiden forward.

Raiden found himself burying his doubts and returning the smile as he drew closer, while Noelle and Freya fell into position beside him.

As Raiden came to stand before Chrono, he extended his hand. Raiden looked into his gray eyes, returned the smile, then placed his hand in Chrono's.

"Anything you'd like to tell me, Chrono?" Raiden asked with sarcasm, his smile never faltering.

"Oh yes, I will betray you," Chrono replied matter-of-factly.

Raiden's smile widened as his eyes squeezed shut. The Sleeping Star's power prevented them from lying to one another, but Raiden had no desire to lie regardless; Chrono had been bold enough to speak truthfully.

"Me too," he replied enthusiastically.

"But until then, let's make formidable allies."

"Agreed," Chrono replied.

In that instant, Raiden felt a shift and gentle sensation on his wrist. He looked down to see a thorn-like black tattoo wrapping around his wrist like a bracelet.

Chrono also looked down at his wrist, then let go of Raiden's hand. "I believe this marks our alliance."

Raiden touched his wrist and rubbed it gently. The surface was smooth and soft, as if it were part of his very skin.

Raiden sighed in relief. With this finally behind them, they could embark on their journey and address the inevitable betrayal after accomplishing their objective.

"We must leave now," Chrono said, starting to leave the gazebo in the direction of the ocean. "We've already spent enough time here."

Raiden's expression grew dark as he trailed behind. "Unfortunately, we can't."

Chrono stopped and pivoted toward him, his expression unreadable. "What do you mean, kid?"

Raiden casually approached, hands sliding into his pockets as he avoided Chrono's gaze. "We will leave this place, but I need to get back to Persia first."

Chrono's eyes narrowed as he watched Raiden speak. "I have urgent matters to attend to."

Chrono remained quiet, hardly looking away from Raiden as if searching for something in his face, but Raiden's expression was stone-cold, offering nothing.

Returning to Persia was essential; not something he would shy away from. He'd have the opportunity to confront FIRMO and potentially halt their search before they progressed further, while also gaining insight into the mysterious girl who was after him.

"Alright, buddy," Chrono said with a smile. "We are a team now, so we have no choice but to cooperate, right?"

Raiden finally looked at him directly. "That's correct, Chrono."

Chrono gestured for his comrades to follow as they started toward the ocean. Raiden remained where he was, deciding who would summon the Leviathan this time.

The others followed toward the ocean while he stayed motionless, hands buried in his pockets.

Aeris summoned it the last time, and while it didn't respond to her specifically, her mana was what called the Leviathan. Soul paid the price of their bargain, while Freya handled the foul during their return.

Standing there, he began to understand how challenging managing the pathway would be. They had only Levi, Noelle, MK, Speed, and him left, and worse still, they had no clue how many absolute domains awaited them.

He rubbed his head as his brain started to burn from overthinking. He had to choose another three people and make sure they could all restore their mana properly the moment they got back home.

But as he remained there, someone waved at him from near the ocean, pulling him from his thoughts. It was Aeris.

The moment reality returned to him, he glanced behind and found he was the only one remaining at the gazebo, making him look rather unhinged as he'd simply stood there, motionless and lost in his reverie.

He sighed and started toward them, still considering who to select for the task.

"Can I summon it now?" Aeris asked the instant Raiden came within range. Raiden was taken aback by the question, his expression turning confused.

"But you already did that last time."

"Exactly, and she's the only one who can summon it now," Chrono replied with a smirk.

This only confused Raiden further as he tried to make sense of the situation. Aeris had volunteered to summon the creature the last time; did that mean she'd known all along? Was this her method of making sure Raiden couldn't abandon her?

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" Raiden demanded, facing Chrono, who greeted him with an even brighter smile.

"Isn't she your comrade?" Chrono shrugged his shoulders dismissively. "So why would that matter?"

He stepped closer to Raiden and rested his hand on his shoulder. Raiden felt the anger building inside him, but he couldn't release it. It was as though the Solace Isle had stripped away his capacity for rage.

"Don't worry about it, friend." He motioned toward the ocean. "Now there wouldn't even be negotiations... we summon it, climb into its mouth, pay for fuel, and go."

His words, while clearly concealing something, weren't entirely false. Raiden saw there was nothing to be done at that moment, and with Aeris there, they could avoid the mana depletion he'd been dreading.

He sighed. "Fine."

"That's my boy," Chrono said with pride.

Raiden looked puzzled again. "How would you guys even get to Noor?"

"Don't worry, we have our own business in Persia too."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he watched Chrono face the ocean. His heart abruptly began to pound. Did Chrono also know about FIRMO? Or could it be that some pages were actually in Persia?

Raiden gulped, sweat breaking out across his forehead. He knew he had to avoid suspicion, but their alliance was temporary at best—it wouldn't last beyond this realm. They were free to act as they chose. If it meant war, so be it.

"Aeris, let's head to Coast City."

As soon as he finished speaking, Speed, standing with Soul on Raiden's left side, chimed in. "I will handle our journey then."

Raiden smiled softly and gave a gentle nod.

Chapter 142: Return

Perhaps some intriguing encounter on their way back would have justified the effort, but alas, there was nothing novel to witness, no new mysteries to ponder within the Leviathan.

However, after about three hours, they detected a subtle change in the creature's behavior, forcing them to take cover, and in that moment a sudden realization struck Raiden.

Raiden observed the creature's mouth opening slowly, forest air flowing over their skin as they took in the sunset stretching before them.

The sense of peace and stillness that had enveloped him since Solace Isle was finally dissipating. At last, he was free.

But Raiden scarcely noticed any of this, his thoughts consumed by how the people of Coast might respond upon seeing such a magnificent creature rising from their waters.

"We have arrived." The Leviathan's frigid, resonant tone reverberated through their thoughts while it unfurled its enormous tongue, letting it fall against the shore and soak into the ocean-soaked sand.

Raiden observed, bewildered, as the others appeared entirely nonchalant and untroubled by their circumstances.

Why are they so calm?—he thought to himself, his gaze darting frantically around them.

Should the kingdom discover this creature, King Hannes would undoubtedly send knights to protect Raiden and secure the Book of Ashes. Such intervention would certainly reduce their prospects of continuing their quest.

Yet as Raiden's gaze swept frantically about, he spotted two fishermen far to his left in a wooden vessel, utterly unperturbed by the Leviathan's presence.

They merely threw their nets into the water, relaxing with easy laughter. It was as though the creature were invisible to them.

The enormous swells generated by its movement, its writhing tail, and, most perplexing, its immense presence looming on the water's surface like a drifting metropolis—all of it remained unseen by the fishermen.

A smile crossed Raiden's face as he exhaled in relief, then jumped down from the Leviathan's tongue to the sand beneath.

"Not everyone can see it, then," he muttered to himself.

"Yes, only those who can sense mana and aura can see it," Freya replied while collecting her belongings from Leo.

"What a relief."

"Call when you need me," the Leviathan's deep tone reverberated one final time as it gradually pivoted toward the ocean and disappeared into its depths.

Once the creature vanished, Aeris stepped toward Raiden. Her hands trembled nervously as she attempted to speak, appearing almost frightened as she failed to hold his eyes.

Yet Raiden understood her game perfectly—she was reverting to her old manipulative ways now that they'd left the place that had forced honesty upon them.

"Chrono wondered if I might show them around. Can I?" She kept her eyes fixed on the ground, unable to hold Raiden's steady stare.

For a moment, Raiden said nothing, searching for any hint of dishonesty, but her emotions remained steady and unreadable. Even so, he was convinced they were conspiring against him, though he couldn't justify accusations based on intuition alone.

"Very well, go ahead."

As soon as Raiden gave his consent, Chrono and Odard drew closer.

"How gracious of you, boy, to let me take your comrade for a while," he remarked, his posture tilting backward in a show of dominance, golden mana rippling gently around his form.

But Raiden showed no reaction, only fixing him with a steady stare, dismissing his theatrical superiority.

Chrono grasped Aeris's hand and began leading her away. "We each have four days," he said, tossing a wave in Raiden's direction without turning around. "Same time, same place."

His companions headed into the woodland that stretched ahead. But all Raiden could think about was his desperate need for mental clarity.

He pulled an aether cigarette from his pocket and motioned for Freya to remain with him. As he positioned it between his lips, Freya gracefully accommodated him, conjuring small flames from her fingers to provide the light.

The conflict hadn't even started, yet they found themselves already disadvantaged. With Aeris accompanying Chrono, Raiden was left with little recourse but to acquiesce to his terms.

He needed both Chrono's knowledge of their destination and Aeris's ability to call upon the Leviathan.

"What did you need?" Freya asked, and Raiden turned toward her.

He gestured for her to join him as he began to follow the others through the forest. "Did you see anything suspicious about Aeris during your journey?"

Freya ran her hands through her long, dark hair and flicked it back over her shoulders. "Nothing at all."

She began brushing her fingers against her chin. "She was mostly collected and spoke less." She smiled darkly. "I hated her for betraying us earlier because she played a role in my familiar's death."

"But she turned out to be a very caring person. She always hurried to heal me whenever I was wounded in battle." She shrugged. "She's still at number seven even though she's three years older than us, but her healing ability is quite impressive."

Raiden glanced at her for a moment. That was the same side of Aeris he'd been seeing for a while now, but after Speed's warning about his suspicions, she had appeared quite different with her unnecessary lies and suspicious behavior.

"Are you sure that's all?"

Freya began tapping her chin repeatedly with her finger. "She drank and had a lot of fun at the inns we stayed at." She nodded. "That was all."

She was the oldest among them. Partying and drinking were normal at their age, but Raiden still couldn't get his head around it. What was with the sudden change? Was she not betraying them after all?

"What's going on?" Freya asked, her expression dropping. "Do you think she's up to something?"

Raiden glanced at her and contemplated whether it was worth telling her before nodding his head in confirmation.

"I don't think so," she said, her smile returning. "Once a traitor, always a traitor, right?"

"You can let me kill her if you want."

Raiden tilted his head upward, gazing at the night sky through the canopy of branches. "Not yet."

Raiden's thoughts weren't helping, but he was certain Aeris couldn't be killed yet. He couldn't stay trapped in his mind much longer before Freya brought up something random, stealing his thoughts and putting a smile on his face.

Before long, they arrived at the mansion. The sight of the five-story Gothic structure, with a newly built fountain in front of it, sent a sense of home through him, and familiarity coursed down his spine.

But something caught his attention completely. Before the entrance stood two girls in white pajamas, one with long white hair and the other with cascading dark hair.

"Hard to believe June and Alora were standing guard for us," Freya said as they watched Alora wave at them.

"I know." His eyes began darting around. "Where are the clones anyway?"

"I wonder."

Chapter 143: Wild Threat

"I can't tell where exactly your clones went," June said with a shrug. "They were around a few moments ago until they all headed outside." Meanwhile, Alora waved over her shoulder as she disappeared into her room.

"We followed them here and found you."

Raiden nodded in understanding. If that was the case, then he knew what might have happened: Klein el Seer and his team, the nightmare cohort, summoned the clones back. They knew he had returned.

As soon as June finished speaking, everyone started heading to their rooms. Leo dropped the others' luggage on the sofas and headed upstairs with his and Raiden's.

Before Raiden could head to his room, June pinched him on the shoulder. "Despite your blindness, I can tell you've grown much stronger," she said with a smirk. "Let's have a duel tomorrow... let me defeat you in peace."

Raiden glanced sharply at her star-shaped yellow crest. They had all improved drastically, and both she and Alora were at number five alongside the others, except him.

He gave her a sharp smile. "Not happening." He walked past her and headed up the stairs. There on the last floor stood Ash, waiting for him.

"Make sure no one defeats you again before I do," June called out. "It's an insult to me, you know?"

Raiden barely spared her a glance, his mind already focused on tracking down FIRMO within their four-day stay.

But what concerned him most was how uneasy Alora's presence made him feel. She was a dreamwalker, someone he couldn't manipulate or handle since she could easily read his mind and, worse, implant false memories. Her discovering his plans was the last thing he wanted.

The moment Raiden closed in on Ash, he noticed her trembling hands and her eyes flickering and darting across the floor.

Raiden instinctively looked down at himself and could feel his own body trembling, goosebumps racing across his skin.

"What's happening, Ash?" he asked, hurrying in her direction.

[They are here,] her voice echoed in his mind.

Raiden's confusion deepened as he reached her, crouching down and touching her cheek. "Who is here?"

She raised her head and stared into Raiden's eyes. Her expression cracked with fear that was becoming impossible to overlook.

"I don't remember who they are," her voice cracked as she spoke, "but I can feel them. They are here."

Was she speaking of the mysterious woman after him? Raiden shook his head in dismissal. If that was the case, then with such a powerful presence, he would sense it too.

But regardless, if it were her, he couldn't pass up the opportunity to see her.

Raiden held her by the shoulders. "Can you locate them?" She nodded gently.

Coincidentally, Leo returned from his room on Raiden's right, but just as he turned to her, a voice from the left caught his attention.

"She looks terrified; why?" Noelle asked and hurried to Ash, crouching beside Raiden as she reached for her pallid face.

"I can't tell, but something is threatening her," Raiden responded, and immediately, Noelle's expression dropped.

"Who?" she demanded.

"Like I said, I can't tell," Raiden said bluntly as Noelle sneered. He locked eyes with Ash once more.

"Where do you think they are?"

Ash remained still for a moment, concentrating. "It's a bit far, but I think Persia City."

Raiden's expression fell sharply. How could she feel a threat from that distance? Was it that powerful?

After a brief moment lost in his thoughts, he snapped back to attention and rose to his feet. He hadn't seen Ash ever this paranoid, but if whatever it was posed such a threat to her, then he couldn't help but respond immediately.

He turned to his right, toward Leo, who wore a perfectly perplexed expression. "I'm heading to Persia City now, so take care of the place."

Leo gave him a firm nod. "Okay, bookkeeper."

Raiden extended his hand, and Ash placed her small one in it. "Let's get rid of this threat, okay?"

Ash stared at him for a moment. [Okay, Papa.]

"Not so fast," Noelle said as she rose to her feet, and Raiden turned. "I'm going with you."

Something powerful enough to threaten Ash from such a distance wasn't something to mess with. That said, he was certain he couldn't tackle such a force alone, and there might be more than one. He needed to play dirty and smart.

"Okay," he said, then turned to Leo. "Go to Levi's and tell him to meet us in the teleportation room."

"Okay, sure." Leo walked past him to descend the stairs.

Noelle shifted and stretched her neck, revealing the choker-like tattoo for the first time in a long time.

"Let's go," she said, striding past Raiden.

Raiden wondered why she chose to reveal her tattoo now. Did it have a hidden meaning or boost her mana control like her aether cigarette?

He shrugged, brushing off the thoughts before lifting Ash to his chest. But despite Raiden's decision to confront the threat, Ash's expression remained sour.

Raiden glanced at her with concern as he descended the stairs. "Are you sure you want us to do this?"

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes wavering. "I don't know," she said, then smiled briefly. "But let's do it."

Raiden responded with a smirk, and the moment he reached the bottom of the stairs, he headed down the corridor on his right.

When he arrived at the teleportation portal, Leo, Levi, and Noelle were already there.

"Such an honor that my master considers me one of the few worthy to face this threat," Levi said sarcastically, bowing with his hand over his chest.

Raiden shook his head in disbelief. He locked eyes with Leo and gave him a gentle nod to do his job, then casually walked through the portal.

He stepped out into the third town square. To his left was the statue of the deceased queen of Persia, mounted on a horse with her sword raised high.

The chilled midnight air brushed against his skin as he absorbed the distant silence, his head turning to survey all four streets leading to the square.

But the empty streets were the least of his concerns as both he and Ash shivered repeatedly, as though they'd been plunged into an ice-cold bath.

At that moment, the others emerged, and Raiden looked down at his hands. He swallowed his fear, unable to tell what exactly was wrong with Ash.

As they stood there, Ash gestured toward the street on their left. Raiden turned in that direction and braced himself.

"Levi, I want you to remain invisible until I tell you otherwise."

Raiden gestured for them to move toward the threat's direction. "We might be facing the mysterious girl who's been after me." His tone grew serious. "Let's be careful."

Chapter 144: Those Eyes

A chill ran through Raiden's body with each step down the street. Silence enveloped them, broken only by hesitant footsteps echoing in the air, while he held Ash's hand as she walked beside him, with the invisible Levi and Noelle flanking them.

Following Ash's directions, however, brought them to a familiar road leading to the slums of the sixth town square.

"I know this place," Levi whispered from the shadows, and everyone turned toward his voice.

"We're heading to the FIRMO hideout," he added.

Raiden and the others all paused as Raiden turned to Ash. When he looked at her, his heart dropped in terror and confusion.

For the first time since Ash manifested into human form, her dark aura began radiating from her. Raiden instantly felt a sudden heat, letting go of her hand immediately.

"What is going on?" Noelle asked while backing away from Ash.

For some reason, Raiden couldn't help but feel terrified. He clutched his chest as cold sweat drenched his body. He began to wonder what was happening as well, but he had no answer.

However, they watched as Ash's hair grew even whiter and began floating freely, looking fluffy and spreading in every direction.

Dark lines appeared on her hands, running in circles around her arms straight to her neck like a snake, and a dragon-like sigil appeared on her forehead. She looked almost exactly like Raiden in his transformed form.

"They are here," Ash said with a dead, cold tone. Before they knew it, she was gone. No sound, nothing to trace. She had simply vanished.

Raiden felt like his heart was being torn apart, not from Ash's sudden actions but from an internal battle. He was scared, more than he had ever been, as he couldn't even catch a breath.

"What is happening?" he muttered. He turned to his left and began running, and Noelle followed instantly.

Raiden knew those feelings weren't his, and if he was feeling that way, they were definitely Ash's. Knowing she was terrified but still decided to fight showed him just how much of a threat their opponents were. He needed to help her.

He continued to run, though the faster he went, the more his fear increased. This caused his movements to grow sluggish as he stumbled from one wall to the other.

Before they could reach the sixth town square, both Noelle and Raiden began to tremble. Each step became very difficult to maintain, forcing Levi, who was ahead of them, to turn visible as he dropped to the floor unconscious.

This wasn't fear from Ash but from Raiden himself—an overwhelming presence, twice as powerful as that of the leviathan. It filled every inch of the area as Raiden began to wonder how the cityscape was still standing.

"Are those the ones Ash is trying to face?" Noelle asked as she forced her body up. Without waiting for a response, she called out to her domain. "Rule domain."

However, the moment the golden aura within her ceased and formed a sphere around her, Raiden, Levi, and a few buildings, her eyes widened in fear as the domain shattered instantly, its shards dropping to the ground like broken glass.

Noelle was instantly drenched in terror, but Raiden had no intention of staying still. Ash was undoubtedly fighting against those threats, and she could die at this rate.

He clenched his fist and his body immediately began its transformation, his dark hair going blinding white, dark marks appearing on his body, and his once blue aura turning dark. The moment he transformed, he began to feel an excess amount of energy.

He glanced at his hands and saw as the marks began to glow within the darkness, and the more they glowed, the lighter his body felt under the overwhelming pressure.

He knew he didn't have enough time to dwell on such a sensation. Concentrating mana into his legs, Raiden immediately accelerated to the town square, covering a distance of about eight meters in less than two seconds.

But the moment he arrived, his eyes widened in terror. Ash lay on the ground, bleeding from her forehead while holding a sword which appeared to be conjured from shadows.

Before her stood three men standing in the middle of a teleportation portal, laughing as a man of Raiden's age approached with an enormous dark aura compressed into his body, flowing from him like smoking darkness and a blue dragon wing-like sigil across his brow. The man casually walked to join the others.

Raiden stood there, slightly confused, contemplating what to do next. He knew perfectly well that if that man possessed such presence, then he stood no chance.

But a sharp glance at Ash, who was still trying to get to her feet, made him a bit anxious about his thoughts.

"I'd suggest you attend to her wounds," the man with the overwhelming presence said as he finally joined the others, and his presence gently faded away as the aura condensed back into his body.

He wore an elegant black suit. His white hair framed brown eyes that were slightly squinted, and his once dark aura had gently turned blue.

"We have no interest in you, bookkeeper," he added, and Raiden's heart immediately skipped a beat.

He possessed not only a cunning presence and a transformation similar to his own, but his eyes held a familiar fierceness and brutality. They reminded him of someone with a similar, cruel but gentle spirit—his twin brother, Jobe.

Raiden gulped down his fear, standing lost in his own daze with his transformation slowly deactivating as he watched them teleport away.

"Why did you let them leave?" Noelle yelled from behind as she ran past Raiden toward Ash.

But Raiden remained lost in thought. For the first time in a dozen years, he had seen someone with that same intensity he'd once admired in his brother, and it had happened in another world.

Though he couldn't believe that was truly him, he couldn't shake the message those eyes had conveyed—the same one his brother's eyes had always spoken. The more he dwelled on it, the more rage consumed him.

"These bastards!" he muttered and clenched his fist, veins appearing on his forehead as his face twitched.

"Jobe's eyes aren't something to be mocked." His voice cracked with fury and sadness.

"I will kill him," he snarled, clenching his teeth. "I will kill him and rip those eyes out with my bare hands!"

Levi joined them. He, Noelle, and Ash all watched Raiden, whose body was burning with rage.

Jobe was his treasure, his god, and he even hated his own face for resembling Jobe's. Seeing a complete stranger with his brother's perfect eyes, he meant every word he'd said. No one could be Jobe. No one.

Now he had a more valid reason to have the threat killed.

Chapter 145: White-Haired Tyrant

It took Raiden almost forever to calm his rage, and though it never fully disappeared, when it finally settled, he found himself wanting to suggest they head to the palace and get back home.

Their passage through the palace was surprisingly smooth. The guards never questioned their motives, and the king never requested their presence. It was as if everything had been arranged for them in advance—perhaps by Princess Alora.

The moment they returned to the mansion, Ash had already fallen asleep in Noelle's arms, and she immediately hurried to her room. Meanwhile, Raiden, with Levi by his side, made sluggish movements, his body leaning from side to side in both fatigue and frustration as he made his way to the living room.

When they reached the living room, Alora sat on a sofa positioned to face the door, sipping a cup of coffee.

Raiden barely registered her presence as he gradually made his way to the sofa opposite the grand staircase and sank into it. All that filled his mind was sleep.

"You look spent," Alora said, placing a cup down.

Raiden didn't say a word, just leaned into his seat, and before long, his eyes were gently drifting closed.

Levi, however, took the seat opposite Alora and began massaging his neck before adjusting his ponytail.

"Don't mind him," he replied, settling back into his seat. "We encountered someone quite formidable."

Alora remained calm with her expression unreadable, unlike the energetic demeanor she always displayed around Raiden.

"The mysterious girl?" she asked, turning slightly toward Raiden, who remained in his slumber.

Levi shook his head. "No, this was something more sinister. The FIRMO." He smirked and leaned his head back.

"It's funny—I worked for them all this time, but never got to know they had such powerful people."

Alora rested her chin on her hand. "Interesting... and why are you still alive?"

Levi shrugged and stood up. He couldn't tell her they weren't FIRMO's main target at that moment, and he was obviously cautious about Alora's perceptive abilities.

With an awkward expression and sweat beginning to form on his forehead, he clearly wanted to avoid any situation where he might slip up and reveal something to her.

"I can't tell you why, but I'm glad I am alive," he said and began leaving the room, waving at Alora over his shoulder.

Alora watched him leave, her white hair spilling over the back of the sofa. She reached for her coffee cup and took a sip.

"Something isn't right," she muttered to herself. She remained seated for a brief moment before finally rising to her feet and walking out of the hall.

Raiden would have wanted his slumber to last forever, even though he had no specific dream worth remembering. But perhaps in that endless sleep, he wouldn't have had to worry about why the FIRMO posed a threat to Ash or obsess over his hatred for his new enemy.

Before long, morning had arrived. Raiden gently rubbed his eyes with his hands braced against his thighs.

His thoughts paced back and forth as he struggled to push their encounter from the night before out of his mind. Those eyes, and the voices they seemed to speak—he just couldn't let go.

FIRMO was already his enemy, but to know someone of such caliber was among their ranks made him want to destroy them more. Yet he knew his rage and thirst for revenge would likely amount to nothing if he didn't understand what had truly happened that night.

The presence they'd encountered was definitely too powerful for just one person, yet even though they were four against their opponents, only one enemy seemed to possess such a commanding presence.

He ran his hand through his hair aggressively. He needed to close the strength gap before anything else, because if the others were all as strong as the white-haired guy, they were in serious trouble.

Just as he sat there, lost in thought, he saw Noelle and Ash descending the stairs with MK behind them. The wound on Ash's forehead had completely healed, but she still didn't look happy at all.

He began to wonder if she looked that way because he hadn't attacked when he had the opportunity. He knew he should have, especially seeing Ash struggling on the floor to get back up, but at the same time, he knew he couldn't have won.

He clenched his fist with growing frustration as he began to remember the kind of fear Ash had overcome just to attack, but he had cowered.

Once they came down, Raiden gestured toward Ash to come to him, and she moved into his arms with her eyes cast downward.

Before he could speak with Ash, however, Noelle spoke up, her hands trembling where they rested on her waist.

"We need to tell the others how strong the FIRMO really is," she said with her voice cracking.

Raiden concentrated on her trembling condition, wondering what was causing her distress. If he could remember correctly, her domain had been effortlessly destroyed the moment she'd activated it, overwhelmed by her opponent's strength alone—but he could tell that wasn't the only reason she appeared so terrified.

She clenched her fist. "These people have my mother, and if I can't even hold my domain in their presence, then I have failed already." Her words carried determination, but her trembling voice betrayed her fear.

Raiden smirked and gently patted Ash's head. "Can we talk after this?" Ash turned to him and nodded firmly.

His thoughts from minutes ago had been about growing stronger, and if she held the same conviction, then it was worth pursuing.

"Why don't you gather everyone and tell them?" Raiden suggested. The moment he spoke, Noelle didn't need to say anything—MK was already heading down the corridors to find everyone.

Noelle couldn't find peace even with Raiden's agreement to have them all get stronger. She drew an aether cigarette from her pocket and began smoking instantly.

Seeing her intensely serious expression, Raiden felt the urge to ease the tension. This wasn't just for her, but also to calm his own churning thoughts.

"You never run out of aethers, do you?" Raiden said sarcastically with a smile, but his words seemed to barely register with her.

Her eyes stared into the distance, obviously lost in her own world. Raiden began to grasp the burden she had been trying to suppress all this time. Her mother's plight clearly devastated her, but bound by duty, she had to pretend it didn't.

They understood each other at this moment. Each carried private reasons for wanting FIRM's destruction, elevating their guardianship of the Devourer books beyond mere responsibility into something intensely personal.

Failure wasn't an option.

Chapter 146: Bond

Noelle's speech to the crew came from a place of fear and desperation. Though both Alora and June were present, she orchestrated her words perfectly through her anger, concealing any hint of when and where their battle with the FIRMO was most likely to take place.

Her words fell on good ears with the others; even Freya knew better than to question her commands at that moment. When she finished, they exited the room, leaving Raiden and Ash behind.

Ash remained seated beside Raiden, her blue eyes fixed on the floor. Raiden was still confused, uncertain how to approach their situation. He hadn't seen her this wounded before—not even when she nearly got killed by June.

He thought for a moment, then reached over and gently patted her head. "I'm sorry, Ash. I would have at least attempted to fight."

She raised her head and gazed in Raiden's direction. "No, Papa." Her gaze dropped to the floor again. "You did the right thing."

Raiden's eyes narrowed slightly, confusion washing over him. "Then why are you this sad?"

Ash said nothing, fidgeting with her fingers as her eyes stared into space. Clearly, she was hiding something.

"Come on, Ash," Raiden said, placing his hand under her chin and guiding her gaze toward him. "You can tell me."

Her blue eyes flickered, and she whispered, "It wasn't what I remembered... it was what he said."

Raiden raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"He was a dragon. A powerful one. And when I fought him, I felt like he was my enemy." She clenched her fist. "Not because of who he was... but because of what he was."

Obviously, the FIRMO was their enemy, but from Ash's words, it was obvious her issue was with the abilities her opponent possessed. As a fellow dragon, her grudge was toward the dragon, not the person in particular.

Raiden remembered seeing the white-haired foe possess a transformation similar to his, but something wasn't right. He hadn't seen any dragons around.

Raiden frowned. "A dragon... in human form?"

Ash raised her head and stared into Raiden's eyes for a moment. She was clearly searching for the right words to avoid Raiden's question, but Raiden knew better.

His expression dropped instantly. "Don't lie to me, Ash. You know I can always tell when you're lying."

Ash hesitated, then nodded faintly. "He said... they were fully bonded. Their rotate is done."

Raiden swallowed. He remembered what Leo had told him about "rotate," a process by which dragons passed on their will and essence to someone they trusted, though he never truly understood much about it.

"What does that mean? Mana Rebinding?"

Before Raiden could ask more, Leo entered with a book in hand. "Primordial dragons bind differently. Stronger. They can sense each other, even from great distances. That's what Ash felt."

Raiden's chest tightened as he looked at Ash. "So... what does this mean for us?"

He held a book as he approached from the corridor and took his seat.

"I didn't know that," Ash said, her eyes following Leo's movements.

"When you left in the evening, I couldn't help but try to understand how Ash could sense a threat from such a distance." He said this and rested the book on his thighs.

"That's when I learned that primordial dragons can sense each other even from great distances... just like what Ash did."

Raiden glanced at Ash as he finally began to believe that she was somehow more connected to the primordial dragons than he had imagined.

Leo shrugged his shoulders. "If whoever you guys met was a dragon and had such an enormous presence—

"Stop!" Ash interrupted, eyes squeezed shut. "I'll say it."

Raiden turned to her, his thoughts growing more perplexed. He didn't know exactly what to make of the situation.

"I don't remember anything about a primordial dragon, but I am certain of some things." She said this and looked into Raiden's eyes, who only wanted the situation to make more sense.

"You and I, Papa... we're sharing the same strength."

She glanced at herself. "And though I contain most of the strength, you also have a portion of it."

Raiden's eyes widened. "You mean... we're both the Moon Dragon?"

She gave him a firm nod. "My entire existence is as the moon dragon, and I bonded with you, Papa."

She glanced down at her small frame. "I appear this way because you see me as a child—as your daughter. Had you viewed me as anything else, I could have taken any form."

Raiden was taken aback. He could have sworn he'd never truly liked her calling him "Papa"—so why would he view her as his daughter? But there were more pressing matters to address.

"How exactly does that explain our situation, Ash?"

"I wanted to explain why I use a higher percentage." Ash took a deep breath. "Right now, there are two moon dragons: you and I."

"But there can be only one moon dragon."

Her words hit Raiden harder than he expected. He wasn't naive; he could tell where her explanation was heading, but he needed confirmation.

"So that's what you meant by 'fully bonded?'"

Ash gave him a gentle nod. "Yes, and for that to happen, the dragon had to trust their bond enough to surrender everything to them. That's rotate."

The moment she spoke, Raiden let out a hollow chuckle—not from humor, but from disbelief. The sound cracked in his throat, as if he were trying to laugh away the truth he couldn't bear to face.

But that wasn't his real concern because he wasn't going to let it happen. Ash wasn't going to die under any circumstances.

After a brief moment, he paused and turned back to Ash. Her eyes were fixed on the floor, and the uneasiness in them told him everything he needed to know.

This was why Ash had been scared of losing him. The constant fear within their hearts made Ash feel as if she would drift away from Raiden. Everything was clear to him now.

Ash's lips trembled as she tried to continue, but her voice broke. Her hands curled into fists against her knees, knuckles whitening as her small frame shivered. "Papa... if there can only be one Moon Dragon... then what am I? What happens to me?"

Raiden reached out instantly, pulling her close. "Don't you dare say that. You aren't dying, Ash. Not now, not ever." His voice cracked with a fury he hadn't felt in years.

"Even if I have to train a decade for it, I'll kill that bastard without losing you."

Ash stared at him for a little while before breaking into a loving smile. Raiden could tell she didn't believe what he said and was only happy because he cared.

"She isn't a primordial dragon after all," Leo said, finally rising to his feet after remaining silent since Ash had shut him down. "I will look for any information that could help you, bookkeeper."

Raiden turned to him and gave him a firm nod.

The moment Leo left, Raiden gave Ash a big grin. He was going to kill the white-haired guy regardless, not just for hurting Ash but also for having the same eyes as his brother, Jobe. And he didn't care if he had to hold back his strength.

"If we work together, we can do this, Ash... trust me."

Ash's smile widened as she stared at Raiden, but his faded after a moment of thought.

[ALERT]

[FAMILIAR TRUST +10%]

"How exactly did you make the sword you held yesterday?" He paused for a moment as he began to recall more such events. "Come to think of it, you've created shadowy chains as well."

"How?"

Ash's expression returned to normal. "When you're within the darkness, as a moon dragon, you can conjure anything... you just have to imagine it."

"Really?" Raiden asked as he rested his chin on his hand.

"Yes, Papa."

Raiden smiled. "You have to teach me anything you know about being the moon dragon, okay?"

Ash responded with a gentle nod.

Chapter 147: Devil of the Moment

[The marks on your body aren't random, Papa,] Ash's voice drifted through Raiden's consciousness as she demonstrated how to bend darkness into weaponized forms.

Raiden glanced at her with a puzzled expression as this felt more complex than the usual rituals he knew. He stood in the darkness on the green grass, adjusting his stance as he visualized an odachi sword.

"The lines are there to fill your entire body with darkness, Papa." Ash transformed as she spoke. Dark lines spread across his hands, neck and forehead, while her white hair became smoking white and fluffy.

"This is the first moon dragon form," she shrugged her shoulders as her pale skin began to glow more like the moon while she gestured her hand and a cup entirely made of darkness appeared.

"The darkness becomes yours once you're in it, and with enough mana you can shape it into whatever you want."

Raiden glanced at her, his cloudy white hair drifting in the darkness, wondering how she made it appear so effortless.

He closed his eyes and began to visualize it again.

[Don't just visualize it, Papa.] Ash's voice echoed in his mind. [Make it appear... command it.]

Raiden nodded firmly and eased his mind, then chose to use words, commanding the darkness to recreate his previous odachi sword.

At that very moment, Ash's voice brightened. "You did it, Papa!"

Relief surged through Raiden's heart as he felt the familiar weight of the hilt in his hand. Smiling, he opened his eyes to find an exact replica of his previous sword, smoking with darkness as it rested in his palm.

Raiden raised his hand and began swinging the sword around, his curious mind wondering what properties this weapon might have.

To his left was the renovated massive fountain, standing in its exact position. Raiden charged toward it instinctively, a smile on his face. Once within reach, he leaped into the air and struck at it with his sword.

And that was all it took. The fountain split into two pieces, water rushing everywhere. Raiden stared at the clean cut, then back at the sword in his hand. Amazed, he reached out to touch the blade.

His smile deepened when it dawned on him that the whole sword was wrought of pure darkness, beyond his direct touch.

He turned to Ash, who lingered at a distance with a proud smile painted on her lips. "The cut was effortless and clean, but I can feel a solid blade. How?"

Ash began to approach him, tugging at her oversized shirt. She'd chosen to wear Raiden's shirt today, though she couldn't say why.

"I don't know... maybe I've never questioned it because it all came naturally to me."

"But I think it solidifies in the moments just before striking the target," she added.

"It comes naturally to you, huh?" he muttered as it dawned on him why conjuring was so effortless for her, yet so difficult for him.

As they lingered there, however, a voice drifted from behind them. "Come and eat, Ash."

They both turned in that direction and found Noelle. As soon as Ash caught sight of her, she dragged her feet hurriedly in her oversized shirt and slipped behind Raiden.

Raiden's expression fell, confused. He hadn't seen Ash hide from Noelle like this before. Not once. So what made eating so terrifying?

[She'll force me to eat until I'm sick, Papa,] her telepathic voice quavered with anxiety.

Raiden found their dynamic oddly endearing. Maybe it wasn't his own amusement but Ash's bleeding through, but at that moment he simply chuckled with quiet joy.

The grim expression etched across Noelle's face showed she wasn't joking—she really would stuff Ash until she couldn't take another bite. She flicked her fingers, and shards of golden aura shot toward them.

The attack came too fast and without warning, leaving Raiden and Ash stunned as they were locked into perfect stillness. Neither could budge even slightly.

"Quit being so difficult and eat," Noelle said, stepping forward while Ash strained to break free. Yet Raiden found the entire ordeal strangely delightful.

Please don't let her drag me away, Papa. I'll explode from eating too much... I'm never even hungry,] she begged telepathically, yet this only intensified Raiden's amusement.

You're by yourself on this one, Ash—he responded, watching as Noelle seized Ash by the collar and started pulling her toward the house.

Ash's expression crumpled with hurt as she gazed at Raiden, her moon dragon form fading back to her human appearance.

[What kind of Papa are you?]

Noelle's hold on Raiden finally released, and he started waving at Ash with an amused smile.

I'm the kind of Papa who's got you,—he responded, his grin widening as he closed his eyes in satisfaction while Ash scowled.

But once they were gone, Raiden's face grew somber. It had been two days now, with the third night falling soon, and he still hadn't encountered the mysterious girl pursuing him or received any word from Klein el Seer.

Everyone else had been training harder than usual, particularly Noelle, who was obviously trying to perfect using her Rule ability independently of her domain activation.

While the rest of the group's dedication was admirable, MK and Noelle's resolve was on an entirely different level, fueled by motivations that went far beyond duty alone.

During those days, Raiden observed Leo drilling his trio of new techniques: wind, water, and earth slash. Recalling that those basic moves had actually injured him, he found himself compelled to master them too, but with his own approach.

During Raiden's past life, his position as a Grim family member and potential clan heir meant he was trained in three deadly sword techniques that belonged exclusively to their lineage—lessons that started when he was merely four, shared with his twin brother.

Those techniques, however, were painless and swift—ideal for their assassin bloodline. But as someone who relished talking to the dying, such rapid methods clashed with his preferences. He remained convinced he needed to forge something new while maintaining the same lethality.

Leo's words about the mechanics of the slashes came back to him, and he quickly began implementing those teachings.

"Wind is about precision," he whispered.

He started channeling mana into his shadow sword, applying the same method he used to manipulate mana through his body for increased agility. Now he focused on mastering the projection of blade energy from the sword, mimicking Leo's wind slash.

In no time, he became entirely focused on his training. Maintaining a consistent rhythm, he saw results forming instantly.

Each moment of training mattered. He had to become stronger to face the FIRMO, because he refused to let Ash sacrifice herself to make him more powerful simply because he wasn't strong enough.

Hours into his training, perspiration covered his body despite the frigid midnight temperature. The feeling was unmistakable—though his shadow blade had no physical edge to slice his hands, he understood he'd trained long enough.

Before he could cease his training and recover, something emerged behind him. His heart lurched as he turned toward it. When he glimpsed what awaited him, everything clicked into place.

There stood a teleportation portal unlike the familiar ones he'd seen, yet he knew without doubt who had conjured it.

"The devil of the moment."

[ALERT]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL: +5]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL- 85 /100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 210

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1150/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 430

STAMINA: 420

DRAGON AURA: 210

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 100%

—Euphoria: 100%

FAMILIAR TRUST: 120%

—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON

CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 5.

—Name: [ASH]

—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SPEED]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SOUL]

—Bond Type: Devotion Pact.

NEW ABILITIES:

—Soul of Dragon: 75%

—Heart of Dragon: 75%

—Moon Dragon's Veins: 70%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

Chapter 148: The Huntress

"What captivates the attention of the one I hold dearest?" Klein el Seer inquired, his form solidifying as he crossed through the portal.

The wind played through his dark-brown hair and tugged at his unbuttoned green shirt, the collar fluttering against his neck.

Confidence radiated from him as it always did, but the familiar black blindfold had been replaced by a wide band of white cloth wrapped securely around his eyes.

Klein strolled toward Raiden with unhurried ease, and Raiden responded by dissolving his moon dragon transformation, rolling his shoulders as his body returned to its natural state.

Still, Raiden found himself squinting, his yellow crest offering little comfort against the disturbing absence of Klein's aura.

Klein stepped closer and rested his hand against Raiden's shoulder, his smile easy and familiar. "How are you doing, buddy?"

Raiden lifted his eyes to meet Klein's covered gaze, his look carrying a tired weight. "You lied to me."

"Not quite the reception I was hoping for," Klein said, something peculiar flickering beneath his usual composure as Raiden's words found their mark. "A month without seeing each other, and that's how you greet me?"

Raiden's face contorted in a bitter sneer. "Right now, I should be hauling you across the ground."

His hand moved to remove Klein's from his shoulder, the gesture sharp and dismissive. "You assured me no one would know I'd left my duty, didn't you?"

Klein adopted an almost theatrical air of childish frustration. "You know perfectly well those guarantees never included Alora." A heavy sigh escaped him. "She's nothing short of a complete menace where I'm concerned."

He shook his head, disgust plain on his features. "Those stellar eyes of hers, when she narrows them at you with that deadly stare, you know chaos is coming."

"I suspect she'll prove to be my greatest enemy one day," he murmured, running his hands along his arms as if warding off a chill.

Raiden held his tongue, studying Klein's strange behavior with quiet intensity. He knew firsthand how formidable Alora could be when circumstances demanded it, particularly given her ability to breach even his dreams while he existed in that precarious space between dimensional planes and reality itself.

He had known her throughout his entire life, though not intimately—the rumors he'd heard over the years meant little to him now.

What really troubled him was that he could tell Klein was being sarcastic, maybe even lying outright, but his eyes caught no emotional tells whatsoever. Could people actually slip past him with blatant deception?

"She is inside. I can get her for you if you want," Raiden said, grasping for something concrete to focus on besides his spiraling thoughts.

"It would be futile."

Raiden raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess, you already know how that goes."

"I don't waste my time on such mundane matters," Klein said, and something dangerous flickered across his face. "You were already informed of the mysterious girl, right?"

Raiden's expression turned serious as the pieces clicked into place. This was why Klein was here, and whatever it was, Klein had been waiting for this moment for a long time.

"You know something about her," Raiden said flatly. "What does she want from me? And who is she?"

Klein began massaging his forehead in frustration. "She wasn't supposed to show up this early." He shook his head. "The future has been disrupted somehow and now I can't really tell what happens next."

Confusion dawned on Raiden first, then his expression dropped to something even darker. "What do you mean?"

Klein took a deep breath, "I can't tell you much about her, but she is the huntress."

"Huntress?" Raiden repeated.

He gave Raiden a firm nod. "She targets specific people because of what they're destined to become, and ensures they never live long enough for that future to unfold."

Raiden knew the huntress wanted him dead from the moment he heard of her, but he hadn't expected such a ridiculous reason. All because of what he might do in the future? The irony was bitter—he had no future in this world because he was determined to return to his past life.

However, at that very moment, understanding hit him like a cold wave. What if the huntress wasn't trying to prevent what he might do here—but what he would do when he returned to his world?

"What exactly did I do in the future?"

For the first time ever, Klein looked helpless in his own game. "The huntress is like an unbreakable force, and once she's involved the future becomes... blank. Uncertain." He shrugged helplessly. "So with you, I can't see past this moment."

"So you're useless?"

Klein smirked. "Is that how you want to put it?" He sat up straighter, reclaiming his presence in the room. "I am Klein el Seer."

Klein's boasts meant nothing to Raiden now. This wasn't a matter he could overlook, not when it confirmed his deepest fears.

An unbreakable force,—he thought.

Was it Aaron's warning—that staying on this path could drive him insane if he couldn't return home? Which would mean... he actually managed to get the pages?

Raiden's thoughts spiraled. How was he supposed to face an unbreakable force? If the huntress simply wanted to stop him from obtaining the twenty pages, killing him would be the most efficient method. He had no intention of dying, though, he would have to make the unbearable bearable, whatever it took.

Dawn was breaking, the sun creeping up from the eastern horizon. As soon as Klein noticed the light, he turned to the teleportation portal that waited behind him.

"I will see you after your mission, kid," Klein called out, but Raiden's mind was completely consumed by thoughts and confusion.

However, it didn't take long before he came to a conclusion—but by the time he raised his head, Klein was already gone.

He clenched his fist and gritted his teeth, frustration mounting as he realized el Seer was gone.

Alora had mentioned something crucial, when the huntress visited, she hadn't attacked them once, despite their attempts to kill her. If that was the case, then the huntress's future-blocking effect only applied to him. Klein could still see what happened to his comrades.

But Klein's rushed exit made it clear; he'd already thought of this but had no intention of helping.

Still, he refused to spend his remaining training days obsessing over the inevitable. When the huntress came, he would counter her however he deemed necessary.

As he stood there, a voice suddenly came from behind. "You really spent the whole night training? Impressive."

The voice snapped him from his thoughts. He turned to find Alora and June, their yellow aura dancing gently in the morning breeze.

"We have to leave," Alora said, coming to a halt before Raiden.

Raiden was at a loss for words. He would have felt more at ease knowing they'd be there when he left on his mission tomorrow, but he didn't want to make his departure too conspicuous.

"We are Stars of the kingdom, you know?" Alora said, brushing her white hair behind her ear. "Duty calls, but we will return as soon as we can."

She smiled. "After all, I can't afford to go much longer without seeing my future husband."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, focusing his sharp gaze on her emotions, but found no fluctuations whatsoever. It confirmed his suspicions about his ability—Alora was either being completely truthful or blatantly dishonest.

He smiled and took a deep breath, then reached into his pocket and withdrew a badge. It was the Dawnbringer family crest Alex had given him as proof of their alliance to free the family from bookkeeping duty.

"Would you give this to Alex Dawnbringer when you return?"

June squinted. "Alex? He's been coming by repeatedly, looking more dejected each time, searching for you. But your clone always hid from him."

Raiden looked confused. "Really?"

June gave him a firm nod, took the crest, and both she and Alora headed toward the mansion.

"We'll settle this with a fair duel when I get back," June said enthusiastically, waving at Raiden as she turned to follow Alora.

Raiden watched as they walked away, saying nothing. He already had too much on his plate, but June's words about Alex's constant visits and depression sparked his curiosity. He'd been keeping the proof of Alex's Dawnbringer lineage from him for far too long.

"Well, the pages are what really matter," he muttered to himself.

Chapter 149: Settled

The sun was slowly setting below the horizon. The sound of steps and dragging feet echoed through the distance as Raiden walked alongside his comrades, moving through the forest toward the Coast City shore.

Ash's hand rested firmly in Raiden's as nothing but reluctant sounds echoed through the distance. Everyone was lost in their thoughts, and Raiden's were no different—those of a scared and confused child.

Huntress, an unbreakable force, was right on his tail for a crime he had yet to commit, and worse still, he had no idea what it was to even weigh his options. To make matters worse, FIRMO had ruthless comrades who could kill him at any moment, and what threatened his fragile life most were the absolute domains they might venture into.

His palms grew sweaty, eyes darting to the floor as he struggled to gulp down his fear. He would have avoided this if he could, perhaps enjoyed the solace his royal life offered. But his dreams and aspirations outweighed his fear, regardless.

Before long, they reached the shore. The ocean lay gentle and quiet, with only the sharp chirping of insects breaking the silence. But when Raiden's eyes swept the area, he realized there were no signs of Chrono, Aeris, and the others.

A look of disbelief flashed across his face. Had Chrono and Aeris left them behind? He checked his wrist, where the mark of their alliance still remained, yet his doubts wouldn't subside.

He clenched his fist in irritation. His face twisted with disgust as his pride shattered around him. Why hadn't he considered this before? What if the alliance crest had been useless from the start?

As he stood there, Freya approached and leaned close to his ear, whispering:

"Your team looks defeated. Perhaps some words of encouragement from their leader?"

Raiden's eyes widened as it dawned on him that perhaps his companions were all wrestling with the same fear that consumed him.

"By the way, don't worry. Chrono and the others are coming," she added. This prompted Raiden to activate Gaze Beyond and scan the city, where he spotted them walking casually with smiles and laughter, making their way toward them.

Raiden released a soft sigh. "You're right, Free. I need to say something."

He turned to the others standing aimlessly around them. Levi and Leo chatted while organizing their luggage, but the rest stayed silent, with only Speed offering comfort as he gently brushed his sister Soul's head.

A simple clearing of Raiden's throat was enough to pull everyone's focus to him immediately, including Noelle and MK, who turned along with the rest.

Raiden took a deep breath. "This will be a very difficult journey. Though I don't expect anything harmful to happen to any of us, we can't ignore the possibility of casualties."

His golden eyes darted between their faces. "We could be regarded as warriors, and if so, we must be prepared to accept casualties."

He glanced at the alliance crest on his wrist. Though this was the very reason he'd allied with them, he found himself feeling the need to be empathetic.

"This alliance is between Chrono and me, and should any of you get caught up in it, contractor or not, I would be deeply wounded."

He gazed at them once more, his eyes narrowed and his blue aura radiating gently. "If this isn't a fight you want to be involved in, you're free to leave. I would be completely fine with that."

Leo attempted to speak, but Raiden motioned for him to stop.

"I believe in all of you," he continued. "Your abilities are exceptional, and without a doubt, I need you."

His tone dropped in tempo. "This is why I am asking you to fight alongside me." He paused for a moment, allowing his words to settle in. "But even if you choose to help from afar rather than fight beside me, I would still appreciate it."

He turned to his left, toward the blue ocean. "If you still want to go with me, then say nothing. When the leviathan gets here, just climb aboard with me."

Raiden was quiet, listening to his racing heartbeat as he feared some would leave. At least Speed and Soul, since all Speed cared for was his sister's safety, or perhaps Levi, since aside from his own agenda, he had no real reason to stay with him.

But seconds became minutes, and as Chrono and Aeris finally closed in on them, none of them had yet left.

"You guys seem awfully quiet today. Are you scared?" Chrono called out the moment he was within reach, prompting Raiden to turn toward him.

"Where I'm from, people tend to hide their fears behind silly jokes and pointless laughs." He tilted his head slightly and raised an eyebrow, his expression matching the cold atmosphere. "Are you scared, Chrono?"

Chrono smiled as he closed in on Raiden. "I won't lie. I am very scared."

Raiden's expression darkened as he realized Chrono wasn't lying. He hadn't expected this level of loyalty from him.

Chrono's voice went cold and calculated. "This is why we must head to Dark Dream Island first."

"It is isolated and contains fewer pages—only four."

"Dark Dream?"

Chrono turned toward the ocean. "The people with the pages are known as the Elusives."

"Elusives? I've heard of them," Leo said as he took a few steps forward. "Weren't they the four Judges for the four kingdoms centuries ago?"

Chrono turned to him with a smile. "You really know your stuff, lad."

A soft smile crossed Raiden's face. Not because Leo knew about the Elusives, but because he could speak Noor. Leo had learned it solely for their mission, something Raiden never would have expected from him.

"Are they also asleep or something? How are they still alive after centuries?" Freya asked while trying to put distance between her and Levi.

"I don't know," Chrono said flatly. "But I know each of the four absolute domains and their owners."

"Dark Dream is owned by the Lost Child."

Raiden's eyes narrowed the moment Chrono spoke. "That name sounds completely unhinged."

Chrono shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we can only hope no one has come in contact with the pages." An uneasy expression crossed his face. "If that's the case, we speak to the Lost Child gently, and regardless of whether they give us the pages, we leave quietly."

He turned to Raiden. "Just like how we left Solace Isle."

Raiden couldn't help but second-guess Chrono's knowledge about the absolute domains. Between the uncomfortable look on his face and the soft cracks in his voice, he was definitely hiding something.

"Aside from the names of the absolute domains, you know nothing about them, do you?"

Chrono turned to him, beginning to scratch the back of his head with an awkward smile. "What are you saying? Of course, I do."

Raiden's heart sank when he saw Chrono's emotions fluctuating red within his golden aura. He slapped his forehead in disbelief as he began to beat himself up for falling for Chrono's tricks.

"You forced us into this alliance because you were unaware of what we were facing and didn't want us to back out."

Chrono let out a sigh. "Yes, you've got me." He smirked. "But we all know you need the names of the absolute domains before you can travel into them."

Raiden was taken aback by his response. "I wasn't expecting you to crack this easily."

"Well, that's because I know I'm not useless," he said with a sarcastic grin.

Raiden watched as Chrono's emotions fluctuated once more. This left him confused; he couldn't understand what was happening. He knew they needed the names of absolute domains to travel to them, and the oath to the Leviathan Path proved that. Obviously, Chrono wasn't useless. So what was he lying about?

After a brief moment, Raiden sighed. Regardless of his lies, they needed to leave.

"You're right." He turned to the others. "We need to leave. Who is willing to take care of our transport?"

Levi, who was busily trying to meddle in Freya's affairs, raised his hand.

"It's settled then."

Chapter 150: Dark Dream

The Leviathan path was usually smooth, until it suddenly wasn't.

The realization struck them all simultaneously as the leviathan's massive form began to convulse more violently than before, as though under relentless assault during its journey. They frantically sought stable footing—some desperately clutching its horn-like protrusions, others seizing hold of its razor teeth.

But that alone wasn't enough to save them. Without warning, the leviathan convulsed its massive body in terror, and they felt the crushing force reverberate through them even from within its depths.

Raiden's grip on Ash's hand tightened as the true horror of this dark dream became clear; it was far worse than he'd ever imagined. Cold sweat drenched his skin, every instinct shrieking for them to flee home while he desperately clutched the leviathan's razor tooth. He trembled alongside Ash, his panicked gaze searching the darkness as his breath came in ragged gasps.

His brain remained razor-sharp, but his other senses shrieked in agony, each forced breath hitting him like a punch to the gut.

It wasn't long before his sharp mind slowly began surrendering to the fear. Had he been a fool to come here at all?

But before he could spiral further, he realized he wasn't the only one breaking down. Behind him, the rest looked more deranged than he did. When he turned to Ash, she was staring vacantly into the void, her consciousness seemingly adrift.

They weren't just afraid—they were drowning in it.

"I think we're too late," Chrono whispered from behind, his parched voice fracturing with hopelessness.

Raiden struggled to turn toward Chrono's voice, every muscle rebelling against the movement, yet he forced his body to comply.

But the moment he turned, his eyes widened in pure terror, his mind reeling as his soul sank into despair. Behind him yawned absolute darkness under storm-wracked skies crackling with lightning.

Skeletal trees clawed at the distant horizon while frigid wind howled through the void. He was utterly alone in nothingness.

He gulped down his mounting fear, eyes flickering with panic. Beside him, Ash stood motionless, still completely lost in her daze.

But at that moment, confusion overtook even the terror coursing through his veins. How did he end up here? And where the hell was everyone?

He pressed his palms against his eyes, desperate to dispel the hallucination, but every sensation hit him with perfect clarity—the tender soreness of his eyelids and the sharp pain from the pressure. Everything felt impossibly real.

He turned his gaze toward the distance, and there, rising from the gloom, stood what appeared to be a haunted gothic mansion, consumed by shadows as dark clouds devoured the moon hovering overhead.

Raiden pressed his palms against his face, completely lost. All he could recall was Chrono's strangled voice, and then—what? Silence. Were they still trapped in the leviathan's mouth?

Questions multiplied in his mind without answers, but he realized that if he was going to get any clarity, his only option was to enter the mansion.

He looked at Ash, still lost in her fearful trance, and carefully hoisted her onto his shoulder. Through the graveyard of dead trees, the path to the mansion stretched empty and desolate. So without a doubt, he began his approach.

His gaze darted frantically in every direction as he pressed forward, yet no trace of life existed anywhere. Only the crash of thunder overhead filled the vast silence.

Yet as Raiden drew near the mansion, primal fear seized him, his very bones telling him to go no further.

His legs shook violently, buckling and intertwining as his stride faltered, threatening to send him sprawling. He managed to steady himself at the last second and adjusted his hold on Ash.

Yet when he regained his footing and looked back at the mansion, the distance hadn't changed at all. What had changed was the solitary figure now perched on its highest point.

Raiden's eyes darted back and forth as he blinked in bewilderment. Squinting hard, he activated Gaze Beyond to examine the figure more closely. His blood ran cold the instant he focused—he might as well have been staring into the depths of hell itself.

"What is going on?" he breathed.

He stood still, trying to process everything, trying to remember what had happened before this nightmare began. But thought after thought yielded nothing. No logical explanation existed for any of this.

How was it possible, one second trapped in the leviathan's mouth, the next stranded in this wasteland? Confusion was beginning to eclipse even his terror. Still, he had to attempt the mansion again. Maybe his urgency for answers had somehow distorted what he'd seen before.

He started toward the mansion again, this time forcing himself to focus on each step, determined not to stumble over his own feet like before, assuming that had occurred.

He continued walking, yet with every step forward, the mansion seemed to retreat deeper into the distance. Raiden's jaw tightened as fury began to crack through his composure.

But he knew this situation required a clear head, not blind rage. He drew a deep breath and steadied himself. Just as he was about to continue forward, he stopped and allowed himself a knowing smirk.

He had to know if he was truly making progress. Using his heel, he scraped a mark into the earth before setting off again. Step after step he walked, only to realize he was caught in the exact same cycle as before.

He searched frantically, scanning the ground again and again for the mark he'd made, but it had vanished completely.

"Why can't I reach the mansion if I'm actually moving forward?" he whispered, bewilderment lacing every word.

"Because you haven't called for me yet."

A stranger's voice drifted through the void, terror coursing through Raiden like liquid ice. He whirled around, eyes searching desperately as he retreated step by careful step, finding nothing but emptiness.

"Who's there?" he called out, his pulse hammering in his chest. He held his breath, waiting for a response that never came.

He came to a complete halt and exhaled shakily. "Am I losing my mind?" he whispered, pressing his palms against his temples over and over.

"Not yet, but you will be soon enough if you refuse to heed my words." The voice returned, now warm and musical, seductively inviting yet threaded with sinister honesty.

Raiden glanced around in all directions once more and asked, "Who are you?"