

The Bookkeeper

Chapter 171: The Promise

Raiden's encounter with Ash's memories didn't just feed his curiosity about her past, or maybe the overwhelming ease coursing through his body and the cunning pixels dancing in his muscles, but it also resolved questions that had been haunting his thoughts.

Sullivan, the moon dragon and sole queen of Viscount—that other world of magical creatures mankind called Dhathopia—stood as the only white dragon wielding both incredible physical strength and magical abilities.

The others were left with nothing but infinite loyalty and affection for their master, their hearts free from any trace of darkness.

The fate of thousands of remaining white dragons seemed unjust, but Raiden understood it partially. This was their binding chain—how the supreme leader of all magical creatures came to power.

Each white dragon offered a sacrifice, and despite being the weakest among dragonkind, they surrendered every trace of strength and magic within them to empower their sole leader, the moon dragon.

Considering it all, the burden was staggering. Raiden rose to his full height, reexamining each fragment of understanding. He had become the sum of thousands of white dragons, holding not just their strength, but their emotions and despair as well.

But this mystery wasn't the only one he could now piece together. The systematic voice that spoke within his head and the blue screen that flickered to life whenever he gained strength or reached an achievement—these were mechanisms reserved solely for the moon dragon, meant to track their growing abilities and strength.

When I think about it, it isn't just some random voice. It's still Sullivan, at least in part... and there's more to her than I understand yet.

He reflected with a gentle expression. The feeling of having a clear mind within this overwhelming exposure, strange and unfamiliar. This was his first time experiencing such mental clarity in this world.

He started toward the outskirts of the mountain island, where his remaining comrades had taken shelter.

Or perhaps it's me... the voice's something forged from the Moon Dragon's advanced form. I am the Moon Dragon now.

His mind felt more composed than it had ever been, as though he was starting to inherit Sullivan's characteristics.

Before he could finally approach the others, he breathed in deeply and let it out, allowing solemnity to wash over him completely as he readied himself to face Noelle and the group.

Whatever you are, I will call you Sulli for now.

[Okay.] the mechanic voice echoed in his head, with a slight hint of humor.

Raiden stepped back with a smile, intrigued by the fact that Sullivan had actually responded to his thoughts.

Despite his evolution and newfound understanding of Ash, their dire situation still hung over them, threatening to collapse like loose stones. Worse yet, after the harsh words he'd exchanged with Noelle about her mother, with Leo there to witness it, their group was barely clinging together.

So they had to keep moving. Their sense of time had been shattered by those encounters with absolute domains, and only the gods knew how much time had passed; still, they were yet to catch even a glimpse of a single page of Aaron.

Raiden weaved through the tangled tree branches and emerged at the shore. The vast blue ocean loomed before him, a gentle wind stirring the waves and carrying cool air toward him.

However, in his peripheral vision, he caught sight of the others forming a circle while Chrono and his companions remained crouched at a distance.

Their disinterest in everyone's company meant little to Raiden, but he was alarmed by how suddenly Soul's dark aura was fracturing and distorting.

A sudden sharp pain shot through his chest as he realized immediately what was happening. He quickened his pace toward them, his mind racing from thought to thought, hoping Speed was okay.

The more he dwelled on it, the clearer he remembered how badly wounded Speed had been. His preoccupation with Ash's death and his own isolation had made him selfish when the situation demanded otherwise.

Now all he could think about was that poor girl, Soul, having to witness her only family like this.

But before he could reach them, everyone turned toward him and immediately recoiled with startled expressions, as if something about Raiden had changed.

Raiden hardly noticed their startled faces, his attention locked on Speed, who lay on the floor with Aeris beside him, channeling her white aura into his failing form.

What he couldn't miss was the broken exhaustion written across Soul's face. She had her hands covering her mouth as though trying to hold in a loud cry, and her dark hair spread across her face, hiding most of her expression.

The current moon dragon, Raiden, walked past everyone else without so much as a glance. When he reached Soul, she suddenly wrapped him in a tight hug, sobbing so hard that Raiden could feel her tears dampening his clothes.

Acting on pure instinct, he pulled Soul close before turning his attention to Speed, watching him intently. The sight made his heart race. Without his black skeletal mask, Speed's face showed something unsettling.

Raiden gulped hard. Speed's mouth was a ruin; most of the flesh melted away, leaving teeth exposed and his mangled tongue visible from where they stood. But the real horror was the blood:

an endless trickle flowing between those hollow teeth, cascading from his nose to join the dried crimson already coating his face.

This made Raiden embrace Soul even tighter, knowing that if he were to witness Ash or his brother in such a horrific condition, he wouldn't have the strength to even look them in the eye.

"Don't move, Speed." Aeris's voice cracked as she gave the order, but Speed ignored her completely, fighting through his pain to face Raiden's direction.

Raiden observed the faint sparkle in Speed's eyes, the way wrinkles creased around them. A cold realization washed over him. Speed was attempting to smile through what remained of his face, through bone and ruin. Even now, he was genuinely happy to see Raiden there.

"This... this is me, without my mask." The words came as barely a whisper, yet Raiden caught every syllable.

"This is what the acid left me with."

A tremor started deep inside Raiden. The sight of Speed's face threw him into turmoil. He remembered when Speed had first explained his situation. Raiden had actually laughed, joking about how he'd been caught doing something as trivial as drinking in a lab. But now... seeing this reality, Raiden felt like the biggest fool alive.

Speed kept that bone smile as his hand scraped through the sand, grasping for his mask. Once he found it, he slowly turned back toward Raiden.

"Do you remember the promise?"

Chapter 172: Eliminated

"Do you remember the promise?"

Speed's question remained suspended between them. Raiden found himself remembering their previous talk, when he'd supposedly vowed to protect Speed's twin sister, Soul, if Speed were to die.

As he reflected, their entire conversation came into focus for Raiden. He watched Aeris gently remove Speed's torn shirt, exposing the angry bruises that bloomed across his chest and stomach, spreading up to his neck in swollen patches of crimson. The evidence made it all clear.

"Your condition got worse because of the cursed air on Hour Island, Speed," Aeris explained, still working to heal him.

Raiden's fist tightened as the memory came flooding back in sharp bursts. Speed's tone of voice, the way he'd suddenly thrust Soul's protection onto him, those sluggish, pained movements as he'd drawn near. He had known his death was coming.

Speed straightened the black skeletal mask in his palm before sending it arcing toward Raiden. When it settled into Raiden's grasp, he turned to stone—motion abandoned, speech impossible.

Speed shoved Aeris's hands aside, holding that death's-head smile with his exposed teeth grinding together, while the fierce confidence in his golden eyes burned undoubtedly.

Aeris startled at his abrupt action, but Speed's hand rose in a calming gesture, silently urging her to settle.

"This asshole won't heal," Speed muttered, pride blazing in his eyes as he gripped his wounded stomach.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as understanding dawned. Speed had likely taken the damage in the Dark Dream, wounded while struggling to break his loop and save Soul.

He'd pushed through the injury regardless, which explained why it was proving so hard to heal. The toxic air of Hour Island certainly wasn't doing him any favors.

"If it had to happen, I'm glad it was while I was fighting to save Soul."

Speed's words came measured and deliberate, deepening Raiden's unease. Not just from what he said, though that unsettled him too, but from the desperate gleam in his eyes. Raiden could see the tears Speed shed beneath his skeleton facade.

"You have to move on... there's still more left for you to do." Speed's voice finally broke as he tilted his head away from their faces. "I... I think my journey ends here."

Raiden's gaze shifted between the mask in his hands and Soul, still held in his arms, her sobs now loud and unrestrained.

Painful as it was to acknowledge, Speed was right. The way he was now, he was dead weight to the group. Truth be told, he was probably holding himself back too—he'd rather his sacrifice count for something than have them burn through their strength trying to save his dying ass.

"I can't be healed." Speed turned in their direction again. "...and that's fine by me." His voice had grown tender.

He broke into harsh coughs, and though Aeris reached toward him, Speed held up a hand to stop her. When the spasm finally eased, he spoke again:

"I don't like you, bookkeeper... but... but I think we both want the same thing for her. For Soul." He coughed out crimson once more. "I don't know what your twisted plans are... but I know you won't hurt her."

His eyes glanced in the direction of the rest. "Ash made you human... the same way Soul did for me."

Raiden inhaled deeply, letting Speed's words wash over him as his racing heart began to quiet. The realization came with startling clarity: Ash had become his family, his only living family. And when they'd been forced into that impossible choice, she had stepped forward willingly.

Judging by what he'd been through himself, Raiden could at least understand where Speed was coming from.

Raiden's eyes swept over his wounded allies with newfound darkness, his hands unsteady as he separated Soul from their desperate hold on each other.

He knew how to fix their situation, but the solution reeked of hatred and rage. He stared at the mask cradled in his shaking hands, his heart strangely peaceful despite the tremor in his fingers, as though all feeling had drained from him. Yet buried beneath it all, Speed's words rang true: Ash had made him human.

"Speed can't continue. He said it himself."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, meeting Speed's gaze directly. "The longer we keep him alive, the more he suffers."

Thick silence settled over the group as those behind Raiden shifted uneasily, recognizing the decision forming in his mind.

"You sacrificed Ash... and now you're going after Speed?"

The silence exploded as Noelle's angry voice rang out, making Soul's gaze snap to Raiden in desperate realization. Her composure finally shattered into uncontrollable tears, and Leo rushed to pull her into his arms.

"Just how cruel can you be?" Noelle's hands balled into fists as she resisted the impulse to touch Raiden.

But Raiden remained facing forward, unmoved. To follow through with such a decision, he needed to be ready for their rage. That's exactly why he'd chosen to shoulder this responsibility himself.

Blocking out Noelle's outrage, he walked over to Speed and dropped to a crouch beside him, their golden eyes locked in unwavering contact.

"He's my slave... which means I can break him any way I like." As soon as Raiden's words left his lips, Speed's eyes blazed with renewed intensity.

"I knew it... you're human, after all."

Raiden couldn't suppress a small smile. Speed knew exactly what he was thinking: that Raiden intended to bear this guilt by himself. And Speed was okay with letting him.

He narrowed his gaze and fitted Speed's black mask over the lower half of his face, covering nose to jaw while his eyes remained stark and exposed above.

Raiden raised his fist, focusing his mana for the killing blow that would stop Speed's heart instantly. Before he could deliver it, Speed's hand found his, stopping the motion entirely. A wave of cold terror washed over Raiden, exposing the part of him that desperately hoped Speed would choose to fight for his life.

However, the forced confidence shining in Speed's eyes indicated exactly the opposite.

"With the mask on... you're Soul's brother."

Speed's voice came in cold and bold. "Protect her as much as I would... I'm counting on your promise."

A smirk crossed Raiden's face under the mask as he felt its supple texture, smooth and comfortable as cotton.

Speed's eyes sharpened, his gaze turning grave despite being moments from death. "No matter what, don't rule out the Dawnbringers."

Raiden felt his heart sink into his stomach, finally encountering something that could pierce his emotional walls. The Dawnbringers, his bloodline's greatest nemesis, but hadn't he already crushed them? What knowledge did Speed possess that escaped him?

"They won't stop. If not you, then Soul."

The second he expelled those words, he was choking on crimson that seeped through his locked jaw, his face contorting with each agonized cough.

Raiden was caught between two needs: his burning desire to learn what Speed had discovered, and the searing pain that made each moment feel like an eternity.

"Please, don't..."

As Noelle spoke again, Soul wrenched herself from Leo's grasp and darted to Speed, falling to a crouch at his side.

"Let me do it..." The words came out broken and raw as Soul raised her hand to strike Speed instead.

What unfolded next defied description: Soul's dying twin, the enraged Noelle, and Raiden all surged forward to stop her, as though something vital had shattered within each of them in perfect unison.

Raiden's pulse hammered as his lips parted, his throat tight and heavy. Though drowning in chaotic thoughts, some part of him remained coldly rational. Their abrupt lunge toward Soul had left Speed exposed—his left side unguarded.

Before conscious thought could intervene, Raiden's fist drove forward, punching clean through to grasp Speed's fluttering heart. Blood sprayed in all directions, drenching Raiden in scarlet.

Raiden's breath came in ragged gasps. Though he fought to comprehend what he'd just done, the reason behind it was crystal clear. He couldn't let Soul carry the weight of killing her own family—not when he'd been crushed under that same guilt for twelve years.

When his thoughts finally cleared, Raiden took in the scene before him. Speed's heart lay still in death, but somehow his corpse maintained its protective hold on Soul as she wept freely, with Noelle motionless at their side, her hand gently placed on Soul's shoulder.

Despite the sorrowful atmosphere weighing down on them all, Sulli's recognizable voice continued to break through.

[ALERT]

[CONTRACTOR ELIMINATED]

[CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 4]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL.]

[+5XP]

As Raiden stared at the blue screen, he felt a flicker of confusion at seeing his active contracts, given that Ash and Freya were dead. Yet consumed by everything happening around him, he dismissed the thought almost immediately.

Chapter 173: Burial

The weight of Speed's death hung heavy in the air, mingling with Soul's tears and muffled sobs. The others who mourned gathered behind Raiden as he stood before Speed's grave, carved into the earth of the mountain island's forest.

Raiden had anticipated Soul's rage, her curses hurled at the one whose hands bore the stain of responsibility. But silence. Only her muffled sobs gave voice to the grief.

Whether he wanted Soul to rage because he couldn't understand his own lack of guilt over Speed's death, or whether he truly cared for her in this moment, was unclear even to him.

Nearly an hour had passed at the graveside. Raiden would have gladly let them grieve all day if they could, but time wasn't on their side.

He tilted toward Soul and pulled off the black skeletal mask Speed had given him. Studying her with calm detachment, his pulse unchanged, he realized it would be best to let Soul go.

He had never viewed her as a hindrance or burden; Soul had always been his trump card. But right then, he wasn't looking at Soul anymore. He saw a shattered, hopeless child who had lost everything meaningful to her.

Though his tears hadn't matched hers, he understood her grief. That crushing weight when everything meaningful turns to dust—he'd been there before.

He closed the distance to Soul, placed his hands on her shoulders, and caught her eyes. Those golden orbs with cat-like pupils, trembling with moisture.

"I'm sorry about all of this, Soul." He watched her struggle against her tears. "Maybe you should return home. Take time to heal."

Her golden eyes widened in shock, tears spilling faster. Raiden's gentle dismissal seemed to pierce her worse than Speed's actual death. The reason was clear to him.

She felt Raiden dismissing her, casting her aside. After Speed's death had already shattered her world, his rejection felt like the final betrayal.

"This has nothing to do with your abilities, Soul." His smile was gentle. "I need you to heal. Come back to us stronger."

His tone turned firm and unwavering, his smile disappearing. "I will return to you, whatever it takes... do you hear me?"

Soul's cries gradually subsided, her hands brushing away tears as she nodded through her grief. Raiden exhaled slowly and embraced her.

Though he might be the most cold-hearted or shattered among them, he wouldn't allow Soul to walk in the path he walked—no personal dreams, her entire existence circling around death.

With painful clarity, he understood his promise would crumble when he eventually returned home, but until that day, he would try his hardest. Even if it meant inheriting Speed's burden.

He surveyed the group: MK and Leo nearby, Noelle at a distance with crossed arms, trapped in contemplation that seemed worlds away from her pre-death urgency. Further back, Levi lounged against a tree, hands buried in his pockets, face a mask.

The group's response disturbed Raiden. He'd murdered their teammate and anticipated more than quiet acceptance. Buried resentment? Or had they truly grasped the necessity of what he'd done?

In any case, he knew it was better to leave their reactions to them and concentrate on the present situation. Someone would have to take Soul back home.

He ran through the options of who should accompany Soul back and who could protect her. The real question was trust.

Noelle had too much at stake to leave—her mother's life depended on this mission, and as Rulekeeper, she belonged with Raiden, the bookkeeper. With her inseparable bond to MK, her guardian was eliminated from consideration too.

Levi was compromised by his grudge against Raiden and his personal vendetta against Chrono, ruling him out entirely. That left Leo as the only viable choice.

The instant Raiden came to that realization, his eyes met Leo's. The discomfort he saw there sent Raiden spiraling into doubt. At last, someone who appeared to condemn his choices.

His hands trembled and clenched as he pulled Soul into an embrace, his mind racing with a troubling question: why was he so fixated on earning others' hatred?

Even so, he knew it was better to speak up and settle this now. There were many more dangerous enemies he couldn't bear to face, like the Huntress.

"How about you take Soul home, Leo."

Leo remained largely quiet, his eyes still studying Raiden's as though he was looking for some way to respond neutrally.

"I trust you to protect her until we come back," he added, knowing Leo was likely to soften when he heard him speak of trust.

The quietness lingered for a long moment before he finally said, "Okay."

The instant he spoke, Raiden pulled Soul from the hug, feeling compelled to offer her more reassurance. "Trust me, I will return."

Soul answered with another quiet nod, and Leo stepped forward, offering his hand, which she gently accepted.

But before they could depart, Raiden paused them, his hand moving to the necklace at his throat.

He intended to come back alive since his mission and promises required no sacrifice of his life, yet he recognized the unpredictable nature of their situation. Just like the circumstances that had killed three of his comrades, he might not survive either.

As he lifted the necklace away, the weighty golden key came to rest in his palm, its warmth flowing through his fingers.

"You're my apprentice, so you must serve as the bookkeeper while I'm gone," Raiden said, hoping to use the symbolic gesture to his advantage.

Leo's lips curved into a small smirk as he accepted the key, and together they headed toward the shore while MK and Noelle trailed after them. As soon as they departed, Levi approached Raiden, wearing his typical stoic expression.

"And how do you expect them to leave?"

"Chrono and the others will set up a teleportation circle for them," Raiden answered, his head cocking to the left as he puzzled over Levi's sudden chattiness.

"Your aura matches Soul's level now..." He stopped before Raiden. "How?"

Raiden let out a scoff and walked past him. He hadn't realized his evolution had triggered such a massive shift in his aura, but he was satisfied it could unnerve Levi.

Chapter 174: Gambit

"She goes by many names... Man God. Joker. And the one that chills me most, Laughing Princess."

Their time on the island had been cut short. After Leo and Soul's departure, Raiden couldn't afford to linger—staying longer risked drawing the Huntress to them. Now they traveled within the gut of the Eastern Leviathan, bound for their next absolute domain: the Gambit.

"Let's just hope luck is on our side this time," Chrono said, shrugging. "It's our final destination. Only the gods know how many pages we lost at Dark Dream and Hour Island."

He sighed and made his way to the leviathan's throat, joining his comrades.

Chrono was right. They had no way of knowing exactly how many pages had been recovered from Lost Child and the Reader. Much as Raiden despised accepting it, Chrono's knowledge extended to only three absolute domains when four Elusive existed. This was their final opportunity to claim a page, and that reality gnawed at him.

His hand found the skeletal mask hanging around his neck as he studied his companions' distant expressions.

Too much blood had been spilled to come away empty-handed.

If they found nothing here, Freya, Speed, and Ash would still demand justice—even if that meant hunting down FIRMO and seizing every page they'd collected in the fallen's memory.

His fist clenched as he braced against the mere thought of FIRMO. The personal vendetta against Ling the Deathstalker remained fresh, and discovering that the dragon he'd been allied with was Ash's sworn enemy had crystallized his determination to end him.

Still, he drew a steadying breath and reined in his anger. The priority now was praying the Gambit remained stable as an absolute domain, and if it had already fallen, determining how they'd escape before the realm devoured them whole.

More than three hours had passed since they'd entered the Leviathan's Path. Without Chrono's sporadic laughter and the banter he shared with his two comrades, absolute silence would have consumed them entirely.

Perched quietly on the Leviathan's pliant tongue, Noelle sat with arms folded, completely withdrawn into herself. Raiden couldn't recall hearing so much as a whisper from her since he'd struck down Speed.

She'd retreated into that same aloof, hostile shell he'd encountered when they first met.

Her guardian MK stood nearby, equally silent, steadily feeding his mana into the creature's flesh to power their journey forward.

A short distance away, Levi and Aeris stood propped against the creature's razor-sharp teeth, the blue luminescence of mucus casting an eerie light around them.

Raiden took his place at the furthest point of the tongue, studying each face in turn. The tight-knit team they'd once been felt like a distant memory; now they were simply people caught in the same web of fate, pursuing the same elusive goal.

But as he brooded, the leviathan's insides gave a sudden, jarring shake, almost throwing Raiden off balance and into the creature's gullet.

In that instant, Raiden's pulse spiked. The tremors could only mean one thing: they'd reached the Gambit, and whatever awaited them would likely be their greatest challenge yet.

He swallowed, cold sweat breaking across his palms as unease settled over him. Then the leviathan's voice resonated through their consciousness: "We've arrived."

A shiver ran through Raiden's entire frame, his thoughts scattering in all directions as he clung to fragile hope. The creature's enormous mouth yawned open, the tongue beneath them gliding steadily toward the gleaming barrier of fangs.

Shafts of radiant light burst from the island ahead, filtering through the gaps between those massive fangs.

The intensity made Raiden's eyes water as he instinctively narrowed them against the harsh illumination. Follow current NOVELS on NovelFir(e).net

A great mountain dominated the horizon before them. This domain offered no welcoming stretch of sand like the others; instead, the restless sea battered itself against a treacherous rocky shore that extended along the mountain's base.

Perplexity washed over Raiden as he watched the massive tongue lower them onto the rocky shore. He scanned their surroundings frantically, but aside from the steep mountain looming ahead, no route presented itself. Maybe there simply wasn't one.

He gulped down his confusion and leaped onto the tongue, dropping onto the rocks below. He had witnessed better scenes before, but this one came with dry, rotting air, and though the descent had once promised a clearer atmosphere, it now brought brain-racking loops and a drenching darkness.

But now... now the sun hung decently above them, and the air—not as pure as that of Solace, but an air that could lull Ash into sleep and draw anyone into dreamful rest.

In no time, he found himself engrossed in his surroundings, staring at the cascading mountain before him and its pointy edges crowned with trees. Everyone else had exited the leviathan, and now it departed, leaving them to face their predicament alone. Still, Raiden couldn't register a moment of it.

His head remained tilted upward, his expression oddly serene, as though he had already forgotten his previous encounters. As though he'd forgotten that not all that glitters is gold.

Indeed, those weren't things he could easily erase from memory, and his fear still lurked within. For all he knew, the mountain could start walking and attack them next. He was certain of that. But still, something was different.

For the first time in a while, he glanced away, his hands reaching for his face.

Something stirred within him, strange yet hauntingly familiar. The instant he stepped onto the island, he could feel it radiating tranquility.

At first, he could only sense danger, but now it was as though his evolution had transformed him to the point where he could perceive beyond mere threat. He could sense peace itself.

A soft smile crossed his face as understanding finally came. He should be weeping, or at least grieving, knowing that Ash had sensed the danger from the very moment they entered that absolute domain, before her death.

Instead, he felt something like relief. At least she had found peace from all those fractured memories.

Raiden let out a sigh. If this was truly a safe haven, if FIRMO hadn't already been here, then that could only be confirmed after they climbed the mountain. But he was going to let his guard down anyway.

"We need to climb this mountain," he said, his head tilting back as he traced the mountain's edges with his eyes, determining if the path would be safe for their ascent.

Then a sharp sound struck his mind. Terror raced through his bones as he jerked backward on pure instinct, his movement signaling the others to be cautious.

Cold sweat erupted on his skin, his breath hitching as he began to doubt everything about the tranquility he'd felt just moments earlier.

Something threatening loomed from the mountaintop.

Chapter 175: Difficult Times

Something threatening loomed from the mountaintop.

Raiden took careful steps backward, his feet scraping against the beach stones as he neared the blue sea at his back.

He could feel the threat approaching, his thoughts spinning wildly. He had to back away for the moment—maybe the mountain was the threat itself. Even so, he scanned desperately for another way out, knowing their situation might be worse than he could fathom.

Who could it be? The Laughing Princess? Or something far worse?

He swallowed, watching his comrades take similar defensive positions, soaked and ready for the worst. Even as fear shot down his spine, he found himself yearning for more choices, his mind already drifting to their fallen comrades.

"What do you think it is?" Chrono asked, scanning frantically around them.

Raiden remained silent, his mind churning with desperate thoughts of escape from the absolute domain.

Through the hazy confusion, Raiden's heart skipped. The threat was approaching even faster now, whatever it was moving at impossible speed.

"Fuck!" he muttered, forcing himself to stay calm even as sweat beaded on his palms.

But through the heated moment, Noelle went still, her face calm and collected as she looked at Raiden. And when her eyes finally moved away, she murmured: "Rule Domain."

The golden aura radiating from her surged outward, forming a perfect sphere that enclosed them all within her domain.

She didn't have to say anything. Raiden could already sense what was running through her mind. She wouldn't lose anyone else—not again. But unlike him, she was brave enough to devise an alternative solution herself.

"Bring it on, you asshole," the Rulekeeper said, her fists tight as she maintained her stance, violet eyes turning deadly.

Raiden looked up sharply, seeing shards of rock cascading down from above, battering against Noelle's golden shield but unable to pierce it.

"Wh—

Raiden's thoughts scattered as a figure dropped from the peak, rocks tumbling in its wake. The figure moved impossibly fast, leaving only a ghostly trail.

Raiden's head snapped toward the blur. Without the falling debris and his screaming instincts, he might have missed it. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY NOVELFIRE.NET

Even so, he understood the reality: depending on the Laughing Princess's strength, Noelle's barrier could only last so long.

"This is definitely a human. The Joker is here." Raiden, the Bookkeeper, spoke quietly, every muscle coiled and ready.

Yet whatever had dropped from the peak was nowhere to be seen, making no move to approach them.

"Don't you think we're being a bit paranoid?" Aeris said out of nowhere, concern and sarcasm mingling in her voice. "I mean, there's literally nothing here."

She let out an awkward giggle, sweat beading on her forehead. She didn't want to die, and neither did any of them. But this couldn't be dismissed as paranoia; there was definitely something.

"There," Levi whispered, his hand indicating their left side. His eyes strained as though focused on something only he could detect.

"Invisibility, huh? Nice trick." His nonchalant tone felt wrong given the danger they faced. "Though it's just a cheap copy of my ability."

They all looked left. Ice coursed through Raiden's veins. If this enemy were male, it definitely wasn't the Laughing Princess. And if even he couldn't get a clear view for analysis, they were in serious trouble.

Levi's eyes narrowed slightly as he reached for his dual daggers, flickering them between his fingers with practiced ease.

At this moment, Raiden was willing to put their differences aside and listen to whatever Levi had to say. And from those squinted eyes and cocky grin, he was most definitely seeing something interesting.

"His yellow crest has no number, no aura." His smirk widened. "I think we've found ourselves someone on Klein el Seer's level of mystery."

Raiden's chest seized tight that very instant. Klein el Seer, leader of the Nightmare Cohort, the very person who had helped them get this far in his own twisted way.

Could they be related somehow? If not, then they were better off calling the leviathan back and fleeing this absolute domain while they still could.

"What did you say?" The voice from the barrier spoke as its owner finally materialized.

The figure was a young man, perhaps twenty years old, with a calm and relaxed demeanor. His blond hair was brushed back casually, framing deep red eyes, and his bare torso was complemented by black trousers and matching boots.

Raiden stepped back for a moment, the threat he had been sensing beginning to subside. But that wasn't what perplexed him most—it was the unnervingly quiet demeanor of their supposed threat.

His chin rested in his palm as he stared at Noelle's domain with careful interest.

"Which part do you want me to say again?" Levi asked with a startled look. "Oh, you want me to repeat the bit where I told you you're nothing but my cheap knockoff?"

"Interesting... so you are the new rulekeeper." The blond figure said, dismissing Levi completely as he stared in Noelle's direction.

"And you are a guardian." Noelle responded, her eyes finding his, as though they both perceived something neither could fully comprehend.

"You know each other?" Aeris said gently, relief evident in her sigh.

It certainly seemed that way from their exchange. But the detached expression Noelle wore as she regarded the blonde made Raiden think otherwise.

"I can't remember seeing you among the portraits of past guardians," MK said, her expression mirroring Noelle's detachment.

"I suppose you're the Rulekeeper's guardian then?" The blonde smiled. And before any of them could utter another word, he spoke again:

"It is obvious you know Klein el Seer as well." He turned and started walking away, moving toward the distant end of the mountain. "Allow me to take you to the princess. She will be pleased to meet you."

Noelle remained silent for a moment. "I don't trust him, but there are things I need to understand." Her gaze was colder than the mountain stone.

"I agree, my lady. He can't hurt you after all," MK added. At that moment, Noelle deactivated her domain and followed behind the blonde without giving him even a glance.

Chrono approached Raiden and placed a hand on his shoulder, smiling. "You never cease to amaze me." He let out a soft chuckle. "I'd suggest you consider who to sacrifice when we're ambushed."

He added before cockily following the others, leaving Raiden and Levi in his wake.

Raiden remained lost in his daze. Chrono's words didn't faze him; he didn't have to speak for Raiden to know what he was thinking. But what troubled him most was if they were being too trusting.

His danger senses were silent, but wouldn't it be wise to exercise some caution? Were guardians really that trustworthy?

"He's a bastard," Levi said, beginning to follow the others. "But I think it would be best if you eased up a bit."

"Particularly after such difficult times."

Chapter 176: Laughing Princess

Following the blonde's lead, they strolled past the enormous mountain—weaving through a narrow rocky route and finally climbing the shortest edge to the mountaintop.

Past their battered fingertips after the tiresome climb, they were welcomed by bent trees, their branches leaning over the cliff, overflowing with green pigments as their leaves swayed gently in the breeze.

The sight was quite unusual, and yet, they could tell the bent nature of the trees was only a plus. Raiden's eyes scanned around, taking in their surroundings, and though stunned, he couldn't trust the blonde. Not yet.

Distance away, through the bent trees, was a massive pavement, stretching in curves within the greenery. Its surface, smoking with heat from the sun.

Not a single word was shared, but watching the blond man maneuver his way to the pavement, everyone else followed.

However, the silence was loud enough for Raiden. Though he could feel from within the serenity, the air was gentle and calming, and his senses struggled to detect the slightest danger—he couldn't shake a sense of unease beneath the tranquility.

His fingers rubbed against each other repeatedly, uneasiness settling in. They had trusted the blonde too easily, and though nothing was apparent, he found himself hoping for proof of his doubts.

This sensation made him wonder: was he accustomed to bad luck?

However, his dark thoughts were disturbed the moment they stepped onto the pavement.

"By the way, call me Iron." The blonde spoke, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"Why are you shirtless, though?" Aeris asked, starting a casual conversation. But through this lightweight atmosphere, Raiden couldn't help but glance around in suspense.

The curved pavement seemed endless, its snake-like body vanishing into the greenery.

This briefly deepened his uneasiness; his hands searched for the skeletal mask around his neck and began brushing against it.

"I already told you... calm down." Levi loomed from behind and whispered. "I won't be killing you anytime soon..."

Raiden gave him a lazy look before letting out a soft sigh. Levi was right; he needed to calm down and trust in his comrades' judgment.

Noelle believes we'll be safe. I should believe that too.—he thought and steeled himself.

"Now, let me take you to the princess." Iron said, leading the way once again.

Without a moment's hesitation, everyone followed. Though he agreed to let his doubts go, he knew they wouldn't simply disappear, and with each passing moment, he braced himself to accept their situation.

Silence was a myth in their walk now. Aeris, for once, was more talkative than ever. She found herself more intrigued in a conversation with Iron. The questions were subtle from the start, but as time passed, she dug deeper into Iron's personal life.

Iron, however, handled each question with measured words. Not too much to answer Aeris's questions and not too little to leave her unsatisfied.

After taking in Iron's measured responses, Raiden found himself admiring the man's composure. Iron was every bit the person he hoped to become.

And for the first time since arriving on the island, he smiled, finally allowing himself to relax in this sanctuary.

A few minutes into their walk, Raiden began to see an unusual pattern in the greenery surrounding them. White two-leaf clover trees began making sudden appearances. Once in a few steps from the beginning, and before he knew it, the bent trees were extinct, leaving only the white trees.

"The Rulekeeper and her guardian are familiar with this, but you... I'm not so sure." Iron settled Aeris's curiosity with a smile.

"That's the Aether Tree. Basically, it's where all magic comes from." Iron added.

Aeris walked toward a branch, an unusual smile etched across her face as she attempted to pluck a leaf. Before she could, Iron stopped her.

Raiden began massaging his forehead, finding her sudden actions unusual and also feeling sorry for her lack of self-control. But Iron continued to wear a gentle smile, as though he was trained for this kind of situation.

"You seem very pleased with yourself, being here." Iron said with obvious sarcasm, and Aeris' expression shifted.

"The tree itself is ordinary, and so are the leaves... only the fallen ones count as aether."

Aeris attempted to speak up, but before she could, Iron hurried his words. "Relax... they'll only fall when they're ready to."

Aeris raised a startled eyebrow. "Even if I cut off the tree?"

Iron, still smiling, gave her a subtle nod. "Yes..."

Raiden didn't know he was going to be this interested in their conversation, but Iron's words cleared up a thought he had when he first saw an aether tree.

When the Rulekeeper, Noelle, was explaining the tree's origin, he saw MK crouch beneath them, picking up the leaves on the floor instead.

"Makes sense... it is the mother of magic and mana, after all." Raiden muttered, but something golden abruptly caught his eye from the distant sky and disappeared.

His body shook for a moment, as though something parried his heart. Yet, his danger detection was quiet.

He began to feel the coldness of his fear. His eyes scanned the sky, searching for what he saw, but there was still nothing. But he could have sworn he got an enormous glimpse of a golden aura. Even for a millisecond, he couldn't mistake an aura.

Were his doubts eating into his mind? Or was there indeed a threat?

Still, he couldn't help but calm himself down. His danger detection was off, and the peace and serenity within the distance was evident. He must be hallucinating.

"We are here, everyone." Iron said as they took their final turn on the snake-like pavement, leading in the direction Raiden supposedly had his illusion.

He began bracing himself, one gentle breath after another, clearing all dark thoughts. He must indeed be paranoid.

However, his mind calmed, and his grimaced expression faded as a faint relief coursed through his heart the moment they went past their last curve.

Before him was a four-story rock mansion, with long stairs leading to its doorway, as the building was surrounded by the white trees, aether, giving it a divine appearance.

But what truly warmed his heart was a little girl with brown hair, covered in a white cloak, glowing in a golden aura with a choker-like tattoo across her neck.

"That... is the Laughing Princess, isn't it?" Check latest chapters at [novel·fire·net](#)

Chapter 177: Bravado

The smile etched across the child's face was profound, her cheeks turning pinkish, as she watched Iron lead everyone toward the mansion.

Raiden had forgotten about his doubts at this point. Well, who cared about paranoia, anyway?! Before him was the cutest thing he had ever seen, resembling a cute doll rather than a human.

But still, Raiden couldn't help but wonder: was she really the Laughing Princess? The Man God?

"No..." Iron wore a soft smile. "This is Meeka."

The moment Iron spoke, an elegant woman between the ages of twenty-six and twenty-eight, clothed in a black tank top with silver armor covering her chest and fetal joints. Her long white hair flickered in the gentle breeze as she brushed it off her shoulders.

Raiden gulped. He hadn't been the type of person to dwell on others' looks, but this... this was something he couldn't ignore. Noelle and Aeris had their share of alluring beauty, but this woman, with her light skin and glowing blue eyes, was every bit as captivating.

Even so, something peculiar nagged at him. The woman's armor was fashioned from what looked like aluminum foil, arguably the most brittle metal he'd ever seen. Yet she wore it with complete assurance.

Was she that assured because she had no aura?

"Uhh... speak of the devil." Iron muttered. "This is the Laughing Princess."

He shrugged his shoulders. "The Joker or Man God, if you will." Google search NoveI(F)ire.net

Her strange demeanor began making sense to Raiden. An Elusive, and the ruler of the absolute domain they existed in; no wonder she was so assured.

"Oh, come on," The Laughing Princess said, walking down the stairwell. Her voice was the perfect definition of succulent: tender in its simplicity. "Quit filling their heads with jargon."

She approached them and wrapped her hands around Noelle's neck with a big smile, as though they knew each other. But Noelle, still lost in her own abyss, remained detached and unapproachable.

But the Laughing Princess wasn't bothered. Not at all.

"Call me Dainty." Her savory voice echoed once more. "You must be weary. Please, join us inside."

Raiden glanced around, a knowing smile crossing his face at the scene. The blissful looks on their faces and their eager compliance said it all—it was obvious he wasn't the only one caught in Dainty's web.

Raiden had anticipated the Laughing Princess would share his level of madness, if not exceed it, given her reputation. But now he questioned what he thought he knew. Still, he was grateful to be here. This was far from a dead end.

Following Dainty's lead past the stairwell into the mansion, they yanked a stone door, its weight indescribable from the deep sound it sent through the air despite Iron pushing it with ease.

That's a hell of a gap in strength.

Raiden's thoughts mimicked his insecurities as he glanced at his grips, wondering if he could push the door at all.

However, his thoughts were interrupted. A cold breeze swept through the air, grabbing his gaze to dart into the room as goosebumps surged beneath his skin. Everything in there was chilly, as though they lived in the snowy mountains.

But what piqued his mind the most was the furniture. Victorian sofas spread across the broad room in countless colors, each accompanied by a polished stone table. A massive chandelier hung over the ceiling, its burning lights flashing in the distance, and the room's vital point was a chimney, its majestic flames burning slowly.

Raiden could count about seven sofas from his position, and judging by how they stretched in the distance, he knew there were more. But still, he couldn't tell where exactly the freezing cold was coming from.

"Make yourself at home," Dainty said and gestured toward the sofas.

The environment contradicted everything Raiden believed, coming to the absolute domain. And sincerely, he was glad the tranquil sensation he felt upon his arrival was right.

But now, the Laughing Princess stood before him, a moment three of his comrades had sacrificed their lives for. He couldn't just lean into the serenity; who knows, each second might lead to losing everything.

The moment the others took their seats, gazing around in awe, Raiden turned his attention to Dainty.

Before her stood Meeka, as her hands rested on her shoulders, both wearing a welcoming smile. To her left was Iron, who was finally putting on a shirt.

Raiden squinted his eyes, bracing himself to ask the question his comrades had seemingly forgotten. However, before he could speak, Dainty spoke:

"So... you're the Bookkeeper of Persia, aren't you?"

Raiden raised a startled eyebrow and took a step back, glancing at himself. Was there something that gave his identity away? His mind wandered, his bewilderment unmistakable.

"Uh—

The words struggled to come out, despite his attempts to force them out. Dainty's gentle blue gaze alone was enough to deepen his uneasiness.

"Don't worry, we will talk about the pages." Dainty's voice cut through Raiden's struggles. "I've got a lot I want to talk over with you, Bookkeeper."

Raiden's expression grew a little darker, his uneasiness slowly fading away. He couldn't tell what caused it; he knew the mention of the pages shifted something within him.

"And you are the Rulekeeper," she added, causing Raiden to turn around—there stood Noelle.

Noelle's dark expression grew even darker. "What are you?" She commanded, her voice raw and unfiltered. "Before it was him, and now you."

Despite her rudeness, Dainty managed to meet her with her usual majestic smile. "'Him'?... you mean Klein el Seer, correct?"

The topic of Klein interested not just Noelle but Raiden as well. The Rulekeeper had no intention of taking a break at this point.

Dainty could tell that, and from a soft shrug, Raiden knew she was willing to start a conversation. With a gentle brush on her brow, she gestured toward Iron to take Meeka away.

Iron responded with a firm nod. "Can I speak with your guardian?" He asked, tilting toward Noelle before walking away with Meeka.

The moment they did, Dainty let out a soft sigh. "I know little of El Seer... just that he's the last member of the Elusive."

Raiden's eyes went wide with shock. He had envisioned Klein el Seer as a formidable presence but never suspected he was an Elusive. Too casual and free-spirited, aside from his mysterious appearance, he could be mistaken for a lonely drunkard. And he... he was the last member of the Elusive?

Dainty placed her on Noelle's shoulder. "Rest assured, Rulekeeper, I will tell you everything."

"You are the very first Rulekeeper to bear the true Rule Domain." She smiled, her long lashes making her blinks seem as though they were in slo-mo. "How can I refuse your request?"

Raiden found her words worth listening to, but from the way Noelle's knuckles popped in her clenched fists and her face contorted, something deeper than their discussion was clearly troubling her.

Her eyes dropped to the ground. "Then why?" Her voice cracked, making Raiden slightly anxious about her words. "If you knew us... why did you let them die?"

"Ash... Ash died because of you!" She yelled, her voice shaking.

Raiden's chest constricted, his eyes shifting restlessly. He hadn't known she loved Ash so much—losing her had genuinely devastated Noelle. But he couldn't escape his own guilt. Ash died because of his choices. The blame belonged to him, not Dainty.

Even through the thick atmosphere, Dainty wore a welcoming expression, her hand still resting on Noelle's shoulder.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she pulled Noelle in her embrace. "I don't know what happened out there, but if the Reader were alive... none of this would've happened."

Her words brought Noelle comfort, but Raiden spotted inconsistencies in what she said. How could she know Ash died in the Reader's absolute domain while insisting she knew nothing else?

He couldn't quite discern whether she was telling the truth... or if he even had the ability to. So, what exactly was happening?

Chapter 178: Mother

Raiden's suspicions showed clearly; he posed one probing question after another, but Dainty's guard remained up. Maintaining her gentle smile, she skillfully evaded each challenge.

...In the end, they were convinced to rest and save the latter for the next day. However, Raiden found her refusal suspicious. Well, repulsive, to be precise.

Even so, locked up in his blunt new room, stirring in gray and a massive comfy bed enough for his army, he couldn't help but take in the moment and relax. After all, he hadn't been in such a freezing room in, like... forever.

Deep into the night, he found himself bouncing from edge to edge on the grand bed. His golden eyes were wide open as sleep escaped him.

If nothing else, the cozy room should've been enough to coil his fatigue away into slumber, considering he had slept on mountains for days. He should be sleeping.

But he could tell that wasn't the case. His mind wandered between meaningless thoughts, but what truly held him captive were memories of Sullivan.

Now, his entire being wasn't his alone. After the Rotate with Ash, not only did he possess the memories of Sullivan, the Queen of Viscount, but also fragments of herself.

Her slow, measured breaths and calm, orderly thoughts seemed to flow into him, and Raiden found himself gradually syncing with her peaceful state.

His eyes darted on the apparent gray ceiling, sweat forming on his forehead as his mind swayed in his abyss of fear.

What if the Rotate transformed him entirely? Would he retain his rage and burning desire for vengeance? Given the serene and compassionate nature of white dragons, might he lose himself to their influence?

This realization alone left him feeling suspended in empty darkness. He'd acquired profound understanding beyond his teammates' reach, but these ordinary challenges still eluded him completely.

A few minutes in his thoughts, he scowled, his hands violently rubbing his dark hair as he rose to his feet.

If sleep eluded him, he was better off exploring the domain of the Man God, Dainty. Ah... the perfect opportunity to confront her and finally extract some truth.

Rubbing the fatigue off his brows, he opened his door to a corridor. Glowing lanterns etched the walls, paving a path through the darkness to his left.

However, the moment he closed the door behind him, something caught his peripheral vision. His stiff neck snapped in its wake, echoing a soft bone-cracking sound.

He was taken aback by the sight, a soft smile playing on his lips as his tiredness slowly drifted away.

He should have known better; he wasn't bound to be the only person to find Dainty's refusal repulsive. A distance away stood Noelle, dressed in her usual black gothic style, as though sleep was never an alternative.

The towering structure featured a living room on each floor decorated with Victorian sofas, and beyond Noelle sat Dainty, an aether cigarette smoldering between her fingers, her head thrown back toward the ceiling, lost in thought.

Raiden took a deep breath and began approaching Noelle. They've been on an awkward collision course since Ash's death, and their rough argument, and now, he couldn't help the need to clear things up. Maybe apologize.

But, before he could near her, she spoke: Fresh chapters posted on [novel火fire.net](#)

"What does it mean?"

Raiden stared as she walked into the room without acknowledgment, his hand still hanging in the air awkwardly while he questioned whether the snub was intentional.

Dainty turned in Noelle's direction. "The rule domain?"

Raiden watched as they engaged in a conversation, Noelle taking her seat while he remained in his awkward pose.

After a moment, he giggled. Maybe it was for the best. He crossed the line when he spoke of her mother so harshly. The silence between them must be a payback.

"There's a word for this... uh, what's it?"

Ah-huh... Karma.

Letting out a sigh, he steeled himself as he began walking to the living room.

"There's a reason my Absolute Domain is called Gambit."

Every Rulekeeper had their Rule Domain restricted to a specific field, and until trapped in their expertise, their abilities were mostly limited. However, Noelle was an exception; she bore the true power of rule.

Raiden absorbed Dainty's explanation, taking his seat near Dainty as she welcomed him with a cheerful expression.

"How?" Noelle asked, scowling in confusion.

"My ability only works in games. I start a game of choice, and I can create new rules and erase any rule."

Noelle's expression grew even darker, as though Dainty's words were foreign. Or perhaps, she never believed she was anything special.

"But my mother had something similar," her eyes narrowed.

Dainty's bright demeanor faltered momentarily, as if processing what she'd just said, her eyes shifting rapidly as her mind raced.

"Uh... it's not possible," her usual expression returned. "... she could've protected the book if that were the case."

Noelle's eyes flickered, as though something within her shifted. "What do you mean?" Her tone was barely audible.

Dainty dropped quiet, the weight of the silence filling the room. Her blue eyes were as gentle as ever, but from a glance, Raiden could tell there was something she didn't want to say.

Whatever it was had real force behind it, something that couldn't be countered by the Joker's hypnotic charm alone. It would shatter Noelle's defenses. Or worse.

Realizing this, Raiden knew he had to redirect the conversation. But Noelle would probably tell him to fuck off or ignore him completely if he said something too random. He'd have to be more tactful with her pride.

"Cut the act. You know we're only here for the pages, so why play host?"

After speaking carefully, Raiden watched Noelle's expression, tracing her features for any sign of offense. When he realized it was safe, he added:

"What's the matter? Aren't you supposed to attack us, like the Lost Child?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows, we might even be working with FIRMO."

"Klein el Seer is on your side, isn't he?" Dainty said, her gaze still fixated on Noelle, not sparing Raiden a glance.

"If that's true, then my fight with you is futile. I can't win."

Her response made Raiden grimace. What was she talking about? Klein wasn't anywhere near here—he couldn't be. So how exactly could they win? Could El Seer really be that strong, even by Elusive standards?

"What do you mean?"

She finally turned in Raiden's direction. "Sure, the Lost Child gets demonic when he wants... but you're alive, so clearly he let you live."

Raiden's heart plummeted, his lips parting in disbelief as he looked at her. What did she mean? That creature had murdered Freya and Speed, and she could respond so casually?

"What the heck?" He blurted.

Chapter 179: A Villain?!

"That's not possible!"

Dainty's casual tone pushed Raiden over the edge, and he found himself voicing what seemed painfully clear: the Elusive, the Lost Child, had murdered his comrades. The revelation struck Dainty like lightning. Her cheerful mask cracked, eyes going wide with horror.

"He's prideful, sure. But that's not the Lost Child."

"Inside his Absolute Domain, he's basically unbeatable if you don't know his weakness." Dainty said, scowling. "He would have killed you all."

Raiden's fist squeezed tight. Freya's sacrifice. The helplessness. Sharp, cutting pain. Thoughts that wouldn't end. Emotions like a prison. And now—she said what exactly?

Before Raiden could explode again, Noelle stirred from whatever trance she'd been in, leaning back against her blue sofa as she spoke.

"That won't help... you trust him, but you haven't given us a single reason to."

Dainty's attention shifted to Noelle's raw tone. She stared for about a minute, her quietness echoing louder, before she finally exhaled. Then, wore her usual charming expression.

She flipped her cascading white hair behind her and leaned into the sofa. Whatever words she was preparing would clearly be painful to deliver.

"How long have we been alive? 200? 220? Long enough to see the world rot."

A scowl crossed Raiden's face as he blinked frantically, anger giving way to stunned disbelief. Dainty looked barely twenty-eight, the others younger—only the Lost Child seemed different. But 220 years? What exactly were they?

"That's how long I've known the Lost Child. And trust me, he hasn't changed." She adjusted herself, fighting the urge to reveal beyond what she already had.

"What are you? A god or something?"

"Ha... ha. We aren't gods—we are humans, like you." Dainty said with an awkward tinge.

Raiden waited in silence as her laughter faded. His instincts screamed that something was amiss. The longevity defied human limits, but that was only part of it. The Elusive harbored greater mysteries—truths Dainty couldn't bring herself to speak.

"Don't fuck around with us... we aren't kids, got it?" Noelle's words cut through the silence.

Raiden couldn't help but appreciate Noelle's presence. He couldn't bring himself to utter a word, only thoughts, bewildered ones at that.

The problem wasn't Dainty; in fact, he was certain she was nothing but a child at heart. Her struggles to contain herself spoke louder—two centuries old... she could have done better. It was rather what they were involved with, something the Elusive themselves couldn't fully grasp.

"I know that..." Dainty began fidgeting with her fingers. Then, sighed. "I don't know..."

She grimaced and held her head up. "Yes, I don't know."

Noelle also seemed to be catching up. Her eyes traced Dainty carefully, nodding in steady understanding with her expression darkening.

"The Elusive... can you tell us about them? And how exactly did you end up with the twenty-eight pages?" Noelle's tone was steady and gentle, as though she were speaking to a child.

Dainty's demeanor shifted once more, a soft smile playing on her lips like usual. "No one had ever cared enough to know."

Noelle smiled. "I do."

Certainly, Noelle Ardit, the Rulekeeper, knew how to be cunning when necessary. Raiden had never witnessed her being so contemplative. Typically, she chose violence or silence. He smirked to himself. Their recent trials had changed more than just him, it seemed.

"Strange how long ages always seem to bring amnesia." Dainty said with a little humor. "But you're in luck; I remember... well, most of it anyway."

She propped her chin on her hand, eyes drifting to the ceiling in thought. "Ah. The Elusive? They were created to pull the four kingdoms together, and, well, to keep order."

"I was then the Rulekeeper... fourteen, I think?" She paused for a moment and shrugged.

"It was Klein el Seer who chose me, stripped me of my duty, and handed me a new position." The latest_episodes are on the NoveIre.net

Raiden's eyes squinted in concentration. So Klein wasn't merely a member but the founder of the Elusive? He could glimpse the future, possibly the past and concealed truths as well.

If Raiden's memory served him, Klein had said that wasn't all he perceived. Could these visions come to him spontaneously, like prophecy?

"We were the strongest each Kingdom could offer... or so they said." Dainty's expression dropped. "But that wasn't the case... there were stronger people. Much stronger."

"Okay... but how did everything come about? You were only a child."

Dainty's eyes darted in Noelle's direction, and she smiled. "We did nothing. El Seer never asked a damn thing of us. Wake up. Train. Eat. Sleep. Repeat. Like machines."

"So... the pages?" Words finally found Raiden.

"...well, until then."

"When?"

"Until he showed up," her eyes glanced at their faces. "Let me say... uhm, until Aaron showed up."

Confusion struck at her words. Noelle and Raiden mirrored each other's bewildered faces perfectly. She didn't seem confident in what she'd said. Had she lost that piece of her memory?

"You don't sound sure," Noelle voiced her concern.

"Well, because I'm not." She took a deep breath. "None of us remembers what he looked like... not even his true name."

She scoffed. "Even the mysterious el Seer..."

Raiden's throat tightened as Aaron's pages came flooding back. If he were the world's only transmigrator, the only person capable of reading English, then perhaps he alone possessed Aaron's secret—that his real name was Milo. Yet could even that be trusted?

"He just walked into our quarters one day. Calm. Gentle. I think." The instant she spoke, her eyes sparkled with excitement as she snapped her fingers.

"Uh-huh, he was a yellow crest bearer. I am certain."

Her explanation was enough for Raiden at the moment, but Noelle, who obviously had other ideas, couldn't stop herself from seeking more details.

"Wait... you let a stranger walk into your quarters? You sure you're really Elusive?"

Dainty smirked. "Well, I did just welcome you into my home, didn't I?"

An awkward silence followed her question, but not long after, Dainty spoke again:

"I think he really was a good person back then. He brought the Elusive together, drew on our strength, and shared in our knowledge."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't have much to offer... other than what I knew about aether. The Reader and the Lost Child had plenty to say, though."

"And all the knowledge he gathered from elsewhere... he wrote it down in his book. What we now call the Book of Aaron."

Raiden frowned, her words hitting him like a brick. He recalled the last page in the book that his comrade Leo had given him.

Aaron had written about his potential fate—madness or return to their world. But Dainty described him as if he'd already fallen to darkness. Could that be what happened?

"He's... a villain?"

Chapter 180: Beyond a Hint

"He's... a villain?"

His words echoed in the stillness. Raiden's vengeful purpose was absolute, but this represented his only route home. He'd accepted the risk of failure, but not the guarantee of it. For original chapters go to NoveI-Fire.net

Both Dainty and Noelle gazed after him with bewildered frowns. Raiden's relationship with Aaron remained hidden from nearly everyone—except possibly Klein, whose future sight might have revealed it. His sudden concern seemed oddly misplaced, given what he should know.

"Uhm... I don't know about that." Dainty's words came in hesitation, her azure eyes locked into Raiden's golden ones.

Relief flooded through Raiden, his exhale carrying away some of the tension as he smiled. His quest for revenge would have continued no matter what, but discovering Aaron retained some humanity lifted a weight from his shoulders.

"Oh, right..."

A flicker crossed Noelle's lips as she visibly fought against saying something. Raiden's gaze found her, and his face clouded over with suspicion.

An awkward strain settled between them, growing heavier by the moment. Raiden would typically brush off interpersonal drama, but something about the Queen of Viscount's power within him was making him achingly aware of every emotional undercurrent.

"I don't know. But that doesn't make him a good guy." Dainty's words cut through their daze, forcing Raiden's attention to her.

"What?" Noelle asked.

"Well... for some reason, none of us can remember a thing about him." She shrugged her shoulders briefly. "He somehow erased our memories of him. I just don't think someone with nothing to hide would go that far."

Raiden shared the others' confusion about Aaron's motivations. Aaron had wandered endlessly, accumulating knowledge in his single-minded pursuit of home—a yearning Raiden understood intimately. But the memory loss was troubling. Was amnesia the cost of escape, was it or something darker?

"What do you mean?" Noelle spoke, maintaining her scowling expression. "You've got everything Aaron wrote down; you're its guardians... can't you figure it out and break the curse?"

Dainty fell silent for a moment, Noelle's question settling in as her mind wandered. Before long, her savory voice cut through the silence.

"Klein gave us the pages to guard. Four went to the Lost Child, ten to me, fourteen to the Reader... and we weren't even allowed to read them."

Identical looks of confusion crossed both their faces. Klein el Seer's dominance was undeniable—every member of the Elusive knew better than to defy him. But the pages themselves were their true chains.

The Lost Child's pages were taken right under his nose, and the Reader met his end within his own absolute domain. Eighteen of the twenty pages had already vanished. This wasn't just a blow to the Elusive's pride—all their sacrifices would be worthless if they failed to secure the last ten.

Studying their faces, Dainty knew precisely what they were thinking. She slipped back into her typical manner, bright and self-assured. Then she spoke:

"The pages aren't yours. They aren't mine either." she said with a smile, confusing Raiden even more.

She rose to her feet, her long white hair stretching on her shoulders. "Klein didn't bring you here by chance. He wants something else from you."

The moment she spoke, she began leaving the room.

Raiden's eyes squinted, taking in her words. Nothing made sense to him at that moment. The last time he spoke to el Seer, he mentioned he couldn't see his future anymore because of the Huntress, an unbreakable force that sought to eliminate potential future threats. And now Dainty claimed what exactly?

"Wait a minute..." Noelle spoke, prompting Dainty to halt and turn in her direction. "If the Lost Child wouldn't kill Freya, then she's somewhere... and you know where."

Dainty glanced at her, her smile slowly widening. "Who knows?" She shrugged and continued to walk away.

A trace of hope lit Noelle's gaze, accompanied by a tender smile. She and Freya had their moments, but her selfless sacrifice appeared to have changed something fundamental within Noelle.

Raiden, however, found no such peace. His thoughts arrived in jumbled pieces, and he realized only Klein himself could provide the answers he needed.

As the two sat there, absorbed in their respective musings, Levi appeared in the doorway, rubbing his sleepy eyes while his feet scraped drowsily along the ground.

"Have you seen Aeris? I'll be needing her." His lazy tone cut through the haze, grabbing Noelle's attention.

"No, I haven't." She responded, and they both began leaving the room.

But Raiden found himself falling deeper into his confusion.

He needed the twenty-eight pages to return to his world, and when he first heard of the Huntress coming after him, this had been his fear. Perhaps his desire was an abomination—one the unbreakable force couldn't allow.

And if Klein had encouraged him so strongly, and not for his journey back home, then what was the reason? But this was only the beginning of his bewilderment... why exactly was the Huntress pursuing him?

This was his solitary abyss. None of his comrades knew his reasons for seeking the pages, and this wasn't knowledge he was willing to divulge. He had to navigate this isolation alone.

He could feel his brain throbbing against his skull, his hands tangling through his hair in frustration as he searched for something to cling to. Something to offer him, even a shred of hope.

The room felt silent, his head leaning back against the sofa, his eyes darting across the ceiling above as he tried to absorb the warmth in the quietness and ease his mind.

However, not long after, a nerve-wracking sound broke from the stone gate behind Raiden, cutting through the silence, and his head jerked in its direction.

Behind it was Noelle, panting as she gripped her knee. Raiden's expression darkened from seeing her alone. An uneasiness swept through him as her condition seemed strange given the carefree expression she'd carried moments before.

"Th—

Raiden's confusion began melting away, consumed by the puzzle before him. Noelle hadn't spoken to him in days, and with that panic threading her voice, something was definitely wrong.

"The pages... they are gone!" The words rushed through her heavy throat.

