

# The Bookkeeper

## Chapter 161: No one would die

Raiden lay motionless where he had fallen. His heartbeat slowed, his breath turning deliberate as he stared up at the sky through outstretched fingers.

Above him, branches bearing white two-leaf clover drifted across his vision, obscuring the height from which he'd dropped.

Fragmented emotions surged through him, building into a relief he couldn't justify, one that coursed through every inch of his body.

He could hear the others approaching, their footsteps checking on him, but his mind wouldn't let him focus on that. Had he lost his way? His mission was simple: get home and avenge his brother. So why?

He tried to justify his actions with trivial thoughts, but he knew something was wrong with him, something unwanted.

However, as he lay there with his thoughts eating him alive, he heard footsteps closing in, but he felt too much weight on his shoulders to turn.

"How are you feeling, Papa?"

He responded with silence, still gazing up at the sky, his mind searching for the right words to describe himself. After a brief moment, he spoke. "I don't know, Ash." He paused, letting his words settle. "It's all too strange for me."

"You too?" A deep voice cut in, nothing like Ash's.

Raiden knew the voice immediately, his expression darkening as fatigue fought against his need to turn. Ash searching for him made sense, but Speed? Why?

Speed clutched his gut, his rigid spine bending in undeniable agony as he made his way across the quiet distance to collapse beside Raiden.

Speed's condition looked dire, likely from their battle with the Lost Child. He should have been tending to his injuries, yet here he was with Raiden, which only puzzled him more.

"Are you okay, Speed?" Raiden asked, his tone etched with concern.

He could see his golden eyes sparkle a little through his mask. "It's nothing. Aeris tended to me already."

Raiden's confusion deepened as he watched emotions flicker within Speed's dark aura. He would have preferred time alone, and while he couldn't say this was worse, he wasn't ready for anything stressful. He was already dealing with losing Freya.

"I'll go check on Noelle, Papa," Ash said softly. Raiden nodded and turned his gaze back to the sky.

"I don't get how your dragon turned human... but she cares about you. Weird, yeah. But kind of special."

Speed muttered the moment Ash left, gazing up at the sky as well.

A soft smile played on Raiden's lips as he began to wonder what Ash saw in him at all. He shook his head in disbelief after a moment of calm, wishing his previous world had people like Ash.

"I think that's how Freya felt when she decided to stay behind... whatever she saw in you, her loyalty was unmatched."

The moment Speed spoke, Raiden's smile began to fade. His uneasiness washed over him once more.

"Why though?" Raiden's voice cracked with uncertainty. "She could have lived too."

Speed let Raiden's words hang in the air for a moment, cleared his throat, and spoke:

"I understand her." Raiden rolled his eyes in Speed's direction, his pinkish cheeks betraying the smile behind his mask.

"She was injured, and spending her energy to create a way out for us was the only way she knew how to help."

Raiden squinted, gazing deep into the soul of the blue sky. He'd never realized having comrades could be this helpful, yet he knew he'd done nothing extraordinary for Freya—nothing but manipulate her in her most vulnerable state.

"I wouldn't do that for you, obviously," Speed muttered through his dry throat as he adjusted his position on the ground.

Raiden turned toward him with a lazy glance, knowing Speed wasn't lying but hoping to catch some flicker of emotion that would prove otherwise. Instead, he met only Speed's gentle dark aura and calm expression.

"The only person I would die for is my sister," he said, his expression turning somber. "But that wasn't always the case."

Raiden was taken aback by his words and took another look at him.

"I hated her kindness. Couldn't stand it, even just being around her pissed me off." His voice lowered. "Then the Jaspers came. And... I don't know. It cut deep. All I could think about was killing them."

"Wait... what?"

What Speed shared was foreign to Raiden. He'd never hated his brother, not for a single day, but he despised himself for being weak and dragging him down. His fist clenched, hand trembling at the thought—because ultimately, his weakness had gotten his brother killed.

"I think in the end it's the bond between us that matters," Speed said, turning to Raiden. "So don't beat yourself up, Freya sacrificed herself for all of us."

Speed reached for Raiden's head and tried to pat him, but Raiden's lip curled in a sneer and he struck his hand away.

"See, I doubt anyone would sacrifice themselves for you," he said with a sarcastic tone as he forced himself to sit upright. "There's no need for you alone to bear the guilt."

Speed shrugged. "After all, she promised to survive."

A sense of relief washed over Raiden as he lay there, struggling to find the right expression for his thoughts.

Speed's words somehow resonated with him as he began to think clearly. He'd been so wrapped up in guilt that he'd failed to see this was Freya's and her familiar's decision—something to be grateful for.

"This is why I want you to promise me something," Speed said, his voice trembling as he failed to meet Raiden's gaze.

Raiden turned to him, his expression darkening as he expected mockery or some cold words.

"What?"

Speed took a deep breath, the words heavy on his chest. "Promise to protect Soul with your life if I end up like Freya."

"Huh?" was the first thing Raiden could manage.

Speed forced himself to his feet, his trembling legs betraying the difficulty he was trying to hide.

"We're not done yet. You won't quit — and if you keep going, Soul will too." He sighed, looking away. "Just... don't make me watch my sister die. If it comes to that, I'll take the fall instead."

Raiden watched as his emotions radiated in red within his dark aura, and the sweat forming on his face was further proof he was holding an uncomfortable lie. But what?

"Promise me." Speed called out calmly.

Raiden also struggled to his feet, bones cracking as he stretched his rigid frame. He'd protect Soul regardless—she was essential to his survival—but admitting such selfish motives felt wrong.

He let out a sigh as he brushed dirt off his clothes. "I promise." Speed turned to leave the moment Raiden spoke, but Raiden reached for his shoulder.

"No one would be dying... trust me," he said with a cold and steady tone as his blue aura radiated boldness. But Speed's eyes grew soft and he gave him a firm nod.

Whether Freya sacrificed herself for him or them all, he knew the guilt that came with losing a comrade, and the last thing he wanted was to experience that again. Hence, he needed to understand the absolute domains better.

## Chapter 162: She's Gone

"Breaking free from an absolute domain probably requires channeling the full force of another domain into a single focal point inside the original domain's territory."

"At least that's the idea Freya came up with."

Speed said, standing alongside Raiden at the water's edge as they surveyed the land before them. The entire island was covered in white leaves like the ones from Raiden's tree, and something about the place stirred a sense of recognition in him.

"Wait, Freya had an absolute domain? When did that happen?" Raiden asked with a puzzled frown.

Speed shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine." He began walking to their left, where everyone else had gathered.

Raiden didn't pursue the Freya question further, finding himself more fascinated by the island and puzzling over how they'd all appeared from thin air.

He brushed his hand against his chin, lost in thought. He needed all the information about absolute domains he could get his hands on. He couldn't afford to let that tragedy repeat itself.

"Could this be what they meant by the Curtain Effect?" he muttered to himself. "Without a doubt, this is the Dark Dream island manifested in the real world."

He glanced skyward once more. "If we escaped from above... could it mean the two lands reflect each other somehow?"

Raiden shook his head. While his theory felt right somehow, he couldn't completely wrap his head around it. He needed clearer answers, or maybe confirmation from someone more knowledgeable about absolute domains.

He quickly turned toward the others, looking for Chrono, but his face darkened as soon as he found him.

Levi's yellow aura pulsed with rage, the intensity so strong Raiden could feel it from where he stood. Levi faced Chrono and Odard with his hands in his pockets, eyes narrowed in a piercing stare. The two acted as if he weren't even there.



The sight alone made Raiden forget all about his confusion and search for answers.

He'd never witnessed Levi that enraged before. Come to think of it, he'd never seen him angry, period. So what was going on?

Before he could move toward them, Levi abruptly left the scene and headed straight for him. Though Levi's face looked calm and his gaze stayed fixed on the sandy ground, his aura still pulsed with that same intensity. Three buttons of his shirt hung open, exposing a red necklace that swayed with each step.

Once he was close enough, Levi looked up at Raiden. "Can I be the one to kill Chrono?"

Confusion crossed Raiden's face. "Why do you want to do that?"

Levi locked eyes with Raiden, his stare so intense it seemed to pierce right through him, as if he could see into his very soul.

"We're nothing but disposable pawns to them," his voice turned dark. "If they had actually fought with us, Freya might still be here."

Raiden's face softened with understanding. He'd experienced that same frustration seeing them sit back so casually, but there was nothing he could have done without the right moment. He'd accepted that reality from the start—their alliance depended on staying united.

"You can have him, but only when our alliance breaks." Raiden's gaze sharpened, and his voice became quietly menacing. "He may not seem like much, but he's incredibly powerful."

Levi sneered, shoving his hands further into his pockets. "Vice Captain of the Arsenal Armada. He can manipulate distance the same way Seth Jasper does."

The moment Raiden heard about Chrono's ability, his eyes widened and a chill shot through him, forcing a nostalgic smile to his lips. Seth Jasper had been the only opponent who fought with the same intensity as his father. But his smile didn't last long—nostalgia brought back memories of the white-haired man whose eyes mirrored his brother's.

His hands trembled as he made a fist, but after a moment, he smacked himself in the head, jolting back to reality. He'd sworn to remove those cursed eyes, and nothing would stop him. He just needed to keep his composure.

Raiden smiled again, turning to Levi. "Surprised you know all that. You've been paying attention."

Levi positioned himself beside Raiden, looking toward the others. "Apparently, he held his own against Ling, the Deathstight."

"Hold on, what?" Raiden's eyes widened in disbelief. "Snow's master, the Vice Captain of the Chaos Armada?"

Levi gave a decisive nod. "I have no idea who Snow is, but yes. Oh, and Deathstight also has one of those unique dragons, same as you."

He fixed his gaze on Raiden. "You can imagine how powerful he is... but he's never heard of me." His voice dropped to a chilling whisper. "I will end him."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, thinking back to Snow's stories about his captain. If his memory was correct, they shared the same type of dragon transformation, which would explain the similar dragons.

"She said Ling was after something as well... what was it, the twenty-eight pages?" Raiden muttered, his eyes widening as the pieces clicked. Was it possible that the white-haired man he wanted dead was Ling, the Deathstalker?

Raiden spun toward Levi, his eyes going wide. "Did you just say a similar unique dragon?"

Levi looked at him with bored indifference, not bothering to answer. "I don't care what it is..."

"I'll kill him first. Then I'll kill you."

Raiden's heart dropped, the pure hatred in Levi's gaze hitting him like a physical blow. "What are you talking about?"

"You heard me clearly," each syllable was more chilling than the one before. "I've been working on this plan for a while..."

His voice, once so strong, started to break. "The only thing stopping me was Freya. But now she's dead."

He raised his head up into the sky. "Now I've got even more reason to kill you. She's gone... and there's nothing left to hold me back."

As his head dropped, he started walking away. "I'm the Shadow of Noor. I don't belong to anyone."

Raiden gulped as Levi disappeared from view. He'd always sensed Levi was playing his own game, but he never thought it would end with him as a target.

He brushed his hand through his hair anxiously. Had his strategy of winning their loyalty through deeds backfired? His gaze shifted to the others, wondering if they harbored similar intentions.

He was caught in his daze briefly, then took a deep breath and turned his gaze skyward to that same spot.

Right after the shocking realization that his target—the white-haired man—was actually his captain, he couldn't catch his breath before another threat materialized, this one from someone he'd believed was on his side.

"What a life," he said with a strained smile, though none of these revelations could break his resolve. "I'll just have to kill them both then."

## Chapter 163: Aether

Raiden stared up at the sky with a grim expression. Despite the heavy burden on his shoulders, the looming specter of complete collapse, he knew better than to rush his thoughts.

The confusion surrounding how absolute domains operated fascinated him. A darkening smile formed on his lips from the thought alone. But now, he had no option but to view it as a mirror reflecting the two worlds.

"It's been two days... let it rest."

Raiden slowly lowered his head to the left. Approaching him were Noelle, with her aether cigarette resting between her lips and smoke coiling around her, and Ash, who seemed a bit moody.

"I think experience would speak best." Noelle added as they drew closer.

Raiden found Ash's expression a bit out of the ordinary, but what captured his attention most was Noelle—how exactly she had managed to cheat death.

"Would you mind telling me?" Raiden blurted, his gaze turning to the forest before them.

Noelle and Ash moved to stand beside him, turning to face the forest as well.

"You are talking about my tattoo, aren't you?" Noelle asked, reaching for her neck.

"Look, there." she gestured toward the forest.

Raiden narrowed his eyes in the same direction. Under a white two-leaf clover, a figure was fidgeting within the bushes.

"What's that?"

"That's MK, picking up some leaves."

Raiden turned to Noelle with a confused expression, wondering what that had to do with her tattoo. But before he could speak, something about MK struck him as odd. MK could easily reach fresh leaves from the tree's branches, yet he crouched down to pick things up instead.

"What's he doing?" His tone matched his confusion.

Noelle's deep violet eyes remained fixed on the tree. "That's the aether tree."

Raiden raised his eyebrows in confusion before glancing at the aether Noelle was smoking. He had never thought of aether as coming from a tree; though something about it had always seemed strange, its origin as a tree had never crossed his mind.

Noelle gestured toward her neck again. "The tattoo is made of aether."

Raiden's expression darkened abruptly. "But that explains nothing."

She removed the aether and tossed it aside, her expression unreadable. "Aether isn't talked about much in your kingdom... that's sad."

She rolled her eyes toward Raiden. "I think this island is closer to my kingdom, Aurelia, than we thought."

Raiden let out a sigh. Noelle's evasiveness was getting on his nerves. After saving her life, he expected something more direct.

"Before magic... before mana and crests, there was aether." She pulled another aether cigarette from her pocket and placed it between her lips.

She turned to Raiden and flashed him a rehearsed smile. "Let's say the oldest magic trick in the book saved me."

Raiden stared at her for a moment, reached into his pocket, and pulled out one of the aether cigarettes Noelle had given him. He studied it intently, his expression softening by the passing seconds.

He knew there was a time when magic didn't exist, but never truly thought about how magic came to be in the first place. If aether really was the oldest magic, then could it do things mana crests couldn't? Could it make him strong enough to defeat Death'sight? And most importantly, could he use it to go back to his world and avenge his brother?

After a brief moment in thought, he turned to Noelle. "Can it do anything?"

Noelle was silent for a moment, her gaze dropping to the floor, seemingly lost in thought. "To be honest, I can't tell."

She turned toward Raiden, the wind stirring her short dark hair. "...since it gave birth to mana and magic, it's only fair to believe it could."

She turned away with a shrug. "I mean, it helps my people and me use our abilities in a unique way."

Raiden smirked as he finally understood why Noelle could heal herself and why she could use her ability without activating her domain.

But before any of them could break the silence between them, Ash spoke up:

"We need to leave, Papa," she said, urgency rumbling in her voice as she turned to the ocean behind them.

Raiden and Noelle simultaneously turned to her in confusion. "Why?"

Ash's blue eyes flickered, her pointed ears shaking as she gestured toward the ocean. Suddenly, Raiden felt the sharp fear radiating from her heart, and his eyes widened in terror as he turned to face the water.



"Something is coming, Papa." Ash's head snapped in Raiden's direction. "It is fast... very fast, and powerful."

Raiden couldn't see anything on the sea, but he had witnessed how far Ash's danger senses could reach... he knew better than to doubt her.

"Well, then we leave."

"What could it be?" Noelle asked, grabbing Ash's hand as they began to quicken their pace alongside Raiden.

"I don't know," Raiden muttered, "but I don't think it's Deathstalker either; he made it clear he's not interested in me."

The moment Raiden spoke, he paused, his eyes widening in terror as his heartbeat quickened. "Could it?... the huntress?"

Noelle and Ash also stopped. "The mysterious girl who wants you dead?"

Raiden didn't respond as he broke into a run alongside the others. He had initially wanted to fight the huntress, but after learning she might be trying to kill him for attempting to return to his world, he couldn't afford to face her. Worse, she was said to be an unbreakable force—not something he wanted to confront.

As soon as he reached the others, he yelled: "Aeris, call the leviathan... hurry."

His urgent words carried through the air, bringing everyone else to their feet despite knowing nothing about the situation.

"Where are we going next, though?" Aeris asked with reluctance, irritating Raiden as his body began to fidget. He had no clear idea what was making him so agitated, but he knew he couldn't afford to be caught.

"That was uncalled for," Chrono said, stretching. "Well, let's go to Hour Island then."

Seeing the anger in Raiden's eyes at her slow response, Aeris hurried her steps as soon as Chrono mentioned the name. She crouched at the water's edge and began calling the leviathan.

Despite the urgency, however, Raiden knew it was best to speak with his comrades before heading to Hour Island. They had already lost Freya, leading to some already wanting his head for it.

As the leviathan approached through the water, its massive form causing the ocean's surface to churn, Raiden took the opportunity to speak.

He cleared his throat, drawing their attention. "I would hate to lose any of you the way we lost Freya."

His eyes fell to the ground as his tone grew quieter. 'So I'll say it again: I need you all, but that doesn't mean I should lose you.'

He lifted his head toward them. "...If you leave, I'd be completely fine."

The leviathan surfaced behind him with its massive bulk, and he turned to face it. "You can choose not to go with us."

As soon as he finished speaking, the leviathan's voice echoed through their minds. "You are fleeing from the huntress, aren't you?"

It opened its enormous mouth, the lower jaw dropping down to the beach and sinking into the sand as its tongue unfurled. "We have a contract, but don't dare put me in danger."

Raiden hardly heard what it spoke as the instant its tongue touched the sand, he began sprinting toward its mouth.

"She is here, Papa." Ash said as she and Noelle joined Raiden.

"Hurry!" The leviathan's booming voice resonated through their minds, prompting them to scramble inside.

When the last person did, Raiden's heart sank in relief. He knew he was the only person the Huntress was after, and if memories served him right, she couldn't harm anyone else apart from him.

So, watching the leviathan gently close its mouth made the creature's gut feel like a sanctuary to him.

## Chapter 164: Me too

Raiden's gaze remained fixed on the leviathan's sealed maw, its razor teeth gleaming. The beast's otherworldly breath bathed his entire body in oppressive warmth while the others lingered behind him.

The Leviathan's Path to Hour Island was obvious, yet he couldn't shake the question: could the Huntress reach them in the absolute realm?

His heartbeat began drowning out everything behind them, each thunderous pulse reverberating through his body. He clenched his fist, willing himself to believe it wasn't possible.

"Only leviathans can get in." He muttered to himself.

The moment he did, Chrono's voice rang out behind him. "I heard you want to kill your vice captain," he said, cockiness thick in his voice as he approached.

Raiden closed his eyes, tilting his head back to stare at the leviathan's hard palate. He knew Chrono was about to wreak havoc with his words, but he knew better than to retreat into his thoughts. He had to address this.

He turned to him, his expression deceptively calm, eyes dark. "What about it?"

Chrono let out a sigh and stepped up beside him, one hand tucked in his pocket as the other straightened the turban on his head, his silver-gray hair catching the light on his shoulders.

"You seem too calm to be a bunch of delinquents." He reached out and placed his hand on Raiden's shoulder, eyes narrowing as he studied Raiden's dark expression.

His lips flickered as he stumbled over his words. Soft giggles bubbled up first, then quiet laughter, before suddenly exploding into loud, hysterical laughs. He gripped his stomach as tears began forming in his eyes.

Raiden's mouth fell open as he watched in bewilderment. He couldn't see what was funny, and he'd never seen Chrono laugh in such a way.

He gritted his teeth as Chrono's laughter intensified, each burst making him more irritated. The others quickly turned their way, confusion etched on their faces just like Raiden's.

Finally, Chrono calmed, tears trailing down his cheeks as he placed his hand back on Raiden's shoulder. Raiden's legs betrayed him with slight tremors despite his efforts to stay composed.

"Sorry about that, buddy," Chrono said, sniffing. "Couldn't help myself."

Through his anger, a slight smile tugged at his lips. He was proud of keeping his cool this long. He could have walked away, but he'd chosen to face this. The best he could do was endure whatever came next.

"The thought... the thought that you can hold a candle to Death'sight is insane."

The smile died on Raiden's lips as he fixed his gaze on Chrono. Death'sight's eyes burned in his memory, rage coursing through him like fire. His knuckles popped as his fists tightened, blue aura erupting around his form.

Chrono's expression changed as he quickly jerked his hand away from Raiden's shoulder as though it had burned him, raising both hands in surrender.

"Come on, buddy." He started backing away slowly. "It's just not possible... his strength matches Drake's."

The moment those words escaped, Noelle and Ash flanked Chrono from behind. Noelle knocked his feet out from under him, and as he dropped, Ash grabbed his neck, hand drawn back to strike.

Before she could, Raiden's gaze drifted slowly toward them. The raw anger in his eyes sent the others stepping backward, all except Levi, who remained against the leviathan's throat with crossed arms and downcast eyes.

"It doesn't matter... I will kill him." His voice held no urgency, but the quiet confidence behind it made everyone turn toward him, even Levi.

In the silence that followed, Chrono broke free of Ash's hold and stood up.

But Raiden simply closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and steadied himself. He had no problem with Ling the Deathstalker. After all, he was his vice captain and also Snow's master. Usually, he'd seek a solution without bloodshed unless absolutely necessary. This time was different.

His brother was different, unique. No one else should carry his eyes or even ones that resembled them.

"I understand... I want to kill him too," Chrono said as he massaged his neck. "...but it would be suicide."

He shrugged dismissively. "Honestly, I'd prefer killing you instead. I'm going to do it eventually anyway."

Raiden gave him a lazy look before shaking his head. He had enough experience to know not to predict an outcome before the fighting began.

"You think so?" Raiden stretched, working out the stiffness in his joints. "Let's see what happens."

Chrono smiled and put his hands in his pockets. "I heard your friend—"

He gestured toward Noelle. "Wolf, wasn't it?"

"She killed her vice captain and took his place. And now you want to do the same?"

At that moment, something clicked for Raiden: he was through with Chrono's needling. They had minimal knowledge about Hour Island, and this guy could be just as deadly as their last absolute domain encounter—Dark Dream. He had to preserve his energy for the battles that counted.

"What do you know about Hour Island?" His tone was blunt and businesslike, allowing no space for idle talk.

Chrono turned partway toward him. "He used to be a bookkeeper from Noor but gave it up to become a Judge, an Elusive."

"Really?"

Chrono gave him a firm nod. "If rumors are true... he's very calm," he said, beginning to walk away. "We might not be in danger after all."

The words were probably meaningless, but somehow they still gave Raiden a bit of comfort.

"He's the Reader." Chrono said this as he passed Noelle and Ash, moving to join Odard and their counterpart.



"The Reader, huh?" Raiden muttered, gazing distantly, lost in thought.

They were two hours in. Previous journeys via the Leviathan Path had taken three to four hours—the variation, he suspected, came down to whoever was controlling the mana. With Leo at the helm now, he hoped they'd reach their destination before rival organizations could seize the pages.

He took up his former position facing the leviathan's teeth, fingers tapping nervously against his thighs. He desperately hoped Chrono was right—because losing any more of his own people, apart from Chrono's crew, would destroy him. That agony was beyond words.

"But even if it isn't, I will be ready," he muttered, clenching his fist.

## Chapter 165: Yield

The wait felt endless before the leviathan finally reached Hour Island's shore. Its colossal head punched through the invisible barrier and slammed into the sand, the impact sending violent tremors through its entire body. Raiden braced himself as he and the others dove for cover.

The instant its maw opened, scorching dry air hit Raiden like a punch to the gut. One breath seared his throat raw, leaving him clutching his stomach and coughing violently, his eyes burning as if all moisture had been sucked from them.

He turned around in his distress, ready to ask what was wrong, but quickly realized the others were suffering just like him.

"We've arrived," the leviathan's voice reverberated through their minds, distorted and harsh. Its enormous tongue unfurled toward the ground, prompting someone to yell, "Get down!"

The closer Raiden got to the island, the more the air seemed to deteriorate—growing thicker and drier, yet paradoxically too thin to breathe properly.

His eyes slowly reddened as he squinted into the distance. The sun lazily hung above the horizon, and ahead of them lay a vast stone pathway that disappeared into the far reaches of the island.

There was something else unsettling about the absolute domain beyond the suffocating air, but Raiden couldn't identify what was bothering him.

Still, he couldn't resist leaping off the leviathan's tongue, the others following close behind. With his hands still covering his mouth, he examined the pavement more closely.

The ground was definitely solid, its surface rough and hard to the touch, and wide enough for dozens of people to walk abreast.

"It seems right to me..." His gaze swept the area as the leviathan withdrew from the absolute domain, leaving them standing alone before the vast pavement. "...but something feels so wrong."

Raiden barely glanced behind him this time. As their leader—and having already lost Freya in the last absolute domain—he couldn't afford to underestimate this realm. To protect the others and maintain their confidence, he would have to shoulder the greatest risks.

Without hesitation, he stepped onto the pavement, pinching his nostrils tighter with each breath to filter the toxic air. The others followed wordlessly behind him, their footsteps the only sound breaking the eerie silence as they endured the same torment as their leader.

Unlike Solace and Dark Dream, their previous absolute domains where they'd felt the weight of being watched, this place offered no such recognition. It was as if the ruler of this world simply didn't care that they existed at all.

Or perhaps... Raiden froze, tension gripping his chest as his eyes swept the area nervously. What if there were traps lying in wait?

As his eyes swept the area in growing confusion, uneasiness prickling at his nerves, a voice came from behind.

"Is it just me, or did the ocean disappear?" Speed asked, gripping Soul's hand tightly.

A sudden chill ran through Raiden as he spun around to look back toward the ocean. His throat went dry, sweat beading on his forehead. The ocean that had stretched beyond the barrier just moments before had vanished entirely, replaced by an indistinct haze.

"That's unusual..." Chrono said, stepping toward where the ocean had vanished. At the barrier's edge, he knelt and reached for the sand below—then instantly jerked back and leaped onto the pavement.

"I... I think the sand is disappearing too." He backed toward the group, his gaze flickering between them and the steadily vanishing shoreline.

Raiden's hands clenched as the truth about this absolute domain hit him. This time, he was willing to avoid conflict at all costs. Whatever mechanism was at work here, he had to understand it and reach the Reader if possible.

"We can't leave through the Leviathan's Path without the ocean," Levi pointed out, fixing Raiden with a hard look from his dry, irritated eyes. "You realize that, right?"

The full weight of their situation hit Raiden, his eyebrows lifting as the realization sank in. He hadn't thought of that; now figuring out this domain's mechanics wasn't just curiosity, it was survival.

Before he could answer, his throat seized up, dry as sand, and he doubled over, coughing with the rest of them. The air was becoming lethal; he watched in horror as it began to crack and fissure his exposed skin.

"We have to... find the Reader!" Raiden croaked through his burning throat and spun around to lead the group forward.

Before he could move, everything disappeared: the sun, the sky, and the very air around them. Raiden floated in absolute nothingness, his pulse thundering as death seemed certain. Then the sun returned with two deliberate blinks, and as reality reformed around them, he found himself more lost than ever.

The pavement had transformed into endless rolling grassland. Flying insects swarmed the air, and when one dove toward Raiden, he struck it down without thinking. But the instant it hit the ground, two flies rose where one had fallen.

Even as the poisonous air continued its assault, this impossible phenomenon froze him in place. His mouth gaped as he tracked the duplicated flies with his eyes, his face broadcasting his complete inability to comprehend what he'd just witnessed.

He had no idea what drove him, but the sole coherent thought he could grasp was to press ahead and find the Reader.

He launched himself forward without pause, legs pounding as he pressed a hand to his nose and forced himself to breathe through his mouth, but the merciless air continued to torment him.

'We need to hurry," he wheezed through his distress, punctuated by a series of brutal coughs.

If any of them answered, he didn't hear it; his thoughts were wholly occupied with finding the master of the absolute domain, the Reader, before disaster could unfold.

He raced through the tangled vegetation, his boots striking hard against the terrain as he wished desperately that they could overcome whatever ordeal the Reader had set before them.

This marked the first time he'd had to protect his emotional state while making critical decisions, and despite knowing that losing anyone here would almost certainly cause his remaining allies to doubt him, what actually motivated him were feelings he couldn't identify.

These emotions were his greatest enigma and potentially his greatest weakness.

He accelerated step by step, and as his boot made contact with the ground, the world vanished into total emptiness yet again.

Raiden's mind churned as he experienced this moment of pure nothingness, wondering how often their environment would continue changing while yearning for any semblance of sanctuary.

Moments passed before everything reconstructed itself, placing them at the center of frozen mountain ranges, the heavens pulsing with neon luminescence as the moon loomed behind the peaks, bathing them in its ghostly radiance.

Raiden gulped audibly as the cold sent violent shudders through his frame. Beyond the bone-chilling temperature, the air remained equally hostile, carrying the same deadly quality as their last location.

Yet Raiden refused to yield, forcing himself to walk forward.

## Chapter 166: Location

The mountains stretched endlessly beyond what Raiden could fathom. They moved through the frozen landscape, hands brushing against each other for warmth as they fought to steady their breathing in the hostile atmosphere.

Raiden warmed his palms again and again, cupping them against his cheeks as his thoughts wandered. They'd been trudging through the cold for almost an hour now, with no trace of the Reader anywhere.

But as he forced himself onward, a sudden jolt of sensation struck his chest. He pressed his hand against it, feeling the irregular thrum of his heartbeat.

The realization hit him immediately—beyond his confusion and desperation, he wasn't scared enough to justify this frantic rhythm.

He struck his own cheek, snapping himself back to focus. There were deeper layers to this realm, and he had to remain agile. Maybe everything they were experiencing was a test from the Reader.

He maintained his steady pace, balancing each step on the treacherous ground while his eyes searched the mountain landscape for any sign worth pursuing.

It wasn't long before the chest pain hit again, that familiar tightening. But something far worse demanded his attention: silence where there should have been footsteps. His comrades were gone. He was alone.

Turning back, he spotted them far behind him, gathered in a circle. Raiden stared at them, puzzled. Despite feeling slighted that none of them had asked him to wait, he found himself drawn back toward the group.

When he got close enough, he found Speed collapsed on the ground, Aeris kneeling beside him as she worked to heal the massive bruise that painted his torso crimson. Speed's breathing was labored, each cough echoing harshly in the thin air.

"What happened to him?" Raiden asked, moving between his companions to get closer to Speed before dropping to his knees beside him. At this proximity, Raiden's expression turned dark as the true extent of the bruising became clear.

It appeared tender and grotesquely swollen. From the rapid, shallow rhythm of Speed's breathing and the movement of his abdomen, it looked as though the injury could burst open at any second.

"Were you attacked?" Raiden asked.

While Speed's situation appeared far worse than any ordinary bruise. Raiden couldn't remember any incident that could have caused such damage, making him suspect an attack had occurred while his attention was elsewhere.

"No... he won't speak though," Aeris whispered, her hands working frantically over Speed's injuries. With perspiration covering her face in the frigid air and weariness written across her expression, she didn't need to explain what was going wrong.

"You can't save him, can you?"

She inhaled deeply through her mouth, one hand pressed over her nose. "This air is making everything worse."

Raiden looked back at Speed, observing how he fought for breath through his mask, though the toxic air seemed to be forcing its way into his lungs like a hostile invader.

He kept blinking, trying to think of some way to save Speed. When he looked left, he found Soul standing nearby, her hands quivering against her mouth as she shook from cold or fear. The image alone caused Raiden's heart to plummet, forcing him upright.



Finding the Reader was their only option. If this truly was a game of some sort, he would have the power to make the air breathable again when they found him.

He snapped his fingers over and over, desperately thinking of ways to transport Speed on their journey. Suddenly, the answer came to him: Leo. He spun in his direction at once.

"Can you nullify his weight and carry him?" As soon as the words left his mouth, he extended his hands toward Leo's luggage, not bothering to wait for a response.

"I can, but wouldn't moving him make the pain worse?" Leo responded with a puzzled expression.

"I can make something cushioned for him," MK interjected sharply. "If he's weightless, it shouldn't cause any issues."

Leo nodded decisively and knelt beside Speed, touching him gently. Speed's form gradually lifted into the air, and MK stretched out her arm in his direction. Her golden aura surged forward and crystallized into a cube with soft, cushioned walls visible within.

When they completed the makeshift stretcher, Raiden's attention shifted to Soul, noticing her dark aura rippling with emotion in the dim light. He offered a wordless pat on her head before turning toward their route to take the lead.

On his third step, though, everything vanished into another empty void. Within seconds, the pavement from their initial encounter with the Reader reformed around them.

The sun's rays pierced Raiden's eyes, and he stretched out his hand to block the light. But the moment he saw his white sleeve, sudden confusion overcame him.

His hands were both stained crimson. Fear shot through him as he hurriedly pulled his sleeves upward, his expression fracturing with even greater bewilderment.

Countless cuts scored both forearms, and from their crude appearance and the ashen flesh surrounding them, he recognized what had happened immediately.

"I didn't know air could be this deadly," Noelle remarked, and Raiden's chest squeezed painfully as he spun around without hesitation.

It was both unsettling and reassuring to see Noelle's arms mirror his own condition perfectly. Yet he couldn't help but feel relieved that, at least in this moment, the cuts were limited to just him and her.

"We have to hurry." The instant he muttered the words, his hand flew to his throat as the taste of blood filled his mouth.

He put on a tight, uncomfortable smile as his eyes searched their expressions. With their surroundings turning more toxic each second, speed was essential.

"Stop talking—all of you," Raiden rasped, immediately followed by a fit of bloody coughing as he clutched at his throat desperately. Each word sent searing pain through his neck, as if someone were cutting him open with every syllable.

He spun around and began moving forward, his steps growing faster as thoughts churned through his head. Leadership and emotional control no longer mattered; now he just needed to stay alive.

He quickly glanced over his shoulder, determined not to lose track of the others again. Despite them walking behind him, the gap separating them was just as wide as it had been earlier.

Nevertheless, he refused to slow down. He had objectives that took precedence over his comrades' lives, though he bore them no ill will.

He pressed his hand to his chest as he moved forward, that previous feeling washing over him again. But this time his chest compressed painfully, his pulse racing out of control. He couldn't make sense of it—his level of fear didn't warrant such a violent physical response.

But before he could process what was happening to him, Ash's quiet voice drifted through his thoughts, breaking her silence for the first time since their arrival.

[Look to your right, Papa.] Without hesitation, Raiden's gaze shifted right. [There's a mansion.]

Raiden's eyes went wide as relief flooded through him, drowning out the tightness in his chest. He spun around to face Ash, giving her an enthusiastic grin and thumbs-up that she returned with a soft smile.

You're amazing, Ash—Raiden thought back to her as he waved the others forward toward the mansion.

At last, a clue to the Reader's location.

## Chapter 167: No retreat

Raiden instinctively kept his eyes wide open, afraid to blink lest his trauma from the dark dream repeat itself and the mansion vanish from sight.

His pace resonated with his heartbeat, unable to distinguish his thrills from his fear. Still, his head kept whipping backward, keeping tabs on the others behind him.

In no time, his expression took a dark shift, and his pace began to slow as they neared the mansion. He wished the sight before him was nothing but a fluke, but the closer he got, the clearer the reality became.

The mansion lay shattered in fragments; the roof had collapsed along with all the interior, leaving only one wall standing. Raiden halted before the wreckage, his heart pounding as he panted heavily, his fingers trembling in disbelief—this was also a dead end.

"Uh... for fuck's sake," Noelle muttered behind him, her voice etched with irritation, her hands repeatedly rubbing against her throat.

Raiden let out a sigh. Despite his doubts, he had genuinely believed this path would lead them to the Reader—but now he couldn't help but assume the Reader was no different from the Lost Child. Even so, this wasn't the end he'd hoped for.

He turned to the others, watching Speed hover in MK's materialized cube, trying to catch his breath, and the rest already showing signs of fatigue.

He exhaled deeply, his golden eyes shifting to theirs as Leo and Odard started picking their way through the shards on the ground.

"We have to keep moving," he muttered, his voice strained but controlled, not wanting it to break as he gestured toward Speed. "He needs our help."

"I think we're all in over our heads here," Chrono added hastily after Raiden spoke.

His words seemed to trigger the shift immediately, the scene melting away to leave them suspended in emptiness before they were deposited onto hot sand, squinting up at the harsh desert sun.

The desert heat hit Raiden like a physical blow, crimson spreading across his exposed skin as warmth flooded through him. He raised his face toward the sun, eyes narrowing in both pain and confusion.

The heavens stretched barren and cloudless above them, the sun swollen to an impossible size and steadily advancing, as if drawn by some invisible force.

A terrible thought crept into his mind: what if the pages had already been taken, and the Reader was as merciless as the Lost Child, watching their suffering with complete detachment?

"What makes this place different? Why is it still here when the rest disappeared?" Leo questioned, balancing carefully on the jagged pieces beneath him.

Raiden whipped around to look, finding the building completely intact, untouched by the transformation. He felt his mouth curve into a small smile, suspicion growing that the structure was somehow tied to the Reader.

But fear struck him like a blade to the chest, his hand shaking so badly he could barely control it. Still, he couldn't resist the urge to grasp at his chest, the pain nearly bringing him to his knees.

The realization hit him that he'd been feeling this way longer than he'd admitted, but his level of fear didn't match the severity of his symptoms. As he studied his trembling fingers, doubt crept in—could the Reader be controlling his body's reactions?

But even as confusion overwhelmed him, Ash moved past with casual indifference, stepping carefully toward the crystalline remains of the structure.

One by one, she hauled away the concrete fragments, throwing them carelessly to the side. Then she went completely still, studying something on the ground before her eyes found Raiden's.

[He's dead, Papa.] her voice echoed in Raiden's mind.

His jaw dropped in perplexity as awareness returned with jarring force, his focus shifting to Ash while his heart stumbled in his chest and every breath felt like it was being stolen from him.

Even as he stayed locked in place, Leo spotted the Reader's body below and hurriedly descended from the rubble above, his sudden movement and expression alerting the rest of the group.

Fear spread among them through silent glances, and he witnessed his teammates' first real moment of doubt about making it out alive, their hushed conversations bitter with hopelessness and frustration.

He recognized the feeling all too well—he faced the same uncertain fate—yet despite not being alone in this, he couldn't escape the crushing sense of responsibility. He had brought them into this nightmare.

He squeezed his hands into fists even as they quaked uncontrollably, his desperate situation stripping away his voice and capacity for movement. But he refused to witness another Dark Dream. He would persist and hunt for an answer that offered hope instead of despair.

For all his bravery, hopelessness had taken root in his core. He might conceal his turmoil with well-worn displays of strength, but privately he grasped the truth: he was utterly helpless, with no understanding of the consequences that followed an absolute ruler's death.

"Looks like FIRMO was ahead of us once more," Noelle murmured, settling beside Raiden as she regarded the rest of the group.

Raiden met her gaze wordlessly, his confidence wavering about finding anything FIRMO might have overlooked. Knowing they had Death sight on their side, he couldn't help but fear the entire organization operated at that same terrifying level.

But the thought plagued him—could they genuinely defeat an elusive within their absolute territory? His thoughts grew disjointed as his gaze became erratic. What if the Huntress was behind this, sabotaging his chance to secure the pages?

He choked back his terror, struggling to regain his composure. Though he understood little about the Huntress, it was clear her vendetta was personal—she wouldn't harm anyone but him; all the evidence he'd gathered supported that belief.

Perhaps FIRMO wielded comparable power... or worse, other groups with even greater influence were pulling the strings—he reasoned, forcing himself to think of anything but the Huntress.

He felt moisture gathering in his nasal passage and immediately pressed his hand to his nose. An unsettling crawling sensation ran through his body as he watched blood drip into his cupped palm.

His mind scrambled desperately for answers, yet before any clear idea could take shape, the same sharp pain lanced through his chest again. He instinctively grabbed at his torso, leaving bloody handprints on his clothing.

"What is this?" he gasped, the overwhelming urge to collapse forcing him toward the ground. Fear no longer described what he was experiencing; it felt as though his heart was being shredded apart.

Before his legs could give way, Noelle gripped his shoulder firmly, her expression growing stern. "You have to be there for Ash in all this." Her attention shifted sharply to Ash's location. "She's so young... she's probably terrified."

Her luminous aura cracked like glass, her voice dropping to a whisper that promised violence. "Let anything happen to her, and you'll wish you hadn't."



His attention drifted to Ash, standing alone and gazing into the void. The realization struck him with startling clarity, eyes rounding in disbelief. What if he'd been carrying someone else's emotional burden? What if none of it was truly his?

[Everything is disappearing, Papa.] Ash's voice whispered inside his head, her blue eyes staring past him toward the distant horizon.

He jerked his gaze in that direction, feeling his very essence shatter within him. What he saw left him stunned and horrified. The desert was gradually fading away in the distance, melting into an indistinct nothingness.

More terrible yet, their environment changed again, depositing them before massive snowy mountains with the moon suspended behind them, drifting slower than the sun ever did, and radiating a cold so severe that Raiden's hair started crystallizing with frost.

Yet even now, the distant mountains were fading away into an empty void.

## Chapter 168: A Monster?!

Reason was avoiding Raiden. His knees plunged deep into the snow, shoulders drooping as though his joints had given out entirely.

He had never believed in fate, or anything superstitious for that matter, but with the vanishing sight swallowing him whole and his comrades openly regretting their choices, he couldn't help but wonder if he had been forsaken by good fortune.

"At this rate, we're going to die," Aeris muttered against the deadly cold and piercing air.

Before Raiden's eyes, Levi sat quietly on the broken concrete, flicking his dagger between his fingers, while Leo stood inches away, his trembling eyes fixed on the diminishing mountains, fear unmistakable in his stance.

"We shouldn't have come..." Leo muttered through his rotting throat, each crack in his voice betraying his raw emotion.

His head whipped in Raiden's direction. "We..." he struggled with his words, then his head dropped to the ground and he fell silent, not uttering another word. It was as if he'd come to a personal realization.

Or perhaps it was those eyes Raiden gave him: that understanding, terrified expression. This battle wasn't theirs alone. Raiden himself couldn't die—not now.

However, cutting through the tension, Odard and Chrono, alongside their companion, surprisingly calm throughout all of this, turned in Raiden's direction.

"You lads should make yourselves useful... think of something," Odard said, and Chrono agreed with a quiet gesture.

Whatever reaction they wanted from Raiden with those words went unheard. Raiden stared at the outskirts of the domain, watching as mountains, sand, even greenery evaporated into thin air.

He struggled to his feet, his face paled as if each cell in his body were freezing from the moon's glow, his heart seized by a familiar sensation that slowly tore at his once unwavering courage.

His mind was blank, and, without the confusion in his chest, his body began to accept his fate. He had no way out. The one method he knew of, breaking this absolute domain with a different absolute domain, was futile. None of them possessed an absolute domain, none that he could think of.

He tilted his head upward, watching as the moon closed in as if it wanted to crush them, the cold turning increasingly deadly.

This wasn't how he wanted to die, at least not before he had ripped out Deathsight's eyes and, most importantly, avenged his brother. But the thought of joining Jobe in his eternal rest brought him a measure of comfort.

He closed his eyes, trying to fill himself with that sensation, but they shot open again, his fingers curling into his palms and cracking, trembling in the snow.

His hatred, principles, and anger wouldn't allow it, and worse, he couldn't afford to let the guilt swallow him whole.

"Jobe deserves better... better than what I could give him." He muttered beneath his breath.

Still, before he could form another thought within his dreadful mind, a nerve-racking sound echoed from the distance, rumbling the ground and throwing everyone else off balance except Raiden.

His head was still tilted upward, and, before his watchful eyes, the atmosphere, sound, and even the dry air itself began moving out of shape, pulling them through different environments: ones they had already seen and others that left their minds reeling.

It felt like a glitch in reality itself, too many atmospheres to comprehend all at once, all within minutes. But Raiden never moved an inch.

When it finally stopped, leaving them in a scorching desert once more, Raiden stared at the sky with calm detachment, watching as the sun swelled to ten times its size and the desert erupted in smoke as though the very sand was combusting.

He felt a sudden sharpness in his chest, but this time, he didn't react. He had experienced too many emotions at this point, and this sensation didn't feel new.

[I can help, Papa.] Ash's voice echoed in Raiden's mind.

Raiden's mind began spiraling at a rampaging pace, but surprisingly, he didn't react with the urgency he expected of himself. Rather, he couldn't help but feel sorry for Ash. She had a very promising future, if only she had chosen someone else as her master.

The moment Raiden finally turned to her, he responded telepathically: Tell me.

Ash turned to the void, her white locks flickering in the wind, the burning sun scorched relentlessly against her moon-pale skin as she stared at the vanishing sight.

[I can use our absolute domain.]

Raiden's eyes widened in confusion, unsure whether his shock stemmed from his racing heartbeat or from the impossible fact that he had an absolute domain. Still, he responded.

What do you mean?

Ash glanced at him and gave him a soft smile. But their attention snapped to Raiden's right as the others hurried toward Speed, who had begun screaming in agony.

Raiden's heart beat faster, quickening to a pace too rapid and erratic for him to ignore this time. He reached for his chest and clutched it.

But as he dwelled on his confusion, Ash crouched low in the sand below them, pressed her tiny hands deep into the earth, and commanded: "Bloom."

Raiden's focus shifted to Ash, the bewildering scene stealing his thoughts as he watched her hands sink into the desert floor. Instantly, her hands and the sand for meters around her transformed into wispy smoke.

The affected area slowly collapsed inward, everything within it becoming dark smoke as a hole opened, exposing a vast mountainous island far below.

Raiden gulped as he realized this was not only a familiar sight, but that 'Bloom,' the very power he had failed to comprehend and wield, was probably an absolute domain.

Raiden was lost in his own reverie, watching as Ash's gaze stayed fearlessly focused on the opening. This was a welcome sight, and he should be glad they were finally escaping.

But he was caught within emotions he couldn't fully comprehend. Frozen in indecision about how to react, he watched the others grasp what was happening and immediately—without concern, without even curiosity about Ash—begin leaping through the hole to the island below.

And before Raiden knew it, only Noelle and Leo were left, both wearing the same thoughtful, confused expression.

Though Raiden barely drew their attention, he could tell they had as many questions as he did. But before any of them could speak, Ash broke the silence:

"You need to leave before everything changes again," she muttered, sweat soaking through her white clothes. From her expression alone, Raiden could tell that maintaining the portal for them was taking its toll.

"Hurry and join us soon," Noelle said and plunged through the hole, and after giving Raiden an understanding nod, Leo followed suit.

The moment they left, Raiden knew it was best to save his questions for later. He approached Ash, his gaze fixed on her hands, which had somehow become one with the shadowy energy.

"How exactly am I supposed to take over for you to leave?" he asked, his eyes showing genuine curiosity.

But Raiden's heart sank instantly as Ash raised her head to look at him. She gave him a forced smile, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Raiden was caught within emotions once more as he watched shadowy skeletons rise from the darkness around their escape route and wrap him in a tight embrace.

He could sense that one small movement would break their hold, yet he remained frozen, unable to act or speak, simply watching as they dragged him toward the opening.

It was as if part of him wanted to be dragged, even against his will.

[...There can only be one moon dragon, Papa.]

Raiden watched her with his mind frozen, and when her tears became uncontrollable, he found himself drowning in his own uncomfortable tears.

Ash shook her head, trying to brush off her tears. [I'll be fine... right, Papa? After all, we... we can finally be in one body.]

She forced a big grin, tears and fluids running down past her stretched lips.

[Avenge your brother... and protect everyone else... please... I'm so scared, Papa.] her voice cracked and she sniffled.

The moment she spoke, the shadows threw him through the hole. He watched as the portal suddenly closed, taking the shadows with it, and the scene broke his heart to pieces. His tears streamed down his face as mucus poured from his nose.

Every memory of Ash flashed through his mind, and his body grew restless as he finally grasped where the sharp pains in his chest originated. They belonged to Ash, and she had been in pain before her sacrifice because she foresaw what lay ahead.

She was the closest person he had to family since his brother Jobe's death, and still, he could do nothing to save her, just as he had been powerless to save Jobe.

Am I a monster?—The only coherent thought he could form before nearly crashing into a mountain below.

## Chapter 169: Am I Dying?!

Everything was collapsing around him. Suspended between emotion and circumstance, as Raiden's last tear slipped free, the deafening sound came rushing toward him.

He closed his eyes in understanding, his pulse quickening with each beat. He knew who approached and what they wanted from him. But he couldn't give them that now, even if he tried; he couldn't even give himself what he knew he desperately wanted.



"Where's Ash?!" Noelle shouted once she was close enough, watching Raiden sprawled across the rough stone ledge, eyes shut against the world.

Raiden tried to rehearse any kind of reaction, but nothing came. The fault was entirely his, and he deserved this reckoning. If he had just realized Ash's feelings in time, he could have prevented her death and still had the one person who felt like family.

Here it comes—he thought, preparing himself for the storm of Noelle's fury.

"Rule domain," Noelle whispered once close enough. Her golden aura ceased its flow, crystallizing into an enormous sphere that trapped them alongside everything within a mile: the trees, the very air, insects, and even a section of the mountain.

She closed the distance to Raiden, caught him by the collar, and yanked him upright. Her deep violet eyes burned with pure rage, wordlessly demanding answers, but Raiden couldn't bear to face them. Not from fear—he knew the connection those two had shared, and now he had stood by helplessly as she died.

"How could you... she was just a child." Her voice trembled, fighting back the tears she refused to show. "...just a kid."

He could have stayed silent, watched the others attempt to penetrate her domain from outside, or simply listened to what Noelle had to say. But something darker in him had other intentions. Maybe prolonging this would deliver all the guilt he needed to carry. Ash's blood stained his hands, no one else's.

"Are you done?" He turned his head slowly to face her, staring straight into her eyes. "Funny... last I checked, it was a servant's job to die for their master."

Noelle's eyes blazed with fury as she stared into Raiden's rotting soul, then slapped him hard across the face. "How could you?!"

Raiden smiled. He hadn't anticipated the slap, but having received it, he hungered for more. He had never realized how thrilling it was to be struck in situations like this.

A menacing grin twisted his lips. "In the end, survival is all that matters... the way it was when you abandoned your mother." His devilish laugh echoed in the enclosed space.

Something snapped in Noelle. She held Raiden locked in her grip, her eyes trembling as she stared at him in complete disbelief, mouth slightly agape.

For a brief moment, it seemed like it was over. Then, inexplicably, Raiden's smile widened further, and that final cruelty shattered Noelle completely.

She slammed Raiden down and pummeled him without mercy. Her fist crashed into his face while she stared past his malicious eyes into something darker. For the seconds that followed, it was as if her fist moved on its own—strike after merciless strike, each one cutting deeper than the last.

Raiden looked into Noelle's emotionless face, and while she stared straight at him, he knew she wasn't really seeing him. Just memories, and past that, reactions long lost.

Blood streamed down Raiden's face as one side went numb under the endless barrage of blows. But he welcomed it. He had been nothing but a monster, letting all the people he loved die while he stood by helplessly. This beating was the least he could pay for simply existing.

After countless strikes, however, Noelle froze mid-punch. She blinked, her vision clearing as she saw Raiden's bruised and bloodied face beneath her. After a few seconds suspended in that position, she let him go and pulled herself to her feet. It was as though reality had snapped back into focus, and she couldn't bring herself to continue.

"We'll finish this later," she said, walking away as her golden domain disappeared.

Raiden's head followed her direction as she walked away. He clenched his fist, shivering uncontrollably. He wasn't satisfied—he needed more, a beating that would bring him to the brink of death, something to make him truly face what he had become.

MK and Leo, who had been trapped outside the domain, looked at him with complete disgust. MK hurried to catch up with Noelle to check on her, while Leo's horrified expression toward Raiden said everything his shocked silence couldn't.

As Raiden watched their retreating forms, he realized his chances of securing them as teammates had dwindled to almost nothing. A cold dread settled over him.

This time, he wouldn't have to wrestle with who he could save and who he couldn't. Freya was gone, Ash was gone, and he'd been powerless to stop either loss.

Perhaps it was time to return to solitude, to purge himself of these emotions. Yes... the way he always had before. The only person he needed was Jobe. And even in his demise, his presence still lingered in every fight.

"Yeah, that's right... only Jobe."

He abruptly forced himself to his feet. No matter who died, no one would rob him of his chance to go back to his world and avenge his brother. With Ash gone, there was nothing left to tie him down.

He began to brush himself clean, his body feeling increasingly hollow and empty, as if a gentle breeze might strip him down to bone.

But his mission wasn't finished, and they needed to move before they were attacked again.

However, the instant he stepped forward, his body seized up completely. He went rigid, trembling as if struck by lightning.

His mind reeled in confusion, wondering if Noelle had done something to him. But soon his vision blurred, his body became impossibly heavy, and the weight pulled him sideways until he collapsed to the ground.

The confusion thickened around him, though no logical explanation surfaced. This feeling was entirely foreign to him, and worse still, as he lay convulsing uncontrollably, he felt himself being drawn away. Slowly pulled from his own body by a force that seemed somehow familiar.

Am I dying?—he wondered as darkness crept in around the edges of his vision.

# Chapter 170: Queen of Viscount

[ALERT]

The usual voice, cold but tender, echoed in his head, unmistakably inhuman.

[ROTATION]

[You've been fully awakened, Moon Dragon.]

Something awakened within Raiden, but he felt too distant from his own body to respond, trapped within an endless void. Through his mounting confusion, he released a startled cry and stared into the consuming darkness, trying to grasp what was unfolding.

The facts were stark: Ash was indeed dead, and he was the only remaining moon dragon. But his isolation only deepened the confusion rather than providing answers.

The feeling carried no pain but remained thoroughly unsettling. It was entirely foreign to him, as if his very soul was being dragged from slumber and flooded with bizarre energy.

Yet the energy wasn't flowing in from outside. Instead, it felt like something internal awakening, as if it had been slumbering within him all along.

Feeling the sensation pulse through his chest, he found himself reaching for it instinctively. The pressure intensified, but he carried the burden with unexpected lightness.

As awareness flooded through every fiber of his being, Raiden felt his emotions crystallize with newfound clarity. Then his body started to change too, a fire igniting in his chest and creeping outward through his entire form. Yet what truly captivated him was what was happening to his mind.

His fingers clawed at his temples while shattered memories, raw emotions, and crushing despair reassembled themselves in his mind with terrifying clarity. Anger, guilt, and pain mounted within him, coursing through his body as an overwhelming, weary dread.

Fear sent his heart hammering as he fought to focus on one clear thought amid the turmoil: Ash? Sullivan?

Through eyes not entirely his own, he witnessed claws slashing his flesh, his body responding with defensive movements he hadn't commanded.

Before him stood two colossal dragons, nearly eight feet in height—one cloaked in shadows so dense they seemed to steal the air from his lungs, the other blazing with red scales and radiating a pure dark malicious aura as cruel laughter echoed from its fanged maw. Both monsters displayed three menacing red horns.

Though the dragons towered over him, Raiden somehow matched their eye level as they struck from every angle. White claws flashed in defense while he cast desperate glances behind him, fury mounting in his core. At the cliff's edge he stood, with hundreds of infant dragons gazing upward from the depths below.

In an instant, something drove through his heart. Warm blood streamed across his pale scales as his eyes went wide with pain, rage, and bewilderment, despite knowing the body wasn't his.

His gaze found one dragon's face, and recognition struck immediately: Merewen, Dragon of Silence. A cruel smile stretched across his features as his hand remained plunged through Raiden's chest. Behind him, Deathstight, Dragon of Poison, approached with leisurely satisfaction.

"You brought this on yourself. You should've stepped down quietly."

Deathstight barely finished his words before his tail swept forward with devastating force, smashing into Raiden's ribs and catapulting him over the cliff's edge.

Though agony tore through his chest, Raiden witnessed himself pushing through the pain, gliding protectively over the infant dragons before slamming into a sheltered area. His instinct to guard them overrode everything else.

His breath rasped, fury still burning. Through the agony of a ruined heart, he tore into his own limb and flung it toward the hatchlings.

He struggled to his remaining three legs, strength ebbing and limbs moving with increasing sluggishness. When he lifted his gaze to the cliff above, the sight pierced his shattered heart with fresh agony.

The other two dragons stood with his attackers: Dunn, the red Dragon of Decay, and Tancred, the black Dragon of Lava, completing the deadly quartet alongside Deathstight and Merewen.

"I... I am Sullivan." The voice cracked and wavered, foreign to Raiden's ears, yet he felt every word tearing from his own throat.

"The Moon Dragon, Queen of Viscount."

Energy finally abandoned him, and he crumpled to the earth. "I won't be killed by the likes of you," he whispered, the words coming slowly and deliberately. Dark flames began erupting from his scales, consuming him in fire.

The silence that followed was heavier than the wound itself, pressing into Raiden's chest until he thought it might suffocate him.

Then came the light. He awakened in a tiny, helpless body; clumsy limbs, blurred vision surrounded by other dragon hatchlings.

His wings felt weak and unresponsive, lacking any real power. Around him, he sensed and saw flashes of other baby dragons being pulled from their group through shimmering portals.

The entire experience tormented Raiden, leaving him with only one consuming thought: becoming stronger. It felt like the sole memory carved into his consciousness.

Time dragged on, days turned into weeks into months, and his vision stayed fractured. Each day brought deeper waves of depression, yet somehow the desire to grow stronger burned brighter than ever.



Until a portal tore open before him, the first thread of hope he'd grasped in this endless torment. The moment he stepped through, though, it threw him back like a rejection, closing with finality.

This shattered what little hope remained. Caught between fragments of himself—who he was, where his parents had gone, even his whereabouts beyond these mountains and rivers—he understood nothing. His existence had shrunk to waking and sleeping in one solitary place.

The universe seemed bent on his destruction. Two more portals came and went, each spitting him back into his misery. When the fourth appeared, he froze, too shattered to hope.

He waited in terror until his original purpose clawed through the darkness: grow stronger. Fighting through weakness so complete he could barely orient himself, he stumbled forward.

As he stepped through, expecting the familiar sting of rejection, something different happened. It worked.

Overwhelming joy poured through every fiber of his being as he stepped through to the other side. What he saw made his breath catch; there, standing before him in perfect clarity, was himself. Raiden.

The memories came in torrents Raiden couldn't stem: fragments he had theorized about and truths he had somehow known were coming. But as the haze cleared and reality sharpened, so did his sense of self.

I understand everything now, Ash... I do.

Pity washed over him, for himself, for Ash and for everything the returning memories had revealed. Sunlight filtered through his eyelids as consciousness returned, but he remained adrift, trapped in the fog of his own thoughts.

[ALERT]

[TRANSITION COMPLETED MOON DRAGON]

[DRAGON MANA POOL: 2200/5000]

[MANA CONTROL: +200]

[DRAGON AURA: +200]

...

The numbers flickered before his eyes, precise and uncaring. Strength. Stamina. Mana. Cold measures of survival—but they could not weigh the grief still burning in his chest.

He gazed upward into the vast sky, his heart carrying the same familiar ache despite this strange sensation of being reborn with limbs that no longer felt his own.

He never knew that Ash, whose true name was Sullivan, had endured such horrors. Her own primordial dragons had killed her for her throne and their own twisted desires. And yet, her dying wish was for Raiden to avenge his brother.

Though she was dying to save him, and selfishness in her final moments would have been forgivable, she chose to care for him even at the cost of her own deepest wishes.

"I want to... I really do." Raiden's voice came out heavy as he muttered the words. "But until I avenge my brother, I don't think I'll be myself again."

The instant he spoke, his eyes narrowed to deadly points, rage bubbling up from his core. His blue aura pulsed, sending fractures rippling through the air.

"For now, I can promise only this... Deathsight will die by my hand." His tone shifted, growing colder and increasingly sinister. "Once my brother is avenged, your throne will be mine again, and I will protect all who live under it."

"Just as you always wanted." He added in a quieter tone.

Yet a sense of closure with Ash lingered, something that had pierced straight through to his core, though the emptiness inside him remained unfilled.