

# The Bookkeeper

## Chapter 151: Dream Loop

The mysterious angelic voice hung in the air as Raiden's eyes swept frantically, seeking its origin, but the sound appeared to come from all directions and none.

"You have arrived at the Dark Dream Island, and I am merely a humble servant of the Lost Child," came the voice, heavy with deference.

Confusion clouded Raiden's expression, his face darkening. "So, where is everyone? How did I get here?"

"You two came here on your own, silly," the voice replied, its playful lilt a stark contrast to the ominous aura surrounding the Dark Dream.

Still, Raiden found himself doubting her words. He recalled setting out with the others, but how could he have left them behind? Then again, he couldn't even remember the journey to this island, so perhaps his memory was failing him entirely.

"Are you sure I came with only Ash?"

"Yes, silly," the mysterious voice replied, throwing the joking tone right back.

Raiden found the voice more trustworthy by the second, yet he couldn't shake his questions: where exactly was it coming from? And how could anyone possess such a naturally trusting voice?

"Okay, but where are you?" His head whipped around in all directions. "Why can't you meet me in person?"

He spun toward the gothic mansion within the shadows. "Are you on top of the mansion?"

The voice hummed thoughtfully. "I'm currently with my master, the Lost Child, and speaking with you like this is all I can do to help." A pause. "There's no one on the mansion roof. You must be seeing things."

Raiden glanced up again—the figure remained. He activated Gaze Beyond once more, but again saw only darkness. Given his night vision and the ability's failure to detect anything, he reluctantly dismissed it as merely a shadow.

"Okay, how can I get to the mansion?" Raiden began walking once more. "I've been walking for a while now, but can't seem to get any closer."

"No, you can't." The voice's tone was bluntly final.

Raiden paused, his expression darkening. He should have been frustrated by all this confusion, by the strange, dry cold in the air—yet he felt remarkably calm, almost eager to listen. It was as if everything made perfect sense.

"Why?"

"My master is in a dire situation at the moment—he had to fight some visitors who came not long ago." The voice trembled with sorrow and guilt. "I couldn't help him, so I'm trying to do something useful at least."

Raiden believed he finally understood his situation. The last thing he remembered before waking up in this darkness was Chrono telling them they were too late. If the voice was right, then the fight between Lost Child and the other visitors was what had caused the panic.

He smiled as he stood there. He was able to create all these scenarios, and it all made perfect sense to him, but why he was the only one there still puzzled him.

"Out of defense, the absolute domain called Dark Dreams automatically summoned someone worthy of the four pages."

Raiden's grin widened, his lips curling from ear to ear. On any other occasion, he would have doubted this, but this time he believed it completely.

"I am honored," he said, offering a gentle bow. "I need to reach the pages before they get into the wrong hands."

The moment he spoke, Ash woke up and began rubbing her eyes as she glanced around in a similarly confused manner, reflecting the same expression Raiden had when he first arrived.

"This might be the only way I can help my master," it said, voice cracking.

Raiden felt a sudden urge to console whoever was behind the miraculous voice, but before he could speak, the voice continued urgently.

"Turn to your left and head straight." The moment it spoke, Raiden instinctively turned in that direction and began walking immediately.

"If you truly are the worthy one, the pages will be visible to you."

Raiden smiled as he walked, carrying a still-confused Ash in his arms. Though he knew she was finally up, he felt compelled to find the pages first and leave their reunion for later.

Each step sent thrills through him. He was finally going to get his hands on some of the pages—his dream could actually come true.

Raiden walked for quite a while without any sign of the pages, but he remained filled with excitement. Everything was aligned for him to find the pages; he could feel it deep down, and that was all he needed.

After a brief moment, only the buzzing of clouds overhead and Raiden's footsteps broke the silence. The mysterious voice had gone quiet, and Raiden felt no need to question anything.

However, it didn't take long before Raiden's eyes lit up with excitement. He paused as he spotted a lake in the distance, and in the middle of it stood a wooden platform with the pages resting on it.

"I've found it!" he called out, his voice ringing with excitement. There was no response from the mysterious voice, but he felt no need to question anything.

Raiden quickened his pace toward the lake. But before he could get closer, Ash began thrashing in his arms, panic overtaking her. Her eyes flickered open as she called his name, but Raiden heard nothing. His gaze was locked on the pages, everything else fading into irrelevance.

Ash grew desperate and began tugging at Raiden's hair. She started gently, but when she realized it wasn't working, she pulled hard, jerking his head up toward the cloudy sky. Still, nothing could break through to Raiden.

Her eyes narrowed with rage as Raiden drew too close to the lake. As if saving her last resort, she clenched her fist and delivered a devastating punch to Raiden's chin.

The force slammed into Raiden's consciousness like a collapsing building, shattering his trance and sending him crashing to the ground as Ash fell alongside him.

Raiden finally came to, clutching his aching chin. "Ouch... that was painful, Ash," he said, watching as she got to her feet.

[It was a trick, Papa,] her voice echoed in his mind, making him turn back toward the lake.

What he'd thought was a tranquil lake was actually a pool of boiling acid, and the wooden stand—a skeleton slowly melting away in the burning liquid.

Raiden swallowed hard as the reality hit him. He would have walked right into the acid and dissolved to death, all while believing the pages were still there for the taking.

"That bastard."

The instant Raiden spoke, everything shifted with a blink. He was back where he'd started, before the mysterious voice had ever spoken, with Ash in his arms and the mansion appearing close enough to reach.

He stood there, blinking in confusion. He could swear something had just happened to him, but he couldn't remember anything. It was as if whatever had occurred had been completely erased.

Realization hit him quickly, and he immediately looked down, scanning the ground for the marking he'd made to determine if he was caught in a loop.

But then the voice spoke again: "I am what you are looking for."

The voice sounded mysteriously cold and deep, with an oddly tempting quality that felt different from before. Raiden's head whipped around in confusion, his heart pounding.

"What was that?"

## Chapter 152: Lost Child

The bold, calculated voice lingered in the air as Raiden's head whipped frantically from side to side, searching for its source, his expression betraying raw fear and confusion.

"Don't move!" The voice boomed, its sinister echoes twisting through the air.

Raiden's body pulled back instinctively, confusion etched across his face as his expression cracked further under the weight of incomprehension.

"Am I going insane?" he whispered, holding Ash like a lifeline.

"No, you aren't." The voice replied, its tone marginally warmer than moments before. "I know what your heart desires. Obey me, and it shall be yours."

Raiden's expression hardened into a sneer, eyes narrowing with disdain. What kind of fool did this voice think he was? Desperate as he might be for understanding, he wasn't stupid enough to trust something so brazenly forward.

"Why don't you reveal yourself so we can talk?"

Raiden spun wildly, looking everywhere for the speaker, but only emptiness greeted him. Finally, he faced the mansion again, glaring up at the silhouette on its peak.

"You're the one up there, aren't you?"

"This is my world, my dream, and my mind."

Raiden's gaze sharpened as the horrible truth crystallized. If this twisted landscape belonged to the voice taunting him, if this was their domain and their nightmare, then he'd found what they were looking for—he was face-to-face with the Lost Child.

But if he was here, where were the others?—The question gnawed at him again.

"You don't need those pages. Submit to me, and I shall forge a way back to your world."

Raiden's pulse stuttered as his golden eyes flashed wildly. The frigid wind couldn't stop the nervous sweat that slicked down his backbone.

"Home?" The word escaped his lips like a prayer. Did the Lost Child mean his original world—the place he'd been torn away from?

"I've claimed enough souls to distinguish those worth saving." The pause felt calculated, predatory. "Your only desire is home—why should you perish in a place that isn't even yours?"



Raiden's chest tightened as the words sank in. Was this real? Could everything he'd fought and suffered for truly be within reach, just like that?

He swallowed hard, his frame shaking, yet he willed his body to stillness as a smile slowly curved his mouth. He seemed like an entirely different person from the one who had been suspicious mere moments ago.

His hand found his forehead as he massaged the tension away, overwhelmed by the implications. This could truly be it. Everything he'd sacrificed for was suddenly within reach, requiring nothing more from him.

"All I ask is your cooperation. Don't give me a reason for unpleasantness, and you'll have your passage home."

Raiden's grin stretched wider as electric excitement coursed through his veins, pure elation flooding every nerve.

Deep in his soul, he sensed the truth of it. Everything was falling into place so effortlessly, and instinctively, he knew the Lost Child could deliver on his promises. As a former Judge, he would possess the necessary power for such feats.

At that instant, all doubt vanished from Raiden's mind. His terror and bewilderment seemed like distant memories, his missing companions nothing more than afterthoughts. This was his ultimate goal—the very purpose behind entering the Dark Dream and forming these alliances.

"Walk forward; there's a door before you. Stay on that path!" the Lost Child's voice rang out.

Raiden gazed up at the lightning-split sky, euphoria coursing through him.

"Cross that threshold, and home awaits you."

Raiden offered a grateful bow, his face lighting up with renewed purpose. At long last, he could go home and fulfill what he'd set out to do.

"Thank you," he breathed, bowing deeply before breaking into a hurried stride toward the mansion.

He could barely contain himself, shifting and twitching with anticipation. His hands found Ash's shoulder, patting her repeatedly as she remained limp in his grasp.

"We're going home, Ash," he said softly, not caring in the slightest whether she belonged in his world or not. His mind had abandoned all logic.

His pace increased steadily, his hurried gait jostling Ash against him until her chin kept hitting his collarbone, slowly pulling her from her trance.

As consciousness returned to her, Raiden froze, his mood shifting to something almost sinister. Yet moments later, his face radiated with fevered joy.

Not far ahead, an open doorway radiated with intense luminescence. The harsh glow seared his vision, waves of pain crashing through his skull. Any other time, such searing brightness would have made him cry out, but now it felt like salvation.

He approached with cautious, reverent steps. Electric anticipation raced through his body, pure ecstasy flooding his system as his most desperate hope seemed ready to manifest.

But with each step forward, Ash curled deeper into herself, shielding her vision from the searing radiance. Her instincts were serving her well.

As soon as he came within reach, she flexed her fingers and unleashed the identical blow from their last encounter, only with greater force behind it.

"You fell for it again, Papa," she whispered, then drove her fist into his jaw.

The impact struck Raiden's psyche like an avalanche of concrete and steel, ripping him from his hypnotic state and hurling him earthward while Ash dropped smoothly to the ground.

Raiden stirred and clutched his aching chin.

"Ouch... that was painful, Ash." As the words left his mouth, his face grew troubled. Something about the felt familiar, yet his memory remained frustratingly blank.

[It was a trick, Papa,] her voice resonated through his thoughts, drawing his gaze back to the door.

When Raiden turned to look, his frame convulsed with terror. What he saw as his passage home was actually an Iron Maiden, its interior bristling with countless gleaming spikes ready to impale him.

Raiden swallowed hard as he realized what was happening. If he had walked into it, he would have died the moment the door closed, without even knowing he was dying.

"Who are you people?" the Lost Child yelled in frustration. "Why won't you just die?!"

"You coward. Show yourself!"

As soon as Raiden called, he blinked and found himself right back in his previous position, before he ever heard the mysterious voice. Ash remained peacefully resting in his arms, and he felt that the mansion in front of him was still within his grasp.

He stood there, blinking in confusion, overwhelmed by a sense of loss. It felt like something important had happened to him not long ago, yet all he could grasp was an unsettling emptiness. It was as if the memories had slipped away, leaving him with a lingering feeling that something significant had vanished without a trace.

It didn't take long for the realization to hit him, and soon his gaze shifted to the ground, searching for the mark he had made to determine if he was stuck in a loop.

"I see what you're after," the voice resonated in the air, each word dripping with intrigue.

The voice carried a lazy, blunt tone that felt strangely nonchalant, a stark contrast to what it had been before. As Raiden turned his head, confusion flooded over him, and his heart raced with anticipation of what was about to unfold.

"What was that?"

## Chapter 153: I'll Kill You

Raiden's head spun, his vision growing blurry until the dead trees around him felt distant and unreal. He gripped Ash tightly with his left hand while his other hand flew to his head in agony. Through gritted teeth, he felt his heart pounding at a frantic pace. And yet, he couldn't help but wonder once more. What was happening?

"Who are you?" He turned in all directions, his movements steady despite his confusion. "Where am I?"

"I am the Lost Child." The voice drifted lazily through the air. Raiden narrowed his eyes, his mouth trembling as the bitter cold penetrated his skin. But what truly caught his attention was a flicker of movement from the mansion he had been trying to reach.

"I am here to grant you the wish you've always wanted." Raiden's heart skipped a beat, confusion and suspicion darkening his features in an instant.

He began to take steady backward steps. The Lost Child's words were perplexing enough, but now he could see the figure atop the mountain slowly closing in on him.

"This is my dark dream. All your darkest secrets could be granted, if only you wish for it."

Raiden gulped down his fear, his mind and body slowly forgetting the headache and predicament as something else consumed his attention.

"What makes you think I would want something from you?" Raiden demanded, but his voice cracked, betraying his fear.

The figure crept closer, paused, and released an irritated laugh. "Your brother."

Just those words made Raiden stop cold. His eyes went wide, his heart plummeting. "My brother?"

"Yes, your brother," the Lost Child purred with mock enthusiasm. "You can finally become like him."

That alone caused Raiden's expression to change, confusion clouding his features. "Become like my brother? What do you mean?"

"I can feel it... Yes, there it is. Your darkest wish. You want to be like your brother."

Raiden's face began shaking with emotion. His fists clenched as he fought every instinct to retaliate.

"Okay, okay, Lost Child." His smile came slowly, forced. "I will give you another opportunity to correct yourself."

The Lost Child sighed, almost disappointed. "Are you saying you don't want to be like your brother?"

"That's it, shithead." Raiden brushed his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. "I don't know what that was, but you almost had me believing you knew my wish."

His body began trembling from annoyance, every muscle fighting against his desire to act out. Getting on the Lost Child's bad side could mean serious trouble. He needed to keep his cool.

"No one, I mean no one, can be like my brother. You get it?" He activated Gaze Beyond, trying to pierce through to the figure's eyes. Nothing. Just shadow. But Raiden refused to let confusion cloud his judgment.

"Say it... one wrong word about my brother, and I will feed you your own fucking throat." The words exploded from him, echoing into the distance and startling Ash awake.

"If your memories serve correctly, your brother is dead, isn't he?"

The instant he said that, something exploded within Raiden. His attempt at keeping things peaceful with the Lost Child was falling apart, slipping through his fingers. His mouth parted in shock, and suddenly all he could hear were his racing heartbeats and his brother's voice—those last words before he died.

"Don't speak about my brother," he muttered, his golden eyes flickering before falling to the floor, his aura turning calm and gentle.

"If you say a single thing about him, I will kill you, I swear." The words came out dead—no echoes, no life in his voice.

He began his transformation into moon dragon form. Dark veins snaked across his arms and up his neck, while a dragon mark blazed on his forehead.

His dark hair lightened to brilliant white, becoming cloud-like and wild, whipping in every direction. The gentle blue of his aura died, consumed by crushing darkness that unleashed violent winds around him.

Ash looked bewildered; she'd never seen Raiden's aura this intense. She slipped from his hand, landed gracefully, and positioned herself beside him in silent support.

Every nerve in Raiden's body was primed, waiting for the Lost Child to dare speak against his brother. He had no plan, but his resolve was absolute—he would find this thing and end it.

"Who are you anyway? What a bother." The Lost Child laughed softly. "Whatever path you choose, the outcome is the same—death by madness or death by my design."

The child paused, then added almost casually, "Your friends are already dead."



The moment he heard that, Raiden's eyes widened as fragmented memories surfaced. The bewilderment he'd felt upon waking, his comrades' absence, and the mystery of how he'd arrived in this Dark Dream—the Lost Child had orchestrated it all.

He shook his head gently, struggling to break through his anger and focus on the immediate threat.

[It's true, Papa.] Ash's mental voice was gentle but urgent in his head. He turned to meet her gaze. [This is the third time he's tried to trick you into dying.]

"What?" Raiden whispered, immediately clutching his head as waves of agony crashed over him. The pain was exponentially worse, electric jolts that felt like they were eating his mind alive as he pressed frantically against his skull.

"You're a dead man. The pages are already taken, and none of you are getting out alive... I'll make sure of it." The Lost Child's shadow flickered and vanished completely.

"Why does my head hurt so much?" he gasped through clenched teeth.

"I think the headaches are from him rewinding time on you... twice now. It must have side effects," Ash said softly, chin resting on her paw. "I just don't know why it doesn't work on me."

Raiden dragged himself through the pain and stood up straight. His skull felt like lead, everything spinning so violently he lost all sense of direction. But he held his ground.

"If this is a side effect, then it's probably just a migraine. The regeneration will take care of it."

"Are you sure, Papa? You look awful."

Raiden nodded with certainty. "I'm sure you're the reason I'm still alive. Thank you." He forced a smile and patted her head tenderly.

However, his face grew dark immediately. "If this is how he works, then the others are in grave danger."

Ash bobbed her head in agreement.

"We have to go after them." Raiden gestured left. "You search that way."

At his words, Ash immediately shifted to her moon dragon form, poised for action.

"I have no idea what his powers really are or how they work." His smile was genuine now. "Take care of yourself."

"You too, Papa," she said with a warm smile.

Then she was gone, vanishing without a trace except for the smoky darkness that hung in the air. No sound, no movement, no sign she'd ever been there.

Raiden let his eyes fall shut and took a steadying breath, calling up Ash's guidance. "Embrace the darkness and command it. You are the moon dragon—darkness bends to your will."

The instant he finished speaking, he let out a deep breath and disappeared, mirroring Ash's departure perfectly.

## Chapter 154: Overconfidence

Raiden recognized something familiar in the darkness that consumed his vision. Words were unnecessary—they shared an understanding that transcended speech. The shadows bent to his will before he even formed the thought to command them.

Every step melted into the shadows instead of meeting the earth, the darkness catching and propelling him forward. Through his headache, he smiled—his body felt weightless, moving twice as fast as his mana usually allowed, each stride utterly silent.

Yet his supernatural pace proved futile. Hours passed as he combed through the desolate landscape, the storm clouds perpetually crackling with lightning, the moon suspended in the exact same position as when he'd first arrived. Nothing else lived in this place; only he, Ash, and the Lost Child.

He paused across multiple expanses of barren terrain, eyes sweeping every angle of the desolate landscape as he systematically covered all directions. Still, fortune eluded him.

It wasn't long before his hands found his knees for support, breath coming in ragged gasps as exhaustion claimed him, his body finally succumbing to the pain of his desperate search.

Doubt crept in as his head whipped frantically from side to side, second-guessing everything around him. What if his desperate search was exactly what the Lost Child wanted from him? Was he still in control of his own thoughts?

By his reckoning, he had been everywhere. How vast this realm truly was remained unknown to him, but he felt certain he had searched every corner of it.

He stood upright, fingers moving through what should have been fluffy white hair, yet found nothing solid to grasp. His entire white mane seemed like nothing more than an illusion, a phantom feature of his moon dragon form.

The frustration mounted as he clawed at his face, spitting curses at his phantom hair. His mind had gone blank—he desperately needed something real to anchor himself to.

But it didn't take long for him to realize he needed to collect himself and examine everything with logic.

"This is his world. I might be seeing what he wants me to see," he whispered to himself, then closed his eyes and drew in a slow, steady breath to calm his frayed nerves.

With his eyes shut tight, he allowed himself to hope that perhaps, against all odds, when he opened them, everything would somehow be back to normal.

He braced himself and opened his eyes, but disappointment struck immediately as his gaze dropped reluctantly to the ground. Still, he refused to let it drag him down and began reasoning through the situation at once.

The Lost Child had claimed his comrades were still around, and he'd have no logical reason to lie about that in these circumstances. Maybe he could simply rewind time and begin the whole manipulation process anew.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as the conclusion became clear: the Lost Child was utterly confident in his own power.

The Lost Child was confident Raiden would either succumb to madness or fall victim to his schemes. This understanding made Raiden face the mansion, fingers thoughtfully stroking his chin as he weighed his options.

The area where he'd struggled most to explore was close to the mansion. Given the Lost Child's overconfidence in his abilities, it made sense that most of his illusions would be concentrated around the mansion itself.

"He thinks no one can endure this loop without losing their sanity," Raiden said with a smirk, his eyes sparkling. "Well, this is it. Time to break free from the loop."

Feeling his body grow lighter, he cracked his knuckles with purpose. The exact nature of the loop remained unclear to him, but he distinctly recalled that maddening sensation of making no progress toward the mansion, no matter how swiftly he moved.

Still, there was only one way to find out. He had to face it and discover the truth for himself.

Wasting no more time, he broke into a run toward the mansion. With each stride, the surrounding darkness caught and slingshot him forward like a living catapult.

He forced his way through the cold wind, gaze unwavering on the distant mansion. Each stride came faster than the last as he sought to break the loop's hold through relentless speed.

The logic seemed sound at first: move faster than the illusion could respond. But everything fell apart the instant he blinked.

Darkness flickered across his features as irritation consumed him. Refusing to accept he was fast enough, he drove his body beyond its limits and finally gave voice to his commands over the shadows.

He desperately tried to keep his eyes open, but the brutal speed sent cold air rushing past his face, relentlessly drying his eyes until blinking became unavoidable.

But every blink sent the mansion retreating deeper into the horizon. The maddening pattern repeated endlessly for hours before he finally gave up and crumpled to the ground in complete exhaustion.

He lay panting on the dusty ground, each breath coming in heavy, labored chunks. His gaze drifted aimlessly across the barren earth as the urge to surrender began creeping in.

He repositioned himself on the ground, rolling onto his back to face the turbulent sky above as his body went slack.

"God, I wish this was just a stupid-ass dream," he whispered, gazing up at the starless expanse dominated by thunderous clouds.

Then his eyes flew wide as he scrambled to his feet. "How could I have missed it? It's all a dream," he whispered with growing excitement, his eyes scanning erratically in all directions.

As he pieced together everything he'd witnessed, the truth became clear: Dark Dream wasn't just a name—it was exactly what this place was, a literal dark dream.

He couldn't run with the freedom he desired, just as happens in typical dreams. The familiar frustration of sprinting at full effort while staying perfectly still was one of dreams' most common torments.

Yet his face fell as the darker possibility crept into his mind. What if this wasn't simply a dream?

"No, it can't be," he muttered, though doubt flickered in his voice.

The Lost Child had specifically targeted his desires to manipulate him. This twisted dreamscape could only function by turning his own wants into weapons against him.

He smirked as he looked back toward the mansion with new understanding. The reason he could never reach it was painfully simple: because that's what he wanted most.

"What if I run with my eyes closed?" Raiden started stretching, realizing there was only one way to find out if his theory was correct.

Eyes shut, he placed his trust entirely in the darkness to navigate him through his own psychological shadows. He braced himself and broke into a run. It was all just a lucid dream brought to life.

His footsteps drummed against the ground, gaining speed with every moment. Sightless yet guided, he knew precisely where to step.

Minutes passed before he felt his body penetrating some kind of dense, foggy barrier. The temptation to open his eyes grew stronger and stronger, but he persevered until he broke through completely, filling him with an airy sense of liberation.

A smile of relief touched his lips, but without warning, something collided with his forehead, driving him hard into the ground.

## Chapter 155: To the right

Raiden massaged his forehead, teeth clenched in agony. Before he could process his situation, instinct kicked in and he shot to his feet.



His eyes stayed clamped shut. He feared the illusion still held him, that one glimpse of light would send everything spiraling back to the beginning.

But he found it difficult to maintain. His senses were razor-sharp, and though his danger instincts stayed silent, he felt tremors rippling through the earth.

He mellowed his breathing as he tried to grasp his situation, guard still raised, taking measured steps backward.

He allowed the vibrations to thrum beneath him as he listened to the rapid cracking sounds in the distance. He gulped instinctively the moment he realized there were multiples of whatever he faced.

He considered his options. With his danger instincts still quiet, whatever he faced must be something he'd never regarded as a threat.

Had his comrades turned into mindless zombies? He shook his head at the thought. If so, his danger sense would have activated regardless, especially since he considered some of them foes rather than allies.

His eyelids quivered as he battled the urge to look, goosebumps racing across his pale flesh. A single misstep could mean death.

However, while he remained motionless, second-guessing his entire ideology, hollow laughter drifted through the air.

The sound was sharp and hollow, stripped of humor and enthusiasm, yet loud enough to shake Raiden's core as his body shivered in panic.

His eyes shot open as he turned toward the sound. Confusion crossed his face as he took in his surroundings: dead trees with roots that beat against the ground and branches that stretched like desperate hands.

In the direction of the sound, a cluster of trees stood in a circle around something, while others uprooted themselves and walked toward Raiden.

The cloudy skies were unchanged from where Raiden had escaped, lightning flashing cloud to cloud, thunderous sounds rumbling through the heavens.

Off to his right, the haunted mansion loomed as distant as ever, the moon resting like a pale disc behind its silhouette.

Raiden understood instantly. Whoever was surrounded by those trees was a comrade who had fallen for the Lost Child's tricks. They were being tortured proudly, completely unaware due to the manipulation.

Raiden squinted with burning intensity, his course of action suddenly clear. "I guess I'll have to cut through these trees then."

He outstretched his hand and summoned a sword of darkness. He waited for the trees to close in as his blade glowed with smoky shadows, wreathed in burning darkness.

The instant a tree entered his range, he lunged forward. With swift precision, the tree collapsed into neatly severed pieces.

He drew a deep breath as the first tree crashed down, then surged toward the next. The sword felt alive in his grip—gentle yet responsive, weightless in his hands.

This revelation deepened his connection to the darkness itself. For the first time, the blade felt like an extension of his very being, responding to his thoughts as naturally as darkness bends to shadow.

His feet drummed against the darkness beneath as he moved between the trees. One by one, without effort, they were sliced into pieces and crashed to the forest floor.

Within moments, countless trees lay as splintered wood across the forest floor, leaving only the circle that had surrounded his comrade.

He stood motionless, his spiky white hair dancing with the wind. He weighed his options for rescuing his comrade without harm.

He didn't know what the trees were doing to them, but chopping them down like the others would probably injure his ally in the process.

As he stood watching the swarming trees, he waited for any gap that might show him what was happening in their midst.

After watching the trees avoid his presence entirely for a moment, he realized he had no choice but to step inside their circle.

He tightened his grip on the shadowy sword's hilt and inhaled deeply. In a flash, he materialized behind a tree and cleaved it in two.

As the tree crashed down, he saw that others still blocked his view of what was happening inside. However, observing how all their branches reached toward the middle, he got a glimpse of what lay within.

Another tree struck at him, but he cut it to pieces before the attack connected.

As it crashed down, Raiden immediately turned on the others, slashing without pause. He wasn't completely certain, but killing the trees seemed like the only solution.

After several minutes of relentless fighting, Raiden panted heavily, sweat dripping from his brow. Before him lay his comrade, completely entangled in twisted vines.

Raiden rolled his sore shoulders, massaging them as he debated whether he could fashion a blade small enough to slice through the vines without harm.

He studied his smoky sword, recalling how much it had taken out of him to create it. But cutting the vines with something so powerful could hurt his comrade.

He let go of the sword, and it dissolved into shadow. Raiden closed his eyes, focusing on the image of the simplest dagger possible.

Uneasiness crept in as he felt nothing materializing in his grip. Just as doubt began to take hold, something formed in his palm. His eyes snapped open to find his fingers wrapped around a small dagger's hilt.

He rushed to the vines immediately, praying that whoever was trapped still lived. Layer by layer, he cut through the binding growth. His heart dropped when he saw the face beneath—Leo, an unsettling smile frozen on his lips, eyes shut tight.

Vines coiled around Leo's neck while others bound his arms to his sides and pinned his legs together. Raiden worked frantically, slicing through every vine before pressing fingers to Leo's throat to check for life.

Relief flooded through him when he felt Leo's pulse. But empathy quickly followed—knowing Leo's nature, Raiden knew he'd blame himself for his capture once he woke up.

Still, he knew their dire situation left no room for such feelings. He started tapping Leo's face firmly, shouting his name to pull him from unconsciousness.

But then the ground began shaking violently, bouncing them both upward with each tremor. The violent motion jolted Leo's eyes open, and he immediately reached for his bruised neck.

But Raiden was looking elsewhere, staring toward the mansion in search of what was causing the ground to shake. Before long, he saw an intense explosion of dark aura descending upon them.

Raiden swallowed hard, transfixed by the sight, while Leo turned his gaze toward the source of the disturbance.

A massive dark aura erupted skyward with violent force, blending seamlessly with the storm clouds until they were indistinguishable.

The aura radiated pure hatred and rage, each pulse making them feel its malevolent intent. Raiden recognized the presence instantly.

"Soul..."

## Chapter 156: I will kill him

"Can you walk?" Raiden asked, helping Leo stand. Even as he spoke, his mind kept drifting to the awful snapping sounds echoing from Soul's battle.

"What happened?" Leo managed between painful coughing fits, cradling his neck with both hands.

"It was the Lost Child, Leo. He tricked you." Leo slowly rose to his feet, one hand gripping Raiden's arm.

"Now that you're fully conscious, I doubt the dark dream can take hold of you."

"Okay."

They both stared at the mansion, Soul's rage manifesting as a fiery aura that expanded relentlessly, minute by minute.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he took in the signs: the violent sounds, the raw intensity, and the dense fog choking that area. The Lost Child was definitely fighting Soul head-on.

A grim smile touched Raiden's lips. While he questioned whether Soul could match the child's power, her struggle would grant him the chance to search for the others.

"Where's everyone?" Leo whispered, his body wavering as he tried to remain standing.

Before Raiden could respond, frantic cries pierced the air from their right. The voice called out for help, cracking with pure desperation.

"Is that Levi?"

Raiden gave a sharp nod, convinced that it was Levi. Yet doubt crept in as the bigger picture eluded him. What had changed that allowed them to hear each other now?

"Soul's fight with the Lost Child must be disrupting the Dark Dream's influence."

The moment Leo spoke, understanding flashed across Raiden's face. A sly smirk appeared as he grasped the perfect strategy.

First, he needed to secure Leo's safety. Then, he could capitalize on the Lost Child's divided attention and rescue the others before the illusion solidified again.

Without pause, Raiden indicated for Leo to mount his back. Leo's face showed obvious discomfort as he grappled with Raiden's transformed appearance, the fluffy hair clearly throwing him off.

"It's fine, Leo. Just get on." He motioned to his back, and Leo nodded briefly before climbing up right away.

In a heartbeat, Raiden bolted toward Levi's voice, weaving through the shadows without a sound. He drove himself past his breaking point, racing against time to finish this, while Leo clung behind him, eyes clamped shut to shield against the brutal wind.

Raiden quickly encountered a thick wall of mist, charging through the oppressive cloud. His jaw clenched tight, veins protruding from the strain as he forced himself deeper into the darkness, fighting through the heavy fog.

This mist felt significantly thicker than what he'd faced earlier, but he couldn't spare a moment to analyze the difference.

Before long, his eyes widened in recognition. A small area ahead showed less fog, and he instantly knew they'd found their destination.



He slammed his feet down harder, pushing his speed beyond what his body could handle. His lungs compressed with each step, leaving him no choice but to breathe raggedly through his mouth.

He ripped through the mist in moments, the crushing pressure dissolving from his frame. The immediate lightness threw off his balance, sending him sliding across the withered grass field faster than he'd ever moved.

When he finally stopped, he scanned the withered grassland. There in the center, Levi supported Freya's unconscious body in his arms as Ash hovered beside them, working urgently to bring her around.

Raiden's chest tightened with conflicting emotions—relief at finding them, sadness at their condition. He hurried over immediately, lowering the unconscious Leo, who had succumbed to their frantic pace.

The area was strewn with snake carcasses, and Freya's ghostly pale skin was riddled with bite marks. When Raiden's hand made contact, his stomach dropped—her flesh was ice-cold, desiccated, and gritty. She felt like death itself.

His eyes returned to the dead serpents. He stepped closer to inspect them; they were utterly alien—each bore twin horns and rough, dusty shells instead of scales. They appeared plucked from some fevered dream, but he analyzed them regardless, hoping their venom might be familiar.

After a cursory analysis, he threw the snake down and faced the others. Levi clutched Freya against his chest, his whole body shaking, while Ash could only stand and watch in stunned silence.

Raiden looked to Ash with sudden intensity, and she returned his gaze with sorrowful eyes. "There must be something we can do."

Ash closed her eyes and gave a defeated shake of her head. "I think we're too late."

Silence enveloped them all, broken only by the distant clash between Soul and the Lost Child, while Levi gazed down at Freya with unblinking eyes.

Raiden's fingers worked nervously, his frame rigid with discomfort. Though he sympathized with Levi's grief, what weighed on him most was the brutal fact that they were losing a crucial ally.

But in the midst of their stillness, a shadowy figure pushed through the mist, their exhausted scream piercing the air.

Raiden and Ash whipped their heads toward the sound immediately. Relief flooded their faces when they spotted Aeris limping toward them, one hand pressed against her shoulder as she gasped for breath.

Her wounds were apparent, but Raiden and Ash overlooked them entirely in their eagerness, rushing forward to meet her.

"Aeris, thank goodness you're here," Ash said, relief pouring from her voice as Aeris looked at them with confusion. "You need to save Freya. Please, come on."

Raiden and Ash guided Aeris quickly to where Freya lay, helping her settle beside their fallen comrade.

"She's completely unconscious," Aeris observed, resting her hand on Freya's brow. She said nothing more as she repositioned her hand over Freya's heart and began infusing her with healing mana.

A smile crossed Raiden's face as he observed Aeris healing Freya. Without question, every group needed support roles, and this was precisely the advantage of having a healer. Though he felt thankful for Aeris right now, her timely appearance still didn't erase his doubts about her true allegiance.

Aeris's power worked wonders, though. In a short time, Raiden observed life returning to Freya's ghostly skin, and moments later, her face began writhing in apparent struggle, as if she were locked in some desperate fight.

Levi's face broke into a broad grin, his eyes shining with anticipation as he waited for her to stir.

But Freya's eyes shot open like daggers, filled with pure wrath. "I will kill him," she growled in a voice that belonged to someone else entirely, dark and threatening, making both Levi and Aeris recoil in shock.

## Chapter 157: Layered Darkness

Freya tore free from Levi's grasp, her fist clenched tight as her blue aura swirled with flickering flames.

Levi remained on the ground with his mouth slightly parted as Aeris crouched beside him, her confusion evident.

Raiden and Ash were surprisingly calm, knowing exactly what was happening. Still Freya in appearance, but the moment those deep tones escaped her lips, they knew the Arch Hell Phoenix had emerged.

Freya's long, dark hair flickered in her blue aura as she advanced toward them with steady steps. As she drew closer, Raiden wondered who she would address. Him or Ash? After all, they were both moon dragons.

However, once she was within reach, she bowed her head.

"I am sorry, my lord. I made you worry." The words emerged deep and steady, heavy with duty. "I promise to handle things better now."

Raiden was stunned, though not by her words. He'd heard enough strange things by now. What shocked him was seeing Freya bow to him.

"Don't worry. You do what you can, and let us handle the matters here," Ash said, her expression intense but her tone gentle yet commanding.

Freya raised her head and turned to stare at Levi for a moment. His eyes gazed back, gentle and soft, mouth still parted in lingering confusion. Then, without another word, she began sprinting toward the battle.

"What's going on?" Aeris asked, watching Freya dash away.

"That's her familiar acting through her body. She should be fine," Raiden said, turning his attention to Leo, who remained unconscious.

"Can you check on him?" Raiden asked, and Aeris was at Leo's side in an instant.

Raiden watched Levi remain on the floor, eyes darting around in lingering confusion. Maybe he was trapped in his own shock, stunned that Freya had left without a word. But Raiden only cared that he was physically unharmed, not about his emotional turmoil.

"Have any of you seen the others? Speed, MK, Noelle?" His head whipped from side to side.  
"Anyone at all?"

Aeris looked up at him. "I saw Speed, but he was making his way to Soul."

Raiden smiled. With Speed, Freya, and Soul all fighting the Lost Child, they had a real chance—or at least they could do some serious damage.

"My lady?" someone called from behind them, drawing everyone's attention.

It was MK, white shirt soaked through with sweat, bent over with his hands on his knees and breathing hard. His usually perfect gray hair hung in messy strands.

Raiden's expression darkened as he took in MK's state. His thoughts jumped frantically from one scenario to another. MK and Noelle were inseparable, which meant if she wasn't here...

MK got to his feet and hurried toward them. "Is she here?" His eyes darted frantically around the group, but no one answered.

Before Raiden could answer, MK's hands shot out, gripping his collar as his golden aura pulsed erratically. Rage carved lines across his face, his deep red eyes blazing as they bored into Raiden's golden ones. "Where is she?" he snarled hoarsely.

Raiden could feel MK's hand trembling on his chest. The grip on his collar sparked an inexplicable irritation. Acting on instinct, he drove his fist into MK's chest, launching him backward into the dead grass.

"Don't touch me," Raiden said, adjusting his collar with an annoyed sigh as he watched MK rise to his feet.

"I'm trying to keep everyone safe, and right now, Noelle is the only one from my crew we haven't located," he said evenly, reining in his temper. "Just calm down."

MK rose to his feet, struggling to meet Raiden's gaze as his eyes darted toward the ground. Raiden understood his desperation. Even though he didn't know much about MK personally, he knew the man's sole purpose was protecting Noelle. This was the first time he'd seen him lose control like this.

Raiden took a deep breath and set his ego aside. He gestured back toward where MK had emerged from. "If we all came from that direction and she's not there..."

He motioned toward where the battle was raging. "She must be there."

MK whipped around to face that direction, his fists trembling with barely contained fury.

Raiden looked back at Ash. "Can you handle things here?" Ash gave him a gentle nod. He smiled and ruffled her hair affectionately. "I'll be back."

Without waiting for a response, Raiden disappeared. MK looked around frantically until Ash pointed toward the battle. Then, without hesitation, he took off running after Raiden.

Raiden found himself praying as he raced through the darkness. He had his own reasons for needing Noelle alive, reasons he knew weren't worth divine intervention, but the prayers came anyway.

His limbs burned from his previous exertion, but he refused to slow down. Even with his healing abilities and control over darkness, exhaustion clawed at him. Agony twisted his features, and his fingers curled in pain, but he slammed his feet down with brutal force, driving himself onward.

After minutes of racing through the dead grassland and back into the withered forest, his danger detection suddenly screamed in his mind. The jarring alarm sent shockwaves through his head as he skidded to a stop.

The instant he halted, he grabbed his head, teeth grinding painfully. In front of him sprawled an impenetrable darkness—so thick his enhanced vision couldn't cut through it.

Raiden found himself backing away from the darkness. The more distance he put between himself and it, the fainter the alarm in his head grew.

But after a few moments, he froze. "What is that?" he muttered, focusing his Gaze Beyond on the darkness, though it proved useless.

"That condensed darkness," someone said from Raiden's left, making him whip around.

It was Chrono and Odard, each supporting one side of an injured comrade as they limped toward him.

"I don't know what it's capable of, but that's at least four layers of darkness," Chrono explained as Raiden stared back at the impenetrable wall.

"Have you seen Noelle?" Raiden asked urgently, his concern for their wounded ally forgotten.

Odard's grim shake of the head said everything, his tone dry as they passed Raiden and continued toward the others.

Raiden's throat went dry as every fiber of his being warned him against approaching the darkness. His fists shook despite being clenched tightly, and his heart hammered frantically in his chest.



"I don't have a choice," he muttered. "I need to save her."

## Chapter 158: Golden Hands

Raiden moved with growing sluggishness, his boots grinding against the ground while his hands coiled away on instinct whenever he tried to grasp the darkness.

But he held his head high, ignoring his pounding heart that echoed through his entire body, pulsing even in his palms, ignoring how his head twisted restlessly from side to side.

He had only one thing in mind—saving Noelle.

The moment he stepped into the thick darkness, his body ran cold. His heart beat faster than before, and the dark marks across his body began glowing in the complete blackness, his hair floating in his invisible dark aura.

Raiden began sweating, his mouth opening as the air within felt thicker than he was used to, his chest growing slowly tighter and worse. He couldn't see at all.

He could feel his body absorbing the darkness around him, filling every nutritional void within himself. But he paid it no attention. He understood the pain Noelle might be going through, and all he wanted was to save her.

He blindly stretched his legs to find solid ground. Despite how it slowed his movements, he couldn't have been more grateful to still be moving at all.

However, in no time, he dropped to one knee. His entire body was drenched in sweat, his lips dry and cracking, yet he was satisfied. His body was filled with energy, so much energy that he couldn't move.

His mind began wandering as he tried to catch his breath. He knew if he deactivated his moon dragon form, the chances of escaping the darkness were slim, but sifting through his clouded thoughts, that was all he could consider.

His breaths came in chunks as he tried to ease his mind and deactivate his form. But the sounds in his mind gave him no room for that. This went on for a few minutes, and before he knew it, he collapsed face-first to the ground, his head throbbing from his thoughts alone.

His eyelids grew heavy with time, and he could feel his body shutting down. Mumbling gibberish, he tried to gather the strength to get to his feet, but in a blink, his eyes closed, and his mind went completely dark.

There was no dream, no sense of slumber, just an empty sleep with no brain cells to work out visions or thoughts.

Seconds turned into minutes, and still he lay there, showing no sign of ever waking up.

However, it didn't take long before a golden aura, formed into two massive hands, began penetrating through the layered darkness.

The force tore through the darkness, casting a little beam of golden light through the void. And the moment it fell on Raiden, his fingers fidgeted.

He began to feel a burning sensation that cut through the cold atmosphere, as if he were being lifted before the sun.

His senses slowly began to activate, and the first thing that crossed his mind was: Get up, dummy! He couldn't spare a second to question those words, whether they were his own, logical, or rational.

His instincts took over and he shoved himself off the ground, rising abruptly to his feet. And the moment he opened his eyes, he instantly raised his hand to block them—the golden hands blazed no less bright than the sun.

His mind wandered at the sight of the hands, and the moment his eyes adapted to the rays, he turned in the direction they came from. Even with that, he couldn't see beyond where the hands extended. However, he knew exactly who it was: MK. And he was grateful.

He smiled as he could now see a little, not clearly like in ordinary darkness, but enough. Without looking at the hands directly, they glowed like the moon against complete darkness.

He glanced around and realized he could only take a few steps before slipping back into the daunting darkness. He began tapping his fingers against his thighs, anxiously. He knew if Noelle wasn't just a few steps away from him, that could mean the end for both of them.

He gulped down his fear as the sweat on his body began to dry.

Steeling himself, he crossed his fingers and took a few steps to his left, glancing around. Nothing. His anxiety deepened as his body began to shiver.

He explored the distance in front of him as well—nothing. He clenched his fist as he began to bite his lips, literally on the verge of cursing at himself, and turned to his last resort: the right side. But before he could, another glow of golden aura caught his attention, slightly beyond the borders before him.

He smirked as relief coursed through his body. There were a lot of questions, but he needed to save Noelle first. He deactivated his moon dragon form and dashed toward the golden aura.

The moment he left the rays of the golden hands, his legs started bouncing off the ground, nearly making him stumble. His body began experiencing the same symptoms as before, which confused him since he wasn't in his moon dragon form.

But still, he pushed through with his eyes fixated on the golden light before him as he ran toward it.

His skin began cracking from the dryness and cold as he ran, holding his breath. Soon, he neared Noelle, watching her lie on the floor with her eyes closed. Strangely, the choker-like tattoo across her neck glowed golden, and a small, fading shield of golden aura surrounded her.

Raiden reached for her neck to check her pulse before getting lost in his own daze as he watched her body growing pale and cold, wondering how she was still alive.

However, after a brief moment, he snapped out of his daze, scooped her into his arms, and began running from the darkness, using her fading aura as his guide.

As he ran, the rough movement caused Noelle to bounce in Raiden's arms, slowly drawing her into consciousness as her eyes began to open.

Raiden had no idea about her condition; his eyes were fixated on MK's aura as he dashed outside. Not until after he escaped the darkness did an overwhelming weight lift from his body, nearly tripping him to the ground.

The moment he reached solid ground, his eyes began to ache from the moon's glow. Squinting, he glanced around, and there was MK with his arms outstretched, worry written across his face as he rushed toward them.

The moment he closed in on them, Noelle hugged Raiden out of nowhere, wrapping her hands around his neck and resting her head on his chest.

"Oh, you saved me again, Raid," she whispered softly as Raiden found himself caught off guard.

But his confusion gave way to a smile as he shifted Noelle to one arm and gently patted her head with the other.

She had a near-death experience; the least Raiden could do was comfort her, he thought as he glanced at MK, who waited nearby with an unreadable expression.

## Chapter 159: You Are

After everything Raiden had been through within the Dark Dream, he hadn't expected a path into the darkness to be so uneventful. But despite his wariness, he could feel something stirring within himself; his exhausted limbs feeling lighter than usual, and his body coiled like a spring. The energy within him was overflowing.

Noelle, however, rested within MK's arms as they made their way back to rejoin the others.

As they walked, silence stretched between them, MK and Noelle before him while he trailed behind with his arms in his pockets. Not a word was exchanged, but from how MK's feet struck the ground in quick, urgent steps, he knew all MK cared about then was getting Noelle to safety.

Still, none of that interested Raiden much, save for Noelle's well-being, and his mind drifted elsewhere.

His eyes shifted slightly to his left, toward the haunted mansion. Thunder rolled through the heavy clouds as lightning split the sky, darkness deepening by the minute while the moon lurked behind the mansion's looming frame.

But something felt wrong. Soul's aura had vanished from that direction entirely. His thoughts spiraled from one possibility to the next; perhaps the battle had intensified, moving far beyond where they'd last seen it.

His head snapped in every direction, desperately scanning for any sign of Soul's enormous aura. But moments stretched on, and still he found nothing.

He began to grow worried, his fingers beating a nervous rhythm against his thigh, his expression flickering between concern and confusion.

Soul's aura should have been impossible to ignore, regardless of her location. So either the prolonged battle had forced her to suppress it somehow, she had been defeated, or there was something else at play—something he couldn't identify.

He quickened his pace in an instant. He knew getting to the others was his best shot at getting some clear answers.

Soon he overtook MK, turned back and gestured urgently for them to move faster. Without waiting for a response, he accelerated from a quick walk to a jog, and before he knew it, he was sprinting through the darkness.

A few minutes into his sprint, he squinted his eyes, peering through the darkness as bone-cracking sounds echoed from somewhere ahead. Still, there was no trace of Soul's aura.

His soul sank as the sharp sounds reached him. The others were clearly still fighting the Lost Child. But if Soul's aura was nowhere to be found, did that mean she was dead?

His fist clenched as he surged forward. The moon dragon form began overtaking him, his transformation pulsing in rhythm with each heavy footfall against the earth.

His body grew weightless as wild, fluffy white hair burst forth, streaming behind him in all directions. The dark marks that appeared across his skin pulsed with fierce light under the night sky, brighter than ever as his desperation to reach the others fueled the transformation.

He melted into the darkness, his legs disappearing into the shadowy depths as he surged forward at more than ten times his previous speed.

In moments, he reached the dead grass, skidding to a halt to control his speed. The scene spread before him: Aeris and Ash tending to Soul, Leo lying unconscious nearby, while Levi—more energetic now—stood guard with his dual daggers, his dark eyes flickering between the group he protected and Chrono and Odard, who conversed quietly beside their fallen ally.

Raiden felt confused by how calm Levi and the others appeared. To his left lay a disturbing sight that should have had them all on edge.

Speed's dark aura alongside Freya's blue one pulsed with intense rage as they faced a short elderly man with long white hair and beard, both bound in ponytails, dressed in singed black dojo clothing.

Raiden swallowed hard as he stared, uncertain whether the person they were fighting was indeed the Lost Child.

Yet Raiden couldn't overlook the gentle quality of his yellow aura as he stood calmly before them, one hand positioned behind him.

But before he could blink, the Lost Child had blocked Speed's attack. Before Raiden could fully process what happened, Speed materialized elsewhere, landing a strike to the Child's neck that sent him hurtling toward Freya. She responded instantly, her flame-wreathed fists unleashing a barrage of strikes.

The Child parried all attacks, skidding back from the force. Raiden saw the fire burn his flesh, but almost instantly, his skin pulsed with yellow light and the burns were gone.



Raiden shook his head in disbelief, struggling to make sense of what he was witnessing. He'd come here to check on Soul, maybe even fight, but now he wasn't sure he could do either.

He remained motionless, mouth hanging slightly open. Every blow produced sickening bone-cracking sounds, but his mind struggled to follow more than a strike or two.

But then, ice-cold dread washed over him as Speed crumpled to the ground with a hollow sound, hands pressed against his stomach.

Raiden gulped, sweat forming on his forehead. He hadn't seen anything happen—if Speed hadn't screamed, he doubted he would have known what had been done to him.

Raiden's confusion and fear were mirrored by Freya as the Lost Child maintained his distance from her. Her flaming strikes seared his flesh, which healed moments later, yet strangely, the Child appeared to only defend against her attacks.

But as he remained there, bewildered, Freya shouted, "You need to keep him busy for now, my lord. I have an idea."

What? Me?—The thought hit him like ice water, his heart pounding faster. Before he realized it, his whole body was trembling.

He forced a smile as he tried to approach, but his body just wouldn't move. He could feel it in his bones—the overwhelming urge to stay away from that fight.

Soul attacked his very essence, Speed drained his physical strength, and Freya's fire scorched him from the inside out. Despite all this, the Lost Child remained standing, unfazed. Even more terrifying—Speed was roughly three times faster than Raiden, yet still couldn't match the Child's speed

What can I do?—His fists clenched as his whole body shook with fear, terror flashing in his eyes. He couldn't die now, not before achieving his dream.

But as he stood there paralyzed, the next thing he saw was Ash's fist driving into the Lost Child's gut, sending him crashing to the ground.

[We can do this, Papa,] Ash's voice resonated through Raiden's thoughts. His heart dropped as he watched her fluffy hair dance in the dark aura surrounding her. [We are the moon dragon, remember? We can do this.]

Raiden's fist tightened as he pounded it against his forehead, overwhelmed by shame and self-disgust. How could he be this much of a coward?

He drew a deep breath and let Ash's words sink into his consciousness. He had to overcome this fear. Closing his eyes, he felt an inner voice telling him to stop retreating, and that was precisely what he needed.

Euphoria surged through his body as he began twitching with thrills and excitement for the challenge, a devilish smile spreading across his face.

You are right, Ash—he responded to Ash telepathically—we can do this.

## Chapter 160: I won't lose

Raiden fixed Lost Child with a stare that twisted a smile on his face, too sharp to be genuine, too steady to be human. His smoking blade of darkness gripped tight, he lunged forward in a shadow-trailing dash.

He closed in on Lost Child faster than he could draw a full breath; his blade hissed as it sliced forward, the air parting around it. Just as steel met flesh, Lost Child's eyes blazed yellow, and he slipped past the sword's edge—so close the edge grazed a strand of his hair.

But his escape led him straight into danger as Ash whipped her shadowy chains toward him, seeking to bind him in her dark snare.

His stare tracked every movement, patient and unblinking.

Shifting his grip on the hilt, he prepared to strike the moment Lost Child escaped Ash's chains.

But in an instant, Lost Child was gone. Raiden's menacing grin faded as his thoughts churned, eyes darting across the landscape in search of his vanished prey.

However, before he could process his confusion, pure instinct drove him forward in a desperate leap. He narrowly escaped Lost Child's strike, the boy having somehow positioned himself at Raiden's back.

Raiden's pulse hammered in his ears as he reached behind himself with trembling fingers. Despite dodging the strike, searing pain tore across his back where the blade had found its mark.

That twisted smile returned to Raiden's face. It was steady now, measured, stripped of all warmth. Lost Child's movements were beyond his ability to track, but he sensed a weakness—something in the boy's technique he could turn against him.

[Cover my blind spots, Papa.] Ash's mental voice cut through his thoughts. In the same breath, she lunged forward, her chains whipping toward Lost Child.

Raiden saw Lost Child's eyes glow yellow as he dodged the first strike instantly. Ash pressed her advantage with another lash of chains, which he narrowly avoided by a hair's breadth.

But Raiden suddenly shifted into a combat stance, his feet rooted in shadow as he channeled mana through his blade. Power coursed toward the sword's point while his eyes fixed on the one vulnerability Ash couldn't guard—her exposed back.

His attention shifted away from Lost Child entirely, but as Ash had requested, his gaze remained fixed on her back. Before long, Lost Child reappeared exactly in that blind spot, just as she had foreseen.

Raiden moved the instant the opening appeared. His legs locked into position as he gathered every ounce of strength into his front stance and dominant arm. He struck with merciless accuracy of instinct, the blade releasing a wave of darkness that carved straight toward Lost Child's neck.

Lost Child's face grew grim, yet his eyes blazed yellow as he disappeared, evading the deadly strike. The slash split the ground, dirt and stone erupting in its wake.

Shock flashed across Raiden's face, but before he could make sense of Ash's sudden turn, her shadowy chains whipped toward him with deadly intent.

[On your right, Papa!] Ash's voice cut through his mind again.

Even with his mind in turmoil, he readjusted his grip and struck to the right. His perplexity transformed into a wicked smile as he felt his blade carve through Lost Child's neck, decapitating him in one swift motion.

Crimson sprayed across the ground as Raiden observed his handiwork, exhilaration and triumph flooding his system. His body shook with uncontrollable laughter, triumph flooding him, sharp and dizzying, almost painful.

He chuckled, shaking his head as if disappointed the fight had ended so quickly.

The group fell into stunned silence, their eyes fixed on Raiden standing over Lost Child's lifeless body. Freya and Speed, however, wore expressions of clear displeasure.

Levi kept watch as Freya knelt and began her ritual, the ground beneath her hands erupting in sparks and flames with a series of sharp, sizzling sounds.

[ALERT]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+5XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL- 80 /100 XP.]

[STAMINA: +5

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +5

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1120/5000

SOUL OF DRAGON: 70%

HEART OF DRAGON: 70%

MOON DRAGON'S VEIN: 60%]

Ash dismissed her moon dragon form and moved to Raiden's side. "We did it, Papa."

Warmth spread through Raiden's chest as he gently patted her head. "Yes, Ash. We did it."

"No, you didn't." Speed hauled himself upright from the ground where he'd been lying, his hand clamped tight over what looked like a serious gut wound.

Raiden's victorious grin crumbled, darkness clouding his features as confusion seized hold. He turned sharply to Speed. "What do you mean?"

"This wasn't the first time he killed him." Speed's finger traced beneath his own eye. "You caught that glow, didn't you?"

Silence stretched from Raiden as chill crawled up his spine, settling in his bones.

Speed pulled himself forward, inch by agonizing inch, toward Freya. "I don't understand the process, but when his eyes burn like that, it's like he becomes untouchable. Every strike, every strategy, he has the perfect counter waiting."

Raiden studied the corpse through narrowed eyes before catching Ash's attention. His subtle gesture toward Noelle spoke volumes. She was already in motion.

Speed's revelation ignited fresh dread within Raiden as he approached the Lost Child's corpse. The moment he drew close enough, he seized the severed head and stared into its lifeless eyes.

Terror seized him as his skin prickled with unnatural sensation. He snapped the head upward, and his blade found it again and again, reducing it to scattered remains.

Something still crawled beneath his skin. He drove his fist into the corpse's chest, bones snapping like twigs around his knuckles. Blood slicked his fingers as he tore free the heart and carved it into nothing.

Bewildered stares fixed on Raiden as he stepped back from his grisly work, blood still dripping from his fingers.

Speed adjusted his mask with trembling fingers. "Were his eyes yellow?"

Raiden met his stare and nodded grimly. Speed remained silent, his masked face unreadable as he watched Raiden for several heartbeats, then shifted his attention away.

Raiden's body betrayed him, trembling from somewhere deep within his core. The Lost Child's eyes weren't the intense, burning yellow of the others, but the pale shade was unmistakable.

The thought alone sparked his will to survive, but he believed no one could return from what he'd done to that corpse. And if he did return, then he was a true monster. But Raiden knew very well that's what the Elusives were.

"We need to leave now!" Freya's voice cut through the air, deep and commanding. "He could return any moment."



Raiden barely glanced back. He shook his head in disapproval, convinced no human could return from that level of destruction. He doubted even his regeneration could accomplish such a feat. But deep down, he knew it was possible.

"My lord!" Freya's voice rang out once more, pulling Raiden from his dark thoughts.

He turned to see Chrono and Odard disappearing into what looked like a hole carved in the earth, their comrade close behind.

"What is going on?" Raiden muttered, and instantly his instincts took over, propelling his body backwards.

Raiden's gaze snapped to the corpse. His chest thudded unevenly, every beat betraying his fear. The destroyed form pulled itself upright, skin bubbling and twisted until a new face forced itself into being.

"Could it be?" His voice fractured. "Is he countering everything through a dream?"

"You need to leave, my lord." Freya's tone grew more insistent.

He turned back to see that only he, Ash, Levi, and Freya remained.

He closed the distance in an instant and looked through the opening. Lava dripped from its edges as Freya fought to hold it stable, and far below stretched a sunlit forest.

"It might close soon, leave!" Freya's voice strained as Raiden watched the effort crushing her.

Raiden was immediately taken aback by her words. "Wait, what?" He squinted as he stared at Freya, confusion and dread warring in his chest. She simply gave him a warm smile and winked at him.

"My place is always at your side... but if I go now, none of you will live." She motioned with an understanding smile. "I might die soon, anyway... the snake venom got me."

"So let me keep my promise and kill him, even if it costs me everything." She turned to the Lost Child, her expression turning grim. "Trust me, I won't lose."

Raiden immediately understood what was happening. She wanted to stay behind. And for some reason, he couldn't move despite wanting to live. He clenched his fist as his sword vanished, his hands trembling with something between rage and helplessness.

He could feel the Lost Child's regeneration finally complete, and yet leaving Freya behind felt so wrong. His body began fidgeting as coldness crept through him.

"No, we aren't—

Before he could finish his sentence, he felt a push on his shoulder, and suddenly he was falling from the sky, the hole hovering midair above him. He could see the vast ocean beneath, the sun resting above the horizon, as his body battled the wind, and his emotional state forced his dragon mana form to deactivate.

He watched as Ash and Levi leaped through the hole after him as well, and the hole abruptly disappeared. In that instant, his chest locked tight, every breath scraping like metal on stone and words lodged in his throat, thick and immovable.

Everything about it felt so wrong, even though this was what he had always wanted.

He clutched at his chest, fingers digging into his heart. "Why?" he muttered to himself as branches clawed at his arms as he crashed downward.

His body pinballed through the canopy, each impact bruising him deeper before slamming into the solid ground. Jolts of pain surged through his entire body, and yet there was only one thing that lingered in his mind:

"What is happening to me?"