

# The Bookkeeper

## #Chapter 81: False Attack - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 81: False Attack

### *Chapter 81: False Attack*

Near evening, with the sun listlessly descending toward the horizon, Raiden and Speed stood on the pavement before the house, facing the broken fountain scattered in pieces just a distance away.

Initially, Raiden wanted to learn a few things about how Speed managed his incredible speed without injuring himself. However, they had barely spent a moment together when a voice interrupted their mission.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Aeris said, leaning against the doorframe.

Raiden turned toward Aeris, and instantly, his blood began to boil with rage. Putting his speed to use, he dashed toward her, seized her by the collar, and slammed her against the wall as the illusion magic cast over the house began to falter.

He was confused about why he was attacking her, but even through that confusion, he knew how much he would love to kill her.

"What are you doing here?" he muttered with a cold tone that complemented his expression.

"What are you saying?" Aeris muttered, trying to catch her breath.

Raiden sneered as he watched her. Ever since he sent her on her mission, she had spoken to him only once. And though Raiden didn't care whether she was alive or dead, seeing her appear before Leo and Levi irritated him—something, some emotion he was just realizing.

"I did as you asked..." Aeris muttered as her face flushed crimson. "Trust me, you want to hear what I have to say."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he gazed into Aeris' trembling eyes. The fear radiating from her needed no words. His gaze then shifted to the slave choker around her neck.

The slave choker he had placed on her would make it nearly impossible for her to lie. But to Raiden, it wasn't about lies—he simply despised her. She was a traitor, after all.

When he came back to himself, he realized he had been pressing her neck hard enough to nearly suffocate her. With a lazy sigh, he released her as she dropped to the floor, gasping for air.

*"Speak now before I change my mind..."*

Speed moved closer. "Let me get her some water."

Raiden gave him a firm nod as he walked past them into the house.

"Okay..." Aeris said, her tone dry as she slowly rose to her feet.

"The assassins have taken the Book of Silence..."

Raiden's expression grew dark. *"What?!"*

Aeris let out a sigh. "The war was a lie. The assassins used it as a strategy to eliminate their unwanted armies while perfecting their plan to steal the book."

"They knew your strengths, your weaknesses, and exactly how to stall both of you." Raiden swallowed nervously as he realized what the Beast God was for.

He then smiled. This wasn't just about a book, and he knew that. But he had suspected something similar during the war. The assassins had a calculated plan to retrieve the two books and dispose of the army they brought. Still, he couldn't just believe Aeris—the kingdom would have informed him about such critical information.

*"How did you know about the Book of Silence when our kingdom didn't?"*

Speed returned with the glass of water. After Aeris drank it, he went back inside.

Aeris let out a sigh. "Because the messengers from the Kingdom of Aurelia haven't arrived yet."

Raiden's expression turned confused. *"How do you know this anyway?"*

Aeris nervously began playing with her blonde hair. "Uhm..."

Raiden gave her a lazy look. How she managed to know these things baffled him, but he sensed truth in her words—not only because she couldn't lie with the slave choker around her neck, but because of his own suspicions.

He had always known the FIRMO organization was hiding something when they requested such a baseless war weeks ago.

He let out a sigh. If this were true, then it was time to fight, because with the Kingdom of Aurelia's Book of Silence gone, the FIRMO assassins were bound to come after him.

"By the way..." Aeris interrupted his thoughts. "You and the book of ashes aren't on their list—at least not yet."

Raiden's expression turned confused. "What do you mean?"

Aeris took a deep breath. "The assassins want something completely different at the moment... the twenty-eight pages."

*"Twenty-eight what?"* he asked, still confused. *"Is that another book or something?"*

"I don't really know, but according to my source of information, the Book of Ashes was never on their list." She continued. "It was the other three books and the twenty-eight pages."

It sounded like gibberish at first, but the more Raiden thought about it, the more it started to make sense.

They sent him the expendable ones—people they didn't need—only so they would be killed and make the kingdoms believe their goal was to attack all four kingdoms, keeping them from uniting.

That was their plan. They didn't want the kingdoms working together.

The Kingdom of Eldon didn't care whether they had their book or not, so when it was stolen, they never bothered searching for it. The Kingdom of Noor had insufficient resources to even protect their book, much less search for it, and as for helping others? They couldn't manage that either.

So the only threats were the Kingdom of Persia and the Kingdom of Aurelia. And if Aeris's words were true, then they didn't want Persia's book either, but they had to act like they did to prevent the kingdoms from uniting.

Raiden began laughing uncontrollably after his realization.

Freya, Levi, the war—all those who were sent after him were bound to die. FIRMO knew they couldn't retrieve the book even if they managed to kill him.

Just like Levi had said after becoming his servant: those poor assassins were meant to die regardless.

Raiden gazed into the sky as night slowly fell. He took a deep breath, smiling. If he was out of their sight, then this was the perfect time to work on finding a way back to his world.

Just as Raiden was lost in his daze, Aeris's choker came off on its own and dropped from her neck. She smiled and glanced back at Raiden.

"I am free now, right?"

Her words snapped Raiden back into reality, and he turned to her. Her question irritated him immediately, but he had already given her his word. At the moment, he knew it would be best to let her enjoy her freedom for now and kill her later. Someday.

*"By the way, Captain Kai is dead."* Raiden shrugged.

"You really did kill him?" She asked with her voice trembling.

Raiden gave her a lazy look. *"You thought I wouldn't?"*

He giggled. *"You will be next."*

She swallowed nervously as she stared at Raiden with an uneasy expression. "Can I... can I work for you once more?"

Raiden sneered, but his expression shifted as he understood. The only person she was betraying to was Captain Kai, but now with him truly gone, she had nowhere else to go.

And worse, if the high court accepted Raiden's proposal for the bloodline ritual that he had requested not long ago, she wouldn't have anyone left to betray him to. She would be broke and useless.

Raiden thought for a moment, his hand tapping his chin. Her situation was perfect for a traitor like her, but... she might be useful. Considering how she could gather information when necessary, he might need her someday. After all, it was best to keep your enemies close.

*"I've been thinking, and honestly, I can't think of a single reason why I would need you."*

"I can heal..." the words rushed out of her mouth. "Such a group like the Guardians of Ashes needs a supporter, like all the great warriors."

Raiden raised his eyebrow. *"And?"*

"I can get you any information you want..."

*"Any, huh?"* Raiden pretended to be lost in thought. *"Sure, but you will need to prove yourself."*

Aeris abruptly gave him a firm nod and awkwardly began heading back inside.

The moment she left, Raiden wore a big grin. Finally, he could truly enjoy the peace while the kingdom remained in chaos.

### *Chapter 82: Bloodline Ritual 3*

Raiden barely had time to celebrate the peaceful zone Aeris's words had granted him. The next morning—supposedly fateful—he found himself summoned to the palace's courtroom by the high court.

Everything seemed usual with the six elders occupying their respective seats and the king maintaining the highest one among them, but two unfamiliar faces stood beside Raiden: a boy and a girl.

The boy had deep, glowing red eyes and rich brown skin, with dark purple, voluminous curly hair styled back with some strands falling forward. The sides were shaved and graying, showing refinement.

He was dressed in a deep maroon, double-breasted waistcoat with his white shirt sleeves rolled up to nearly his elbows, completed by an elegant black cape draped over his shoulders and various golden jewelry adorning his ears, hands, and neck, along with a black glove.

He smiled calmly and confidently, radiating warmth in his golden aura.

The girl, however, looked detached, confident, and a bit confrontational.

She had pale skin with a soft but cold undertone. Her hair was short, a tousled black bob with hints of deep teal at the ends, especially near the neck. She had violet eyes with a piercing, disinterested gaze.

Everything about her spoke of attitude, considering the choker-like cross pendant tattoo across her neck and the cigarette in her mouth. She was undoubtedly rebellious.

Despite her rebellious nature, she wore a glossy black high-collared robe that appeared to be made of leather or something slick, covering her chest, but her golden aura gave it away.

Raiden stood there with his face twitching in irritation, as neither of the two appreciated his presence. Not even a glance. But he braced himself; maybe King Hannes had good news for him.

Before long, the king spoke up. "Thank you for coming, Bookkeeper."

Raiden smirked as finally the two glanced toward him, but the girl's stare was one of disgust, making his cocky expression become forced.

"Before we go into the matters of the day," King Hannes said with a steady tone. "Those beside you are the Guardians of Silence. Noelle Ardit, the current rulekeeper of the Kingdom of Aurelia—so she is technically the bookkeeper."

He gestured toward the man. "This also is MK, the rulekeeper's personal guardian."

Raiden let out a sigh as he finally understood why the girl was so prideful.

King Hannes braced himself. "These two just delivered shocking news concerning the book of silence."

He drew a measured breath, expecting his revelation to land like a blow, but Raiden's expression didn't shift. The man already possessed every detail.

"The book of silence has been stolen alongside the previous rulekeeper, who was Noelle's mother."

Raiden donned a mask of shock, his voice rising with calculated disbelief. *"How? We won the war—how could this happen?"*

King Hannes shook his head, weighted by silent grief. "How this came to be is beyond us, but the FIRMO assassins are out there—and you're clearly their next target."

Noelle glanced at Raiden as she adjusted her cigarette. Raiden narrowed his eyes, his facade cracking as he gestured toward her.

*"Is she seriously going to smoke in front of you?"* he asked King Hannes.

MK leaned forward slightly, his gaze shifting to Raiden. "Forgive me if my lady's actions seem inappropriate, bookkeeper," he said with measured politeness.

"This is actually a traditional herb from our kingdom—aether. It helps stabilize mana flow and is quite common among our people."

Raiden's gaze shifted between Noelle and MK, puzzled by the dynamic. Did MK always speak for her? She hadn't said a word in her own defense.

Hannes made a brief sound to command attention. "Given that our book is now the sole surviving copy, the rulekeeper and her guardian shall serve under your protection to keep it from falling into enemy hands."

Raiden's lips parted in disbelief. Given Noelle's attitude, he could already envision the chaos ahead. He would have much rather dealt with Alora—at least she wouldn't push him to the point of murder.

But scanning the expectant faces around him, he realized negotiation was impossible unless he came clean about the assassins. And he wasn't prepared for that conversation.

But then a smile flickered across his lips. This tragedy was exactly the opening he needed to insist on his real agenda—the bloodline ritual.

His face changed in a heartbeat, adopting an expression of sorrowful appreciation. *"I'm deeply grateful for your assistance, rulekeeper."*

"The pleasure is ours, bookkeeper," MK said, even as Noelle kept her eyes deliberately turned away.

Raiden's fist clenched in frustration, but he managed a strained laugh. *"Now, King Hannes,"*

he said, his tone shifting to something more grave.

*"This is exactly what I was referring to. Even what I thought was peace turned out to be an illusion."*

He held Hannes' gaze steadily. *"We can't put off the bloodline ritual any longer. If death comes for me, let it be while doing my duty, with the knowledge that all is well, not while my enemies laugh over my failure."*

His voice turned ice-cold, causing Noelle to glance up in surprise. *"This is the only way you can honor my family. Otherwise, you've failed as a kingdom."*

The elders made their displeasure with Raiden's words clear, though King Hannes quickly motioned for silence.

"I can see your words come from the heart—they mirror my own thoughts when I first learned of our situation." He paused as Raiden tensed, waiting for what would come next.

"If I can't break the rules as king to make my kingdom stronger, then I'm just a puppet controlled by the throne."

Raiden's pulse quickened with barely contained excitement.

"This is why I've made the decision to proceed with the ritual without the public's knowledge and tell them once it's done."

Raiden breathed a sigh of relief, already envisioning the peaceful life ahead. But then he remembered Noelle would be staying with him, and his expression soured.

King Hannes motioned to two elders, and they quickly approached with a jar of ashes, beginning to trace a magic circle on the floor in front of Raiden.

Once the circle was complete, the elders motioned for Raiden to step inside, which he did. They placed a blade, a seal, and a paper bearing the oath into his hands. King Hannes stood, prompting the other elders to rise as well.

"Read it aloud, Raiden Night," Hannes commanded, and Raiden nodded solemnly.

Raiden drew in a steadying breath.

*"I, Raiden Night, sovereign of my blood and bearer of its legacy,  
do bind all who descend from me to the sacred duty of the bookkeeper.*

*By my will, let this charge pass from parent to child,  
unyielding through the ages, until the end of our line or the end of the task.*

*So let it be remembered. So let it be done."*

As soon as he finished reading, King Hannes nodded. Raiden sliced his palm with the blade, bloodied the seal, and let it fall into the magic circle. Flames erupted immediately, engulfing both the seal and the circle.

But Raiden had to stay inside the circle as blue fire consumed it around him, enduring until nothing remained but ash.

The elders motioned for Raiden to offer his hand for treatment, but his regeneration had already sealed the wound. Since exposing his abilities would cause complications, he took the bandage they offered and wrapped his palm himself.

"Everything is complete now... the Dawnbringers won't have grounds to target you anymore."

Raiden felt genuinely grateful—they had shown him a path to peace, after all.

*"Thank you,"* he said, inclining his head with a slight smile.

Hannes nodded in acknowledgment, still standing with the elders.

"Now go and protect our kingdom. The fate of this world rests on you," he declared. "Ask for whatever you need—the rulekeeper has already declined having knights for protection."



Raiden looked at her with approval. That was a clever decision, and he started to think she might not be so bad to have around after all.

"Now make this world proud."

Raiden stayed where he was, rubbing his bandaged palm, while Noelle stood quietly with the aether between her lips.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," MK said, bowing respectfully.

"You may go to the hideout now," King Hannes said, and Noelle and MK took their leave without delay.

Raiden remained where he was, his expression unreadable, wondering whether they knew the location of the teleportation portal to the hideout.

After a moment, he sighed and started after them. Now he had two options: retrieve Leo and Levi, or burn down the Dawnbringers' headquarters.

#### *Chapter 83: Guardians of Silence*

*"Bloom."*

Raiden muttered as his bed and the canopy around it dissolved into dark smoke. The sensation was brief—shorter than he'd hoped—but he could feel his bed as solidly as if it were truly there.

He sighed and extended his hand to stroke Ash's head. Her wings settled peacefully while she exhaled a smoky breath, wearing a gentle smile.

When Raiden came home with the guardians of silence yesterday, she'd been awake and energetic, jumping around with more joy than he'd ever seen—but she only lasted an hour before drifting off to sleep again.

Her mysterious behavior left Raiden even more confused and frustrated, but he couldn't afford to dwell on it. Not only was it pointless, but Noelle and MK were causing such a racket in the corridor that his irritation was reaching a boiling point.

He tugged at his hair in frustration, gritting his teeth. He'd offered them rooms downstairs, but Noelle had chosen the two rooms right next to his—she took the one immediately adjacent to his room, while MK settled into the one beyond that.

Raiden quietly got to his feet to tell them to keep it down. The moment he opened the door, there she was—Noelle, leaning casually against the door across from his with the aether cigarette between her lips.

Raiden forced a polite smile. "Could you keep your voice down?"

Noelle faced him with her chin raised, removing the aether that rested in her mouth. "Sorry, who are you?" she asked in Aurelian.

Raiden began to laugh softly, though irritation edged his voice.

"This is the bookkeeper—we met him yesterday," MK said as he approached from his room.

She sneered. "I hate these barbarians... though this one looks too weak to be a guardian," she said in Aurelian.

"Yes, my lady," MK replied in kind as they moved away, heading downstairs.

Raiden shook his head in disbelief. They clearly thought he couldn't speak Aurelian, but that wasn't going to be as much trouble as Noelle's behavior.

He went back to his room, rehearsing how to stay calm around them while maintaining his authority in the house. It was his territory.

He prepared to head downstairs and find something to eat. If necessary, he'd send Aeris after Leo and Levi, who still hadn't returned. And with the storm partially settled, he could finally prioritize returning to his world.

As soon as he headed downstairs, Speed and Soul were sitting in the living room. *"Are Leo and Levi back yet?"*

Speed's ears narrowed a little, completely ignoring the question. "I hate the new girl." His tone was cold and uncanny—utterly sincere.

But his eyes widened instantly. Maybe he could spark some fun after all and assert his dominance in his own house.

*"Do you want to fight them?"* Raiden asked, coming down the stairs.

There was no trace of fear in Speed's eyes. "Without a doubt, but I might kill her."

A twisted smile spread across Raiden's face, showing all his teeth. Unless Noelle could see auras, Speed's turtleneck would conceal his neck, making her underestimate him.

But then his expression dropped instantly. He needed to display his own power to gain Noelle's respect, not showcase his servants.

He let out a sigh. *"You can fight if you want, but I'd like to enjoy it."* He scoffed irritably. *"At the moment, I have more important matters to think about."*

Just then, Aeris emerged from her room, yawning sleepily.

*"Hey, Aeris."* He turned to her while walking to the kitchen. *"Do you know anyone who understands multiverses or dimensions—different realities?"*

She shook her head while rubbing her eyes.

"I do." Speed spoke up, and Raiden immediately turned to him with a spark in his eyes, wondering why he hadn't thought to ask him sooner.

*"Uh... tell me."*

Speed gave him a lazy look. "Not until you arrange a fight between me and the new girl... she insulted Soul."

Raiden let out an annoyed sigh. With Soul involved, Speed wasn't going to let this go, and Soul herself seemed to support the idea, judging by the big smile on her face.

Soul was the most fragile among them, and might well be his savior someday. Getting revenge for her shouldn't have been a debate.

*"Aeris, grab me some bread when you get to the kitchen."* Aeris gave him a firm nod and began heading toward the kitchen door behind the staircase.

Raiden smiled again. *"You should have mentioned this earlier, Speed. Disrespecting Soul won't be tolerated."*

He gestured for them to follow and began heading outside. Speed held Soul's hand as they trailed behind him.

At the entrance, Raiden could see Noelle and MK moving back and forth across the field, as if they were measuring the land.

He sighed and put on an unhinged expression as they approached.

*"I don't know how things work where you're from, but here, no one disrespects anyone, especially my comrades,"* he said in Aurelian.

Both MK and Noelle turned to him, startled that he could speak their language.

Raiden squinted as he stared directly into Noelle's violet eyes. *"The last person who did that ended up dead."* He smirked. *"But I believe you're too strong for that."*

Noelle pulled the cigarette from her mouth. "I don't insult the innocent."

Raiden's eyebrows shot up in surprise. *"Really?"*

*"Never mind... still, you two need to settle who's right through a duel."*

Before either MK or Noelle could respond, Raiden initiated the duel. *"Fight!"*

The moment Raiden spoke, Speed appeared before Noelle, his fist driving into her gut and launching her into the ground. Before she finished bouncing across the earth, Speed was already positioned for another strike.

MK stood frozen, mouth slightly agape, watching as they pummeled Noelle too fast for his eyes to follow. He clearly wanted to intervene.

*"Be a gentleman, MK,"* Raiden said cockily, taking a piece of bread from Aeris.

MK turned to him with a sigh. "I'm not worried about my lady. I just don't want her to kill your comrade."

His words didn't match the situation, confusing Raiden as he turned back to the fight. He couldn't see clearly, but he could see Noelle's golden aura fluctuating wildly.

"Rule Domain," Noelle muttered through the chaos. Raiden's eyes widened in shock.

The way her aura flowed from her body to form a sphere around them was unlike anything Raiden had seen. The speed and precision left his mouth hanging open in confusion. The next thing he saw was Speed frozen in place, unable to move, while Noelle looked paler than usual, gripping her gut with gritted teeth.

"Really, it turns out your friend here is very strong. He managed to make Lady Noelle react in pain."

Raiden glanced at MK—the pride etched across his face was unmistakable.

"You see, my lady has the ability to create and change rules, not only in her domain but even outside it."

Raiden gave him a lazy look as he ate his bread.

"This girl again?" Freya's voice caught their attention as she approached from behind.

"I fought her years ago at the kingdom's festival—I lost."

Raiden's expression shifted as realization hit. "She's the one Levi said you lost to at the tournament?"

"Yes... and she still has that strange ability to alter the rules of reality itself."

MK smiled, watching Noelle with admiration as she drove her fist into Speed's gut.

"My lady's ability isn't strange. It is the power each rulekeeper must possess. Her mother had it, and so did the two generations before her."

Raiden nodded in understanding, still enjoying his bread. This explained why she was called a rulekeeper instead of a bookkeeper like him. He shrugged.

"So what would have happened if she didn't have the same ability?" Freya asked.

"Every generation has a rulekeeper, so they would've searched for someone with rule abilities or kept the position open until one appeared."

Just then, Soul nervously tugged Raiden's black shirt, making him turn to her.

"I want to fight her," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Raiden glanced at the fight again, and seeing how badly Speed was faring, he understood his sister's concern.

"Okay, Soul." He turned to her with a smile. "Go kick her ass."

Soul said nothing more and walked toward the duel. Within range, he unleashed an overwhelming presence, sending a huge wind blowing outward.

MK swallowed nervously as sweat began forming across his face. "I knew she had an incredible aura, but nothing like this."

Freya gave him a confused look while Raiden's eyes moved between their faces, enjoying his meal.

"Why do you think she has those stabilizing seals all over her body?"

MK said nothing as they watched Soul casually walk into Noelle's domain. Instantly, the golden sphere flickered and shattered.

Shock was etched across MK's face as he watched Soul grab Noelle by the collar and toss her out of her own domain.

"She did it so casually..."

Raiden smirked, seeing an opportunity to earn his respect. *"You said Speed was strong, right?"* He giggled. *"Well, he's supposed to be the weakest among us."*

MK looked even more confused.

"I really want to fight her again," Freya said and turned to Raiden with a big grin. "But do you know what I want the most?"

Her laughter became menacing. "A fight between you two... I would really enjoy watching you brats kill each other."

Raiden gave her a lazy look. He wasn't opposed to the idea either—he wanted to test himself against Noelle, too.

However, his danger detection suddenly kicked in. People were approaching, but he couldn't tell whether they were allies or foes.

#### *Chapter 84: Advent of the Pages*

The weight of danger filled the air.

Soul helped Speed aside while MK helped Noelle to her feet, and they made their way into the house. Raiden remained outside, patiently awaiting whoever was behind the aura he'd been sensing.

He couldn't trust Aeris completely, but he believed her words about assassins given the circumstances. Plus, he knew the approaching figures weren't assassins.

Was his bloodline ritual already identifying them as enemies?

Raiden activated Gaze Beyond to get a proper look at the approaching threat. His vision searched through the forest, but as it turned out, he couldn't reach beyond three miles.

This made him uneasy as he stood still, fingers twitching, lost in thought.

"I think..." Freya said as she looked through the distance with her gaze beyond activated. Raiden's expression turned grim as he wondered if her sight reached farther than his.

"Those aren't intruders... it's Leo and Levi."

A sudden wave of relief surged through Raiden, forcing a soft smile onto his face. "*Are they injured or something?*"

"No," Freya said casually. "Levi has his usual cocky smile, and I think he's teasing Leo." She smiled.

"Leo's wearing a white shirt with gloves and a bandage on his nose," she said, narrowing her eyes slightly. "He doesn't look great, but he seems fine."

Raiden gave a firm nod, but his expression grew somber. He was expecting them to come with Alex.

He reached into his pocket and felt the badge Alex had given him for their bargain. Raiden had expected him to come for it so both of them could finalize the deal.

He sighed. *"I guess I'll have to keep it for a while,"* he muttered.

Soon, Leo and Levi emerged from the forest, walking across the grassy field in the distance, their yellow auras flowing gently around them. The smiles on their faces gave Raiden warmth—it was as if he now saw them as something beyond mere servants.

When they got close, Freya moved toward Levi, and Raiden remained still, while Leo approached him.

The dark circles under his eyes spoke volumes. It was as if he hadn't slept in days.

*"You don't look well,"* Raiden said with a concerned expression. *"Do you have time to explain what happened?"*

"Don't worry, it wasn't from torture or anything. Alex made sure of that. I was just working through something," Leo said with a smile.

He stood before Raiden and stretched out his hand with his eyes closed, while Raiden stood there, hands in his pockets, staring at him in confusion.

Leo began murmuring incantations. Raiden could see his mana overflowing, leaving white traces at the edges of his yellow aura. Flames sparked on Leo's hand, and Raiden's eyes widened in confusion.

*"I thought these could only be done in the 5th realm."* Raiden checked Leo's neck and saw he had reached level 6. Impressive, but he still wasn't at level 5 to use elemental magic.

Leo opened his eyes with excitement. "Yes, I thought so too, but then an elderly maid began visiting me in my prison cell."

The sparkles in his eyes made Raiden smile; it was as if Leo had waited all this time to share this information with him.

"My fight with Captain Kai was so intense, it forced me to level up mid-fight." His smile widened. "Once I did, I realized I could easily nullify 200 kg of weight. Just one strike was enough to cancel out his ability."

His expression changed instantly as he reached into his pocket and drew out a piece of brown paper for Raiden.

"I suppose the maid knows you." Raiden's expression darkened, nervousness washing through him. "She said I should give you this when I get back."

Raiden quickly read the words on the paper, and his eyes went wide as his heartbeat quickened and his hands began trembling.

The words were written in English, the language from his previous world. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. If the message was in English and delivered by an elderly maid, then was it really who he suspected?

*"What did the woman look like?"*

Leo considered this. "Nothing really stood out about her except her white and blue maid uniform."

It was her. It was indeed her.

Raiden looked back at the page, his heart pounding. However, after reading it more carefully, his expression grew more confused.

The handwriting was exactly like Milo's handwriting from the Book of Aaron. Raiden rushed to read it completely.

It read: "I had no option but to write this on the final page of my diary, because I've made some mistakes I should have corrected.

"Throughout the years, I've worked with many people, but few were able to help me get closer to returning to my world, and I am yet to try everything I've discovered. It might lead to my madness or even death; that's why I want to write this to my fellow transmigrators.

"There are twenty-eight specific pages in the diary that explain how to read the devourer books, particularly the Book of Ashes, since it's the most powerful, and how to grow stronger beyond human comprehension.

"My fellow victims of this unfair interchange of life, if you are reading this, read those specific twenty-eight pages. They not only stand a chance of getting you back home, but also contain all the knowledge you would need in this world."

Raiden's eyes widened upon realization. Aeris said the assassins were after the twenty-eight pages, not the Book of Ashes.

He understood it all. Before they could read the four books, they needed those pages on how to do it, and maybe even how to retrieve and read the Book of Ashes.

His head started hurting from overthinking, so he rubbed his temples.

"You can read that?" Leo's voice cut through his daze, but Raiden answered with his own question.



*"I left the Book of Aaron in your care, right?"*

Leo gave him a firm nod. *"Get it for me."* At the command, Leo immediately hurried inside the room.

Raiden needed to verify if the pages missing from the book were indeed twenty-eight. Unable to wait any longer, he followed Leo inside.

MK and Noelle rested on the couch, but Raiden stood in the living room without noticing them, his hand shaking as it repeatedly struck his thigh.

If this were true, then not only were the twenty-eight pages essential for him to return to his world, but he also needed to ensure the FIRMO assassins never got their hands on them.

Otherwise, they would target the Book of Ashes next, and worse, gain access to the entire Books of the Devourer.

Before long, Leo returned with the book of Aaron. Raiden grabbed it and started flipping through it. Page after page, counting the torn pages, everything felt like déjà vu.

The moment he finished, he clenched his teeth in irritation. The missing pages were exactly twenty-eight, confirming everything he'd read. But if that was the case, where had the page he read come from?

Was the elderly woman who supposedly transmigrated him the one who wrote it? Did that make her Milo? Why would Milo bring him to this world if all he wanted was to help?

He squeezed his eyes shut and released a sharp scream of frustration.

Regardless of what it was, he knew he had to get the pages before the assassins did. And just as he'd said after arriving in this world, he didn't care who had killed him or who brought him here—he just wanted to go back and avenge someone dear to him.

He let out a sigh. He knew what to do, but where was he going to start?

*"Can the people Speed spoke of help?"* He slapped his forehead. *"The black market is my only option, then."*

#### *Chapter 85: Advent of the Pages 2*

"Well, I don't know much about them, but they're called the Astro Society." Speed relaxed on the sofa while Raiden stood before him.

"Back in Kingston City, they used to pester people with their beliefs, and they're also fans of the book of Aaron."

Raiden smiled. Getting a start wasn't as hard as he'd anticipated. He just hoped they could offer some real help.

*"You'll have to take me to Kingston City, then, Speed."*

Noelle interrupted from behind as she came down the stairs. "What is going on, bookkeeper?"

"You've been acting strange since yesterday—you know something about the assassins, don't you?"

Raiden ignored her. He had already forgotten she was even in the house with them, and dealing with her wasn't part of his plans.

"Rule Domain."

Noelle's domain formed around them in an instant. Raiden began to swallow nervously, sweat beading on his face. Within Noelle's domain, she could get everything out of him. He didn't fear telling the truth—he feared revealing more than he intended.

"You have to tell me now." She walked toward Raiden, her aether cigarette resting in her mouth. "What's going on?"

Raiden stood still, his eyes darting around, hoping for the domain to force the truth out of him, but nothing happened. He then smirked. She could only change and make rules—she couldn't issue commands.

*"Well, it's about the FIRMO assassins. They're after specific pages from the book of Aaron."*

"The twenty-eight pages?" She asked with a confused expression while Raiden met her gaze with a similar expression of his own.

*"You know about the pages?"*

"Not really, but my mother did."

Raiden raised an eyebrow, a soft smirk crossing his face. People around him seemed to be connected to the pages somehow, which was good.

*"Then we need to speak with your mother. If the assassins get those pages, they could read the books."*

Noelle gave him a lazy look. "I thought you were the bookkeeper. Weren't you told the assassins took my mother alongside the book?"

Raiden's eyes widened in realization, then dropped immediately. *"How, though? Did she sleep with the book or something?"*

She let out an irritated sigh. "I knew you were pathetic, but not to this degree."

Raiden's face began twisting with irritation. Only common sense kept him from striking Noelle.

"I don't know what they did actually, but my mother had her rule domain around the book." She stepped closer, and Raiden looked down at her due to her smaller frame.

"They must have done something to consume my mother's domain with her and the book inside it."

Raiden nodded in understanding. The assassins found Noelle's mother challenging because of her domain, and since it surrounded the book, she didn't need to fight—the moment they entered was an end game. So they had to take her domain with her trapped within it to get the book.

Raiden let out a sigh. *"Can you undo your domain now?"*

Noelle stared directly into his eyes. "One thing—will you be going after the pages?"

"Yes."

"Two birds with one stone, then." Her eyes dropped to the floor. "I need to prevent them from getting the pages and also rescue my mother."

Raiden swallowed nervously. If she stayed behind, it would be better since she was also a guardian, but with both of them gone, who would protect the book?

*"Uhm... don't you think that's a bad idea?"*

She deactivated her domain. "What?! If you can go, then why can't I?"

Raiden let out a sigh. *"There has to be a guardian around..."*

"Then you stay. You don't have any agenda except stopping the FIRMO, right?"

Raiden began gritting his teeth.

"Well, I do."

She wasn't wrong. Raiden had no other excuse since he couldn't tell anyone what his actual reason was.

*"Okay, sure... I'll take you."*

"Take me where? If you're talking about the pages, then I'm sorry, but you aren't coming with me." She said and walked past Raiden.

Raiden opened his mouth with a startled expression. How could she make such a confident claim in his territory? But her commanding personality only intrigued Raiden.

*"You know where to go, right?"*

She turned to him and took a seat. "No... the other guardians will be taking MK and me."

The moment she sat down, Speed rose to his feet and left the room.

*"You know those are my people, right?"*

"Yes..." she said and relaxed on the sofa. "As guardians, they can't refuse to work in favor of the books' safety."

Her words made Raiden burst into uncontrollable laughter, his eyes filling with tears as he clutched his gut. Noelle was confused but unbothered by Raiden's abnormal reaction.

*"You really thought they were guardians?"*

He tried to stop laughing, but the amusement made it impossible.

*"The only person here you can call a guardian is Leo, and trust me, he wouldn't help."*

"What are you trying to say?"

*"Every person here is my servant, whether by contract or by some agreement."*

He narrowed his eyes, staring into her violet ones. He wasn't comfortable going this far, but he knew it was necessary.

*"Everyone does as I say and does what I do."*

"Are you saying you have contracts with more than six people?"

Raiden smirked.

"That's not possible for someone at number 7..." She rose to her feet and began leaving the hall. "Next time, get a better lie."

Raiden just stared at her as she left, and at that moment, Freya returned from the kitchen, stuffing a few snacks into her mouth.

*"Can you call everyone here, Free?"*

She gave him a firm nod as she walked away. Raiden was taken aback. He never knew contracting four people was out of his league... Leo would have told him that. His life was confusing, and yet he had so little time to figure it out.

Before long, everyone came to the living room and took their seats. Raiden sat on the staircase, facing them.

He cleared his throat. *"You were all made aware of the twenty-eight pages yesterday, right?"*

Leo responded while the others simply remained seated. *"Speed claims to know a society who might give us a lead on where to get them."*

He paused to let his words settle in. *"This isn't something I can stay away from, so I want to get out there, get all the information I need, and if possible, retrieve the pages before the assassins do."*

He sighed. *"I'll be going with some of you, of course, but I must have people stay to protect the house and the book."*

Leo raised his hand. "As an apprentice, I don't have any option but to stay, right? I will be staying."

Raiden gave him a subtle nod.

"Soul will also be staying..." Speed added.

With Soul and Leo around, he believed the house would be secure. They were more than capable.

*"It's settled, then."* He rose to his feet. *"I will request the needed funds today, and we will leave tomorrow."*

They all responded positively, rose to their feet, and began to walk away.

*Chapter 86: Advent of the Pages 3*

Raiden and the others were fully prepared to leave the house, Ash perched on his shoulder, when Noelle and MK decided to join them.

*"Funny, I could've sworn you weren't tagging along,"* Raiden said with a sarcastic edge.

"Forgive my lady's impudence yesterday," MK said, his expression regretful. "We would be honored to serve you on this journey, bookkeeper."

Raiden smirked. These were the words he had been waiting for since their arrival.

*"Well, we must walk through hell, though..."* Raiden said, leading his comrades out of the house. Without a moment's hesitation, Noelle and MK followed.

Leo and Soul remained at the entrance of the house, watching as the group slowly disappeared into the forest.

Finally having a clear goal to get back home should have been thrilling for Raiden, but it wasn't. He was happy, sure, but not in the way he wanted to be.

He was mostly filled with confusion and frustration. If things were as he believed, then he wouldn't need Ash's power as much anymore—meaning he couldn't afford to dwell on her. What worried him most were the twenty-eight pages and where they might take them.

The goal was simple enough—get the pages first, prevent a worldwide catastrophe, and go back to his world. But why would someone who supposedly got him into this mess help him? Was everything a trap?

Despite his mind racing with unanswerable questions, he forced himself to act casual, hands tucked in his pockets. Speed mirrored his posture as they walked, while Levi and Freya chatted up ahead and Aeris, Noelle, and MK trailed behind.

With Freya and Levi's help, they made it out of the forest in under an hour. They encountered some goblins and slimes along the way, but the monsters didn't pose much threat—they were too afraid to attack.

But when they emerged from the forest, the scene made Raiden's eyes sparkle. Everything seemed peaceful and serene.

Two young men were in a small wooden rowboat, gently drifting across a clear, turquoise sea. The water was so transparent that colorful fish and patches of coral were easily visible below the surface.

The coastline they approached was dotted with white sandy beaches and tall palm trees casting shade. Rocky formations and lush green islets peppered the distance.

It seemed like the perfect place for a summer vacation on a remote tropical island. It was dreamlike.

*"This is Coast City, huh?"* he muttered with a smile, eyes darting around.

They began heading to their left, following the same direction as the men on the boat.

As they walked, Raiden couldn't help but think about how much he would have enjoyed this coast if he'd known about its serenity. It would have been the perfect escape from all the confusion and chaos. But now it was too late. Maybe another time.

It didn't take long to reach the main city.

Even from afar, Raiden could see it was bursting with life and architectural charm—a stunning Mediterranean-style cliffside town overlooking the sparkling blue sea.

The buildings were stacked organically up the rocky terrain, their red-tiled roofs and pastel walls catching the sunlight. Narrow stone pathways and stairways wound between them, creating a cozy labyrinthine maze.

Boats bobbed gently in the harbor below, the water shimmering as it kissed the cliff base.

Dense greenery surrounded the entire town, blending nature with human habitation beautifully.

Compared to Persia City, this was just a village, but its cozy environment was something Raiden would have loved. The closer they got to the city, the busier the sea became—clearly, most of the citizens were fishermen.

Both Raiden and Speed wore soft smiles as they walked into the city's main alley.

"This is your first time, huh?" Speed spoke for the first time since leaving their estate.

*"Yes... I bet you've been here many times."*

"Not really, I think twice at most."

Raiden nodded softly in understanding.

The streets weren't as busy as Persia City's, and the people seemed more approachable and happier. Merchants had set up mini shops along the streets, selling everything from fish and vegetables to other essential goods, while offering services ranging from tutoring and fortune telling to strip dancing.

Raiden's eyes darted from side to side, taking in the new beauty. However, it didn't take long before his danger detection activated, ringing loudly and prompting him to turn back instantly. A thief was trying to steal Ash off his shoulder.

Before Raiden could even react, Noelle struck the thief in the neck from behind, sending him crashing to the ground.

"You owe me," she said, aether resting casually in her mouth.

Raiden was confused since he hadn't even asked for help. Nevertheless, he sighed and patted Ash on the head.

"Oh, I forgot to mention... the city may be beautiful, but it's filled with bandits and thieves." Levi gave a slight shrug before smirking and winking. "But don't worry, you are with the Shadow of Noor after all."

Raiden and Noelle stared at Levi with nearly identical sneers, disgusted by his cocky personality.

Just then, a carriage came by. Levi hailed it and gestured for them to enter. Raiden remained motionless for a moment alongside Noelle and MK, who were waiting for him to board first.

But the carriage seemed too small for their needs. There were seven people, and judging by the size of the black carriage, it could only accommodate about four.

As he stood there, Aeris approached him. "I think it can take all of us." Raiden turned to her with a confused expression. He wasn't going to cram himself in there with everyone... the sweats.

"They usually take about eight, but I can get another carriage if you prefer."

Raiden watched as Speed, Levi, and Freya climbed in with ease.

*"I don't see many other carriages around. How long would it take to find another one?"*

"I can't tell—probably a few hours," Aeris responded.

Raiden studied her, wondering if she was looking for another excuse to run away.

"No, let's take it."

Raiden gestured for her to take her seat. When she did, he walked over and peered into the carriage. There really was enough space, just like Aeris had said. This made him wonder if he'd become a spoiled brat from all the royal treatment.

With a sigh, he took his seat beside Speed and Aeris by the window—three on one bench. MK and Noelle sat with Levi and Freya on the other side, four on that bench, with Noelle positioned directly across from Raiden.

The carriage began rolling toward the western side immediately, but the frustration on Noelle's face made it clear how uncomfortable she was.



"How long will this take?" she asked in Persian.

But no one responded—in fact, none of them acknowledged her words, which made Raiden giggle.

*"How long until we get to Kingston City?"* Raiden asked.

"Four hours or less," Speed replied. Noelle's face began twitching with irritation, which only made Raiden happier.

The carriage rolled silently for almost an hour as they exited the city completely and entered the forest. However, Raiden began sensing something that made his eyes dart around repeatedly. There was danger approaching.

*Chapter 87: Advent of the Pages 4*

There was no fear in Raiden's eyes.

This was a cruel world, and what he had witnessed went far beyond the threat of simple bandits. Instead, he was curious, wondering what new tricks these bandits might have.

He called out to the driver to stop the carriage, and it halted in an instant.

*"Bandits are approaching,"* he said, and everyone's eyes began darting around.

The driver, however, wore an interesting smile. Raiden at first mistook it for eagerness to fight the bandits. Perhaps he had something planned for such circumstances—this was his daily route, after all.

But after a closer look at the smile etched across his face, Raiden knew that wasn't the case. The driver had set them up. He and the bandits were in it together.

But that only made Raiden smirk, and soon the bandits were appearing one by one on the street.

The others were as calm as Raiden, carrying on as usual despite his warning about the threat.

Raiden turned to Levi. *"How did you manage to survive all this so well, Levi?"*

Levi shrugged briefly, expecting Raiden to know about it already. He simply turned invisible.

Raiden let out a sigh and got out of the carriage as he gently placed Ash on the seat. Meanwhile, the bandits emerged with cocky expressions, their swords and weapons resting on their shoulders.

Raiden began stretching his body. *"This is the perfect time for some experience points..."*

He walked toward the driver. *"I'll be killing all of them, and just so you know, we won't be paying for the trip either."*

The driver sneered, and Raiden slapped him hard across the cheek. *"Don't act stupid."*

Over a dozen bandits surrounded them, as he stood there, and one of them dashed toward Raiden, aiming his sword directly at his head.

But before he knew it, a heavy wind blew, and Raiden's fist was slamming into his chest, launching him into the ground. All it took was a single bounce on the surface to finish him completely.

Fear swept through the bandits, but they didn't falter. A scarred, muscular man glowing with white aura was the next to approach Raiden. He left his axes hanging midair as he let out a scream of desperation.

Even though he was not a threat, Raiden casually delivered two swift strikes to his chest while his axes hung midair, giving him no time to adjust.

The bandit dropped to his knees, his weapons falling to his sides as blood began trickling from his nose. What followed was him coughing up a chunk of blood before he dropped to his left in an instant and took his last breath.

The terror in the bandits' eyes deepened this time, and they didn't spare a moment before running away.

Raiden turned to the driver to see him trembling in his seat, sweat forming on his forehead. Raiden smiled once more.

Before his expression darkened in an instant. He heard nothing from the system. He'd expected an increase in experience points after killing two people, but there was nothing.

He let out a sigh of disappointment and climbed back into the carriage. The moment he sat down, Noelle gave him a watchful look, as if she suspected him of something or perhaps realized something about him.

However, the carriage began rolling, and Speed spoke up. "Since only commoners take this road, bandits of this caliber are considered the strongest."

Raiden understood that, and his expression said it all. He got five experience points whenever he killed five goblins, but if two humans got him nothing, it really spoke of how weak they were.

The carriage continued to roll peacefully without any problems. That's when Raiden understood something—it was the drivers who brought bandits to rob passengers, and whatever money was made was shared between the bandits and the driver.

That explained their safe journey, even though the forested route from Coast City to Kingston City should have had at least one or two more bandit attacks.

Before long, the carriage began rolling into the city as children approached through narrow cobblestone streets, begging for something.

Their clothes looked worn out, while a select few among them wore relatively modern clothes. This was the first time Raiden had seen something like that. His blood began to boil with irritation, so he didn't bother to look at them this time.

His eyes took in the infrastructure around him. The buildings had a distinctive European medieval influence, featuring timber-framed walls, steep gabled roofs, and clay or tile shingles.

The carriage then stopped at a large archway that appeared to be part of an inn.

Raiden got out of the carriage, his eyes darting around. Though the city wasn't as attractive as Coast City or even Persia City, based on how Speed had spoken of it, he'd expected something worse. But this had a warm and soft atmosphere, despite the unpleasant smell from the commoners.

The driver didn't bother to question them for his money and drove off. But Raiden barely cared about that—something else entirely troubled him at that moment. Did he hate commoners? And if so, why?

He had no answer to his own questions, but he knew he didn't like something about how they simply accepted their fate and continued to live in filth. If he was fine with Speed and Soul, it was because they had fought against their fate as commoners and won.

[Papa...] Ash said as she finally woke up, nudging him with her wings flapping gently and her tail wiggling.

*"Hey, you're up?"* He cradled her in his arms. *"How was your sleep?"*

[Okay, papa...] her soft voice echoed in Raiden's mind.

Raiden turned to see the others already entering the inn and sneered in annoyance. He was the one who had to pay for everything, and yet they left without telling him anything.

The inn had lanterns lit around it. Its wooden sign creaked gently in the breeze, with "The Sleeping Fox Inn" written on it, hanging from an iron hook at the entrance.

Without a doubt, it was a place of friendship, perhaps where midnights ended with comforting sounds of laughter, clinking cups, and fireworks.

As he opened the door, a soft chime of a bell greeted him, followed by comforting smells of baked bread, stew, and old wood.

The moment Raiden stepped inside, the others were already speaking with the innkeeper. With a gentle smile on her face, she asked how their journey went, but Noelle wasn't having it. Even from afar, Raiden could see her asking for the rooms already.

The innkeeper wasn't quite pleased with her behavior, but kept her expression open. "How long will you be staying?"

Raiden was close enough to hear but didn't know how long they'd stay, so he blurted out, "Three days for now."

The innkeeper turned to him. "Okay, dearest." But her expression dropped. "Forgive me, but have you been here before?"

Raiden knew what she was talking about, and it wasn't about whether he'd been there before. As the bookkeeper, it was normal that people would recognize his face from the post-war ceremony.

"No, no..." Raiden replied.

The innkeeper smiled once more, but clearly she was confused and couldn't recall where she'd seen Raiden before.

"For all of you, that would be 420 Persa," she said, forcing a smile.

Raiden paid without hesitation, and she politely guided them to their rooms.

Raiden was soon shown to his room upstairs, and the others to theirs. The room was warm and glowing, with polished wooden floors, overhead beams, and a stone hearth crackling with fire.

It had a quilted bed, a small writing desk, a window overlooking the moonlit street below, a few candles, and a washroom to the right.

Raiden let out a deep sigh and sat on the bed.

*"Let's rest for now, Ash."* He set her down on the bed. *"We go on a journey tomorrow."*

[Okay, papa...]

*Chapter 88: Advent of the Pages 5*

Raiden and the others stood before a secondhand bookshop. There were no flashy signs, just a velvet curtain, a brass bell, and a door etched with constellations. It seemed meant only for those who were supposed to find it.

*"This doesn't look appealing."* Raiden said with a sneer.

"I can search around for better options," Aeris suggested.

Raiden gave her a firm nod. *"Yeah, and Levi, make yourself useful as well."*

Levi instantly vanished as Aeris began walking away from the alley.

"MK, try to get us something. I'll handle this with him," Noelle told MK, and he graciously walked away.

The place looked so small that even the remaining four wouldn't be able to find space, and there were already people inside from what they could see.

"I'll walk with Freya; maybe we'll find something," Speed said, and Raiden gave him a firm nod.

At that very moment, someone came out of the shop. It was a woman in a blue cloak etched with random zodiac symbols.

"Apologies for the delay," the woman said respectfully. "You may enter now." She motioned toward the entrance.

Raiden and Noelle exchanged glances, though neither moved. The whole scene felt familiar, reminiscent of the astrologies from his world—except those hadn't carried this same unsettling quality.

Raiden took a deep breath and entered, Noelle right behind him.

Inside, the space was bathed in soft twilight hues—navy, silver, and deep purples—illuminated by floating lanterns designed to mimic stars. The ceiling bore a zodiac sky that seemed to move with the passage of real time.

There were low, circular tables ringed by plush cushions, and rocking chairs with half-finished quilts hanging over their backs.

At the corners stood two women in similar attire to their guide, and by the wall stood another who was clearly their leader.

"Welcome to the Astro Society," the leader said, smiling as she gestured for them to sit.

Once again, Raiden and Noelle exchanged glances, though confusion flickered across Raiden's face. It was as if Noelle only acted after he had already made his move. He couldn't quite grasp why, but the feeling that she was treating him like a servant nagged at him.

"Please, no smoking in here," the Astro leader told Noelle, but her words went unheard.

With Noelle around, Raiden couldn't help but feel like he was a better person. Her actions seemed to follow no principles at all; she just said whatever she wanted, whenever she felt like it, with no consideration for others. She was that flawed.

However, after a long moment of letting the woman's voice fade into the distance, she removed the aether from her mouth without another word.

It seemed miraculous to Raiden, and he couldn't help but wonder if the Astros had an ability that compelled people to obey.

"Can you—

The woman shushed Noelle, and Raiden looked at her as her gaze dropped to the ground, clearly struggling to stay calm.

"This is the society of peace and acceptance. Many people in this world refuse to learn beyond our established concepts," she said with a storytelling cadence.

Raiden listened quietly, absorbing her words and hoping for something more substantial.

"There are many hidden truths in this world. Where have all the people gone who reached zero and transcended mortality? What did those strange words in Aaron's book mean—the ones no one could understand?"

Raiden smirked.

"There are worlds beyond our own, and the stars tell us that's where all righteous souls ascend to... different worlds, different concepts. These are things we must love and appreciate."

Raiden could tell right away they were wasting their time with the cult, but Noelle remained surprisingly calm, like an obedient child, which contradicted her usual behavior entirely.

"I know you're here out of curiosity. Perhaps you doubt this world for what it is. If that's the case, then join us... let's unlock these mysteries together."

Raiden sighed. *"Sorry, but I think we're in the wrong place..."* The woman's expression became unreadable. *"Do you know where the tavern is?"*

Speed had already told him how hard it was to deal with these people, but with the right words and determination, they could shake them off.

The woman remained silent for a moment, her eyes meeting Raiden's. "A tavern?"

Raiden adopted a convincing expression. *"Yes, we were told there were some around here..."* He gestured toward Noelle. *"My comrade here was trying to inform you, but you didn't let her."*

The woman seemed lost in thought for a long moment—like a robot rebooting.

"Okay," she said, gesturing toward one of the girls in the corner. "Take them there and make sure they get what they came for."

Raiden immediately stood up, with Noelle following suit as they began to trail behind the girl. Raiden glanced at Noelle, still puzzled by her sudden change in behavior.

*"I didn't know you could actually be nice to people."*

"Shut up," Noelle replied and put the aether back in her mouth.

The girl made just two left turns while they followed behind, and suddenly they found themselves in front of a tavern.

The tavern was located at the city's town square, built with weathered stone foundations and thick timber frames.

Its heavy wooden door hung open, revealing a chorus of sounds from what were probably the drinkers within.

The girl held the door open for them to enter when a young man, likely in his mid-twenties, emerged from the tavern. He didn't look like a drunkard in the slightest.

He had long, wavy, tousled dark brown hair flowing freely behind him, and wore an unbuttoned dark green shirt with a loose collar. His facial expression suggested a confident and dreamy demeanor, but what truly stood out were his eyes.

His eyes were hidden behind a wide black blindfold wrapped around his head, and strangely, no aura radiated from him despite his yellow crest.

Neither Raiden nor Noelle spoke, but they could both feel the confusion that permeated the atmosphere.

"Hey, it's you," the mystery man said, flashing a casual smile as he put his arm around Raiden's neck. He looked at the girl.

"They came for me, you can leave now," he said, dismissing her with a wave.

The girl stood motionless for a moment, then finally turned and walked away.

The man released a heavy sigh. "You really got yourself into trouble there," he smiled.

Raiden remained confused, not only about the man's friendly demeanor but about how he had managed to see them with his eyes blindfolded.

"Who are you?" Noelle asked before Raiden could.

The man's expression fell immediately, and he withdrew his hand from Raiden's neck. He studied both of them for a while before putting his smile back on.

"Come in and let's talk..."

#### *Chapter 89: Advent of the Pages 6*

"The name is Klein el Seer," he said with a bow, then stepped behind the counter where Raiden and Noelle had seated themselves. He served them water.

Klein had dismissed everyone from the tavern, leaving them alone, but an unsettling atmosphere still permeated the room.

No aura with no mana crest would be reasonable, considering most commoners Raiden had encountered had neither. What made it worse was that Klein's crest showed no number. But having a crest while lacking an aura was puzzling, not only to Raiden but to Noelle, too. Despite her unbothered expression, her eyes betrayed her curiosity.

*"Klein el Seer, huh?"*

"Yes, that's the name," he said with a smile as wind ruffled his hair. "Are you sure water is all you want?"

"Everything about you is unusual. The way your hair flickers is too dramatic; you're blindfolded, and yet you can see perfectly—you can even distinguish colors," Noelle said coldly, standing up and fixing Klein with a threatening stare.

"No aura, and not even a number," she said, removing her aether from her mouth.

"Who the heck are you?!"



Raiden blinked repeatedly as he watched the exchange. Klein braced his elbows against the counter, rested his chin on his fists, and gave Noelle an affectionate smile.

Raiden was baffled, not only by Klein's reaction—Noelle was right to question him, after all—but by Noelle's abrupt change. She had been perfectly calm just moments before, so why was she suddenly confrontational with Klein?

"You better speak now!" She added.

"Calm down, would you?" Klein said as he stood upright and reached for a bottle of wine on the shelves behind. "I literally just saved you from those creepy Astros."

Klein filled Noelle's glass with wine, picked it up, and outstretched his hand toward her. "Take it..."

Noelle stayed motionless, making no attempt to take the glass. Raiden sighed, knowing Noelle was right. They needed answers, so why had Klein stepped in to help them at all?

*"I think it would be best if you answered her question,"*

Raiden said, his eyes narrowing a little. *"You stepped in for us when we needed it, even going so far as to dismiss everyone in your tavern."*

Raiden nodded toward the glass of wine. *"And now you're offering free wine..."*

His voice grew deeper, making Noelle turn to him in surprise.

*"Our presence intrigues you, doesn't it?"*

Klein broke into laughter. "This is why I like you, Raiden."

"Raiden? We never told you our names..." Noelle's bewilderment was evident.

Klein let out a sigh. "Come on, I am Klein el Seer, nothing passes me."

Klein's name should have been a dead giveaway to Raiden, but he was giving him the benefit of the doubt. Even being a seer didn't explain all his strange qualities.

*"So you can see the future?"*

Klein touched his bottom lip, appearing lost in thought. "That would be an understatement."

Raiden's eyes widened. He didn't want to entertain the possibility that Klein could see everything, because that would be impossible and likely a god-tier ability.

Are you saying you're a number zero or something?' Noelle raised an eyebrow. "You look perfectly human to me."

Klein smiled. "You guys can leave now; your friends are looking for you."

Raiden held Klein's gaze while Noelle just walked away. He was waiting for something, some words to prove Klein could actually do what he claimed—something deeper than the surface-level comments he had already made about himself.

After a moment of holding each other's gaze, Klein's smile widened. "I will see you soon, Raiden... sooner than you think."

"And take care of your dragon," he gestured at Ash who remained dormant on Raiden's shoulder.

Raiden remained silent, continuing to stare at Klein for a moment before rising to his feet and heading out of the tavern while Klein waved enthusiastically from behind.

The moment he stepped outside, Noelle was waiting for him at the entrance.

"What if he knows something about the pages?"

Raiden barely heard Noelle's words. He walked past her and headed down the alley they had returned from, his thoughts spinning. It felt like Klein was toying with him. There was no way Klein knew everything—if he did, he would have known how desperate Raiden was to get home and that he didn't actually need Ash for anything.

He smiled to himself. "He's probably a fraud," he muttered.

Neither Raiden nor Noelle spoke after Raiden ignored her question. Before they knew it, they had reached the inn without uttering another word.

As soon as they walked in, they spotted the others seated at tables to their right, enjoying freshly baked bread and stew.

MK approached Noelle. "You don't look good, my lady... What's wrong?"

She walked past him and took her seat, Raiden following suit. The moment he sat down, Aeris, who was on his left, turned to him.

"As for the search, I found nothing helpful in this city, but I was told Sheon and Westland City would be our best options."

Raiden turned to her. Aside from Nyx and Persia City, Sheon and Westland City were the only remaining options, and both lay between Coast City and Persia City. It would

take about two days to reach even Westland, the closer of the two; the landscape was that vast.

"We are on the right track then," Levi announced, his tone prideful. "I heard there's a cult in Westland called the Transmit Cohort, and they could help."

That put a subtle smile on Raiden's face, though he doubted this would be any different from the Astro Society.

*"We leave tomorrow, then."*

"No one knows where they are, so we might have to ask around," Levi said with a teasing smirk.

Raiden didn't care much about the struggles—if arriving there would give them a lead on the twenty-eight pages, then that was all that mattered.

He leaned back in his chair as he realized Noelle was staring at him. He didn't know what the problem was, but he assumed it was because of the awkwardness between them when they'd returned.

Still, he didn't dwell on it as much as he did the mystery surrounding Klein. What if Klein knew everything and all Raiden had to do was ask? That wasn't hard to believe considering Klein had welcomed them for literally nothing, but what if he did it because he wanted Raiden to ask for what truly mattered to him?

He ran his hand through his hair in irritation. *"If he really knows everything, then he knows how irritated I am right now."*

*Chapter 90: Advent of the Pages 7*

"There is something you must know," Levi said as he stood beside Raiden. They waited for a carriage alongside the others, with commoners in ragged clothes swarming around their feet, pulling at their shirts for at least something to eat.

Raiden turned to him. "It was said there are people who call themselves Nightmares."

"They practically own Westland City to some extent, and when stronger visitors arrive, they test them before allowing entry into the cityscape."

Raiden raised an eyebrow. *"What do you mean by that?"*

"Exactly what I said." Levi gazed at Aeris as she hailed a carriage. "If we meet their standard of strength, we'll be tested."

He glanced at Raiden. "They keep their city safe that way."

Raiden shrugged.

Levi muttered, "Let's hope they don't notice us. It's better to pass unnoticed than to be tested."

Raiden's attention shifted to the approaching carriage. He gave it little thought, knowing this city was the most secure of the six.

Raiden was still standing there when he felt a sudden touch on his shoulder.

"My job is done, right?"

Raiden turned left to look at Speed, his expression puzzled.

"I only came with you because Kingston is my city. Now I have to go back home and take care of my sister," Speed said firmly, his gaze steady.

Raiden smirked. Speed's distant eyes told him everything he needed to know. He hadn't enjoyed a moment of their journey because Soul wasn't with him.

*"Sure... take care though."*

He gave Raiden a firm nod and walked away. With a heavy sigh, Raiden approached the carriage and climbed in, sliding into the window seat next to Freya and Levi. Across from them, Noelle and MK joined Aeris, with Noelle sitting directly facing Raiden.

The carriage started moving as Raiden's gaze shifted outside. Klein el Seer still weighed on his mind. Guilt ate at him, but he knew there wasn't much he could have done. 'A seer who knows everything'—the mysteries surrounding him were too significant to ignore.

The carriage buzzed with conversation, but Raiden barely noticed. His elbow pressed against the window, chin propped on his fist as he gazed outside, lost in thought. After a while, a smile unconsciously formed on his lips.

His focus shifted from his inner turmoil to the natural world passing by—trees flanking the roadside, squirrels, birds, and even small insects that would dart across the road only to scatter at the carriage's approach.

They filled him with a sense of warmth. Though nothing unusual from what he saw on a daily basis, they spoke to him differently now. The way they sensed danger and retreated—that was what he should have done. If he hadn't met Klein, that was exactly what he would have done.

He barely glanced at the others, and when he did, it was to snatch his share of their meal before Freya wolfed it all down.

Before long, it was already night. The roadside beauty had vanished into darkness, but he barely cared about that now. Levi's words from before their journey echoed in his mind—they were in Westland's territory, which meant if the rumors about the Nightmares were true, they could appear at any moment.

He asked Levi for some space, lifting Ash from his shoulder and setting her on the seat beside him.

He needed to clear his thoughts and maintain focus, despite the carriage's constant bouncing and swaying as it rolled over the rough terrain.

To have an organization control access to their city in the name of peace sounded logical until he considered it further. What if the supposedly powerful visitor posed no threat at all, just as they didn't? What troubled him most was whether King Hannes knew this, and if he did, why he chose to ignore it.

His thoughts did everything but let him think clearly, and he knew it. His danger sense triggered, sending his body into a cold shock. Intense heat flooded through him, his chest constricted as he fought for breath, and sweat broke out across his face.

"Stop!" he commanded, and the carriage halted immediately.

Everyone looked at him in confusion as he gripped his chest. He had never experienced danger that made him feel this way before, and given the threat approaching, it should have been strong enough to wake Ash—yet she kept sleeping peacefully, a soft smile on her face.

*"I don't know what's happening, but someone powerful is approaching,"*

he muttered, stepping out of the carriage.

The driver sat trembling, seemingly more terrified than the rest of them.

"Do you think it's the Nightmares?" Levi asked, standing behind Raiden, who faced the forest to their left, hands in his pockets.

*"I don't know, but you must get the driver under control."*

"You should know I'm already at it," Levi said, turning invisible instantly.

As soon as he left, Raiden could sense the aura drawing nearer. The closer it came, the more his body twitched and his legs trembled.

It's just one person, so why?—he thought, trying to keep his composure.

Soon, the moonlight revealed a figure in a straw hat, walking with one hand on his sword's hilt. His other hand held his black robe, which draped open to show his lean, ripped torso. He kept his eyes downward, staring at his black trousers and geta sandals.

Raiden swallowed nervously. Like Klein, this person had no detectable aura, though his golden crest glowed in the moonlight beneath his disheveled dark hair.

"He's just like Klein—don't you think he sent him?" Noelle leaned closer to Raiden.

*"I don't know..."* Raiden murmured without looking at her.

The enemy lifted his head and looked at them. His expression remained calm, showing mismatched eyes—one piercing blue, the other gray. A smirk played on his lips around a piece of straw, and a scar marked his bottom lip beside it.

Meeting his gaze directly sent euphoria coursing through Raiden, a twisted smile spreading across his face.

At that moment, their opponent's gray eye glowed, and Raiden instantly took a step back, eyes fixed on the floor. They all watched as something resembling Raiden's shadow separated from him and formed a circle in front of the enemy.

He giggled, turned, and began to walk away.

"No, you won't!" Noelle shouted, trying to go after him, but the shadow suddenly took human form, twisted smile and devilish expression included.

Its hands were positioned on its shadowy body as if resting in pockets, and despite having no facial features or skin, its confidence was unmistakable.

Raiden's fear disappeared in an instant, confusion taking its place. The others shared his bewilderment as they looked from the figure to Raiden and back again.

*"Is that me?"* Raiden asked, his confusion clear.

#### *Chapter 91: Advent of the Pages 8*

Raiden could sense it; it was him. But why would their opponent create a version of him for them to fight?

Raiden didn't have long to think before his eyes widened in terror. His shadow was right in front of him, staring at his face with its devilish expression unmistakable.

It all happened so fast that none of them saw the shadow move, only discovering it before Raiden in the next instant.

Raiden instinctively attacked, but the shadow easily evaded without taking a step. What came next was its fist connecting with Raiden's gut as it grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to remain motionless.

Though gentle, the strike felt like a concrete ball had been driven into his gut. He coughed out blood as goosebumps rippled across his skin, his eyes darting around in confusion despite the devastating pain.

Noelle activated her domain in an instant, and the shadow immediately began struggling to move. Its hand fell from Raiden's shoulder, forcing it to remain still.

Raiden seized the chance and created distance between himself and the shadow, clutching his stomach as he dropped to one knee. Aeris ran over to heal him.

MK's red eyes lit up instantly, his golden aura forming into a massive hand as he gestured toward the shadow, wrapping it in a tight grip.

Freya's flames blazed as she dashed toward the shadow with a determined scream and struck it across the face, but it simply continued wearing its menacing expression. Noelle also followed with a strike of her own.

What came next was a barrage of strikes aimed directly at the shadow's head.

As they fought, Raiden was being healed while trying to process everything. The shadow took every attack they threw at it. Clearly, Noelle had created a rule that it couldn't move, but nothing happened to the shadow—it was as if the strikes had no effect whatsoever.

Raiden's eyes widened in realization as he rose to his feet, pulling away from Aeris's grasp.

*"Stop!"* he called out. They all paused mid-strike and turned to him.

Raiden let out a sigh and began massaging his forehead. If the shadow was him, then it was probably thinking like him. So all he had to do was put himself in the shadow's position. If he were in such a situation and knew their attacks wouldn't have much effect, then he would take them head-on until they were all exhausted and the domain broke.

He lifted his head and met the shadow's menacing expression with an even more daunting one of his own.

*"You have to leave it to me."*

Noelle looked at him in confusion, while Freya and Aeris simply stepped out of the domain.

"What do you mean?"

*"This is practically me, and the best person to fight me is me."* He turned to Noelle. *"Just set a rule where it can't leave the domain and leave everything to me."*

Noelle sighed, shrugged, and placed her aether between her lips. MK released the shadow as well, leaving just the three of them within the domain.

*"Let's see what you are capable of, Raiden."* He murmured in excitement and dashed toward it.

Once within reach, he struck, but the shadow easily dodged. This only deepened Raiden's resolve, his twisted smile growing wider. He turned invisible instantly, and using the momentum from his failed attack, he propelled himself forward and drove his leg into the shadow's gut, sending it sliding backward.

Just like Raiden, it had instincts, so it reacted just in time to reduce the impact. But due to Raiden's Soul Condemn ability, its body began fluctuating.

Raiden smirked. "Just like I suspected, it's Jack against Raiden."

He concentrated his mana into his legs, and before the shadow could readjust from the previous attack, Raiden had already closed the distance. He slammed his fist into its chest, the impact tearing a hole clean through its torso.

However, the shadow acted through the impact and grabbed Raiden's hand. Raiden's teeth gritted in an instant—he knew he was in trouble, but the shadow's devilish smile grew darker instead.

It slammed its leg into Raiden's ribs, forcing Raiden to turn visible in an instant. He couldn't react in time to block the strike completely and had to absorb the full impact since the shadow still gripped his hand tightly.

He felt his ribs give way, but he knew his regeneration would take care of it. He pushed through the agony and struck with his remaining hand, tearing the shadow's twisted smile clean off, leaving only its eyes.

At that moment, it was as if they shared the same mind. What came next was Raiden and his shadow exchanging strike after strike, sharp sounds echoing across the distance as dust filled the air. Their movements were barely visible, leaving the others, especially Noelle, in shock.

They remained motionless, Raiden coughing up blood after each blow he took, yet euphoria coursed through his entire body as he began laughing. From the sparks in his shadow's eyes, it was clearly laughing along with him.



Each of Raiden's strikes tore through the shadow, gradually erasing it. Before long, the shadow was completely obliterated.

Raiden dropped to his knees while the others remained frozen in confusion. However, after a sharp glance at Raiden, Noelle deactivated her domain and moved toward the carriage.

While Raiden breathed slowly and steadily, waiting for his body to be completely healed.

**[ALERT]**

**[+25XP]**

**[NEW ABILITY UNLOCKED: MOON DRAGON'S VEINS-5%**

**—You now possess the physical and territorial dominance of Ash. This grants super strength, darkness dominion, scale armor, and spiritually based attacks."**

**[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6 : LEVEL- 0/100 XP.**

**MANA CONTROL: 105**

**DRAGON MANA POOL: 920/ 5000**

**PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 335**

**STAMINA: 330**

**DRAGON AURA: 150**

**SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2**

**—Swordsmanship: 90%**

**—Euphoria: 75%**

**FAMILIAR TRUST: 102%**

**—Linked Familiar: WHITE DRAGON**

**CONTRACTS: ACTIVE 5.**

**—Name: [ASH]**

**—Bond Type: Sealed Pact.**

—Name: [LEVI]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [FREYA]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SPEED]

—Bond Type: Binding Oath.

—Name: [SOUL]

—Bond Type: Devotion Pact.

#### **NEW ABILITIES:**

—Soul of Dragon: 35%

—Heart of Dragon: 35%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

*Moon Dragon?*—he remained quiet for a moment as he tried to understand, but his vision within the darkness slowly became somewhat vivid.

Then he sighed and smiled as he stared at the blue screen. He had known better than to dwell on the mysterious Ash at that moment.

His smile deepened. He had never known it would take such intensity and brutality to fight himself. Yet as he remained there, his expression shifted once again.

The shadow was him, but it wasn't him at all. Its devilish smile meant nothing, and each of its strikes felt blunt like ordinary attacks. It was as if the shadow was created based on how others perceived him.

*"This isn't how I see myself, is it?"* he muttered. He let out a sigh and rose to his feet.

Aeris rushed to heal him. Though his regeneration was already working, he gratefully accepted her assistance.

"You can turn invisible, too, huh?"

Raiden turned to Levi, who stood there massaging his shoulder and neck with a smirk. Raiden said nothing. There wasn't anything he could say, even if he'd wanted to, but he didn't anyway.

"You are full of mysteries, aren't you?"

Raiden let out a sigh and gestured to Aeris to stop healing him. He began stretching his body, glancing over at the unconscious driver, then turned to Levi, who simply shrugged.

He turned east to see the sun rising. The threat was gone, but their journey wasn't over. They had to push through the confusion.

*"We have to leave."*

#### *Chapter 92: Advent of the Pages 9*

Westland was a mountain city nestled deep within a rugged alpine landscape, its stone buildings displaying intricate, historic architecture: steep roofs clad in reddish-brown tiles, arched windows framed by wooden shutters, and small balconies that jutted from ancient walls.

The carriage rolled along cobblestone streets that wound through the city center, following the gentle downward slope through crowds of walking, conversing townspeople.

Their calm and decent demeanor alongside the sturdy structures gave the city a cozy, fortified feel, yet the buildings opened up just enough to reveal courtyards, staircases, and pockets of greenery despite the dense population.

The carriage pulled up on the right, before a prominent tower—perhaps a town hall—rising with Gothic-like spires and arched windows.

Raider's eyes swept gently around as he stepped out of the carriage. Everything in Westland felt foreign to him. It lacked the modern atmosphere of Persia City, yet the landscape and population seemed more diverse than Persia.

Chilly winds from the snowy mountains swept across the city, yet people strolled about in their overcoats and gloves, wearing soft smiles. Even the children showed no fear of the cold.

"It will be 200 Persa..." the driver announced with a dry tone, pressing his palms together to warm himself. Yet clearly the cold wasn't the cause of his lifeless expression; it was what had transpired on the way.

His words snapped Raiden out of his daze, and he leaned in to pay him instantly, but the driver drove off the moment he touched the money without sparing a glance.

"I don't think he will be coming to Westland again," Levi called out as he stood by Raiden, both of them watching as the driver desperately drove away.

*"I think so..."*

The driver's fear and concern for his safety were understandable because he wasn't the only one drowning in confusion—Raiden was too.

Fighting a shadow of himself, something he had never considered or even heard of, but what perplexed him most was the person who had summoned it. Who was he?

"We need to find an inn," Freya announced from behind.

Raiden raised his head and watched as the sun slowly began to set. At that moment, a mysterious man glowing with a white aura approached them. He wore a brown leather coat and black gloves, complementing his boots and brown hat, and his expression was noble.

"Are you on an adventure?" he asked calmly. "We have a lot of rooms, and trust me, lads, you'd love them." He gestured toward a building beside the massive gothic building they stood before.

Raiden gave him a cautious stare. Westland was said to be peaceful, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He gestured toward Levi.

*"Check him out."*

And with that, he began a cordial conversation with Levi as Raiden watched them walk toward the building the man had previously indicated.

As Raiden stood there, he glanced at his hand. The moon was rising, and only streetlights illuminated the streets, but he could see clearly.

He wasn't seeing by sunlight—nothing appeared shiny or bright; a mirror would have looked as dim as it would in darkness—yet though he felt surrounded by night, he could see everything clearly, perhaps better than in daylight. It was as if he understood the night.

Soon, Levi returned alongside the old man. "Well, I've secured our rooms."

Raiden turned to them with a raised eyebrow and watched as the others were already making their way toward the inn.

He let out a heavy sigh and began following them.

The inn was built from the same weathered grey and brown stones as the nearby buildings, topped with a brownish sloped tile roof.

Dark oak beams framed the windows and balconies, which were adorned with small shuttered windows and flower boxes, slightly warped by years of mountain air. A carved wooden sign hung above the door with 'The Traveler's Peak' etched into it.

The moment Raiden entered, he faced a bar counter opposite the heavy wooden door, polished and stocked with shelves of old bottles, dusty casks, and handcrafted mugs. Behind the bar stood the innkeeper, who looked identical to the man who had approached them.

However, a buzzing musical sound from the right corner of the room—behind wooden tables filled with drunkards—made Raiden's face twitch in annoyance. Too much noise.

Still, Raiden went to the counter to pay for the rooms and escape the buzzing place as soon as possible. He was taken to a room where the main feature was a grand fireplace dominating the far wall, crackling with logs. A wooden-framed bed with a somewhat squishy mattress sat not far from it, with a table and standing lantern to its right.

Raiden gently placed Ash on the bed and sank down beside him.

*"Moon Dragon, huh?"*

Though he had initially decided not to dwell on the fact that Ash was a moon dragon—even though he had no idea what a moon dragon actually was—he began to understand why certain things were as they were: the full moon he always saw in his dreams and how Ash could solidify shadows.

Exhaustion from his long journey began weighing on him. He started to yawn through his thoughts, rubbing his eyes as he stared at the wooden ceiling, and before he knew it, the cozy atmosphere had pulled him into sleep.

This was a life he could barely make sense of, and he had come to believe these mysteries would keep coming. But still, with a clear path back to his previous world before him, he knew it wasn't his place to think much about a life that barely belonged to him.

Before long, it was morning, and Raiden stood before the inn alongside his comrades. They had questioned the innkeeper about where they could find the transmitter cohort,

but despite all the rumors that passed through the ears of bartenders and innkeepers, there was nothing he could tell them.

*"We must split ourselves into three groups."* Raiden gestured to Levi and Freya, and he didn't have to say another word before Aeris and MK knew what to do.

He turned to Noelle as she shifted the aether cigarette in her mouth with her tongue, her hands folded across her chest as she wore a nonchalant expression.

*"Can we leave now?"*

Noelle said nothing more before heading to the left. Raiden didn't like the idea of being with her either, but he knew her ability would come in handy if they encountered the transmitters.

*"So what rules can you create in your domain?"* Raiden asked and quickened his pace to join her, not wanting to repeat the unusual awkwardness of their previous encounter.

However, Noelle didn't say a word to Raiden—it was as if his words fell on deaf ears.

*"I don't think you can create just any rule."*

Still, there wasn't any response, so he let out a sigh and fell silent as well. They began moving from place to place, and it didn't take long before Ash woke up, but she went back to sleep immediately after devouring all of Raiden's snacks.

However, the information they gathered led them to the city's second-largest gothic-style building—a history hall.

But before they could enter, Noelle spotted someone in a black cloak, hood pulled up, and approached him. Raiden was confused for a moment but immediately understood what was going on.

"He is the transmitter," Noelle said, turning back to Raiden.

Raiden smiled as a sense of relief surged through him. He was a step closer to going back to his world, and his excitement was difficult to hide.

*Chapter 93: Advent of the Pages 10*

The transmitter looked somewhat terrified before Noelle, small beads of sweat forming on his forehead while his white aura fluctuated. Raiden was confused by what was happening and decided to approach them; however, before he could get any closer, Noelle turned to him.

"He will be taking us." Her dark violet eyes stared at him bluntly, the aether cigarette resting between her lips.

Raiden gave her a lazy look. *"Sure..."*

The transmitter gestured for them to follow him to an alley by the gothic building. Noelle followed immediately, and so did Raiden. The alley led them to a back door of the gothic building, where there was a massive wooden door that the transmitter knocked on gently three times.

The door opened to a small room where a red-haired man in red clothing, glowing with a yellow aura, sat on a brown leather couch behind a small polished wooden table. Near a warm amber lamp, he showed his golden teeth in a grin as two individuals in black cloaks, like their guide's, welcomed them in.

The moment they entered, the room felt historic despite the young man's golden teeth. There were paintings similar to ones Raiden had seen in the palace hanging on the walls, but what drew his attention was the ceiling.

It glowed blue like the ocean, as beautiful as the coast in Coast City, with swirling patterns—possibly symbolic constellations and arcane symbols—glowing in green and gold. Though it looked somewhat like the world's map, it was different.

"What brought you here, lads?" The man asked as he settled back on the sofa.

"Where can we find the twenty-eight pages?" Noelle blurted, and the man immediately started laughing.

Raiden shook his head in disappointment and began massaging his forehead. From the man's expression and appearance, this wasn't information he was going to give out just because they asked. He was clearly a businessman.

"You walked in here to ask such a ridiculous question?" The man shook his head. "Don't you kids have anything better to do?"

Raiden cleared his throat, took a few deliberate steps forward, and positioned himself just above Noelle, drawing everyone's focus to him.

*"She can be silly like this sometimes..."* Raiden gave her back a pat, but Noelle's face began to twitch from irritation.

The man's eyes narrowed for a moment. "I think I know you from somewhere." As he tapped his fingers on the table, his eyes suddenly lit up. "You're the bookkeeper, aren't you?"

A smile crossed Raiden's face at the man's reaction, and he shrugged; this was going to be easier than he had anticipated.

The man rose to his feet. "It's an honor to have you, bookkeeper." He offered his hand for a handshake, and Raiden casually accepted it. "The name is Steve, leader of the transmitter cohort."

Noelle sneered while Raiden smirked back at her. *"Can we talk now?"*

"Yeah... it will be a pleasure," Steve replied enthusiastically, remaining on his feet.

Raiden walked over and settled onto the sofa with him. Steve wasn't perplexed in the slightest—if anything, he was intrigued by Raiden's confidence.

*"Now, tell me, what can you tell us?"*

A menacing smile crossed the man's face. "In this cohort, we've dedicated ourselves to learning the history behind our world, secrets you can't find anywhere." His expression began to darken. "That's why we are the transmitters, the bridge between this world and our past."

He flashed a rehearsed smile. "That's why it's an honor to have the first bookkeeper in our kingdom's history perform the bloodline ritual... that's a bold decision we transmitters admire."

His expression fell once more, shifting to the cold demeanor of a businessman as he moved away from Raiden. "However, we don't share anything for free... not even to the king."

Raiden giggled and took a deep breath. Money wasn't that much of a problem, but the credibility of the information they would receive was questionable.

These kinds of people were certainly operating under the radar from the law, and might leverage corrupt connections to retaliate if he provided them with bad information. But at that moment, he had few options.

*"You already know who I am... you'll need to do more talking to get what you're after."*

Steve laughed proudly. "The bookkeeper, huh?"

"I don't really care what you intend to use the twenty-eight pages for." His expression darkened. "However, I'm very interested in the money you'll be making for doing your job."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, his expression composed as he waited for Steve's price.



Steve cleared his throat. "Four million Persa would do..."

Raiden was taken aback by the demand, staring at Steve in shock. While he had unlimited worth as the bookkeeper, four million Persa—likely enough to sustain an average person for life—wasn't something he could casually request from the kingdom without explanation.

He sighed. If this was the cruel game Steve was willing to play, then he could play along with it. Tilting his head slightly, he took a better look at the yellow star-shaped crest on Steve's neck and noted the number seven within it. He smiled.

*"Is that all?"*

Steve put his hands up in surrender. "I am nothing but a mere businessman."

Raiden turned to Noelle, who stood with her hands folded across her chest and an unreadable expression, her aether cigarette smoldering between her lips.

*"Can you pay him for me, rulekeeper?"*

"Don't give me orders!" Noelle sneered.

Steve's expression darkened instantly. "Wait, what? She's the rulekeeper?"

Before his words could even settle, Noelle activated her domain. Raiden rose to his feet, patting Ash, who rested on his shoulder, then bypassed Noelle to walk toward the two guards in black stationed by the door.

He gave them a soft smile while they remained frozen, sweat beading on their foreheads as they attempted to move. Raiden giggled, seized their heads, and slammed them into the stone wall, crushing their skulls to a liquid. Their warm blood splashed across Raiden's face and black sheet, spattering Ash's white skin.

However, Raiden glanced at his hands as he admired Ash's strength—the moon dragon's power flowing through him. If he could easily crush someone's head at 5%, what could he do at 100%? The thought alone brought a gentle smile to his face.

He turned backward to see that Noelle had shattered almost all the joints in Steve's hands. His smile vanished instantly. He knew Noelle was heartless from their first encounter, but this exceeded his expectations.

Her expression remained calm, devoid of emotion, while Steve appeared to scream in agony, though it seemed she had created a rule preventing any sound from escaping. She was cruel, just like Jack's mother, Jane.

Raiden smiled. *"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're the villain here."*

Noelle tilted her head toward him, staring at him from the corner of her eye with a cold expression. She said nothing—just returned to her work.

"..." Raiden instantly reached for his throat, trying to comment on her expression but finding he couldn't speak anymore. Her rules within her domain were affecting him.

He shrugged with a smirk and began wiping away the blood on his face and on Ash's body.

"I... I will talk," Steve said with a trembling voice.

Raiden turned to them as he waited for more.

"The only people who know where the pages are located are the Apex Circle."

Raiden's expression darkened. He would have been scammed if he had paid the price Steve asked for. He began massaging his forehead.

"But... they are in the Kingdom of Noor, in Dark City." His golden teeth were clenched as he gestured toward the table before him. "You can find my badge there," he muttered.

"Just give it to their leader when you arrive..." he murmured.

Raiden watched as Noelle checked for the badge. He couldn't talk, but he really wanted to ask a few questions. The Kingdom of Noor was about a month away by the fastest ship, and by that time, FIRMO would have already gotten to the pages if possible.

"You see," Steve said the moment Noelle found the badge. "You can let me go now."

He tried to move over there to at least alert Noelle about the situation. But before he could even close in on them, Noelle snapped his neck and killed him instantly.

Raiden's expression turned disappointed, his mouth agape. Noelle turned to him, tossed him the badge, and deactivated her domain.

*"Do you know how far Noor is?"*

Noelle gave him a lazy look. "He couldn't lie or hide anything." She shrugged. "That was all there was to it."

Raiden sighed as Noelle walked past him and exited the room. After a brief moment, he followed. He began to wonder if it would be best to inform the kingdom about it; maybe they could help with their teleportation magic.

However, he knew informing the kingdom would limit his chances of having the pages all to himself—they would want them disposed of.

Noelle was ahead of him, but he was in no hurry to catch up as he was lost in thought. But someone caught his attention in an instant, and he and Noelle both paused in place.

It was the young man in a straw hat they'd encountered on their way to the city, a Nightmare, displaying the same calm demeanor with his hand resting on the hilt of his sword and the other tucked within his black cloak.

Raiden's heart began pounding, goosebumps coursing through his skin as Noelle also began taking a few backward steps. If he was there to punish them for killing Steve, then they were in for huge trouble.

*"This guy is bad news..."*

*Chapter 94: Advent of el Seer*

Behind Raiden and Noelle was a dead end—they would have no other option but to fight this man off.

"You can kill your shadow again if it shows up, right?" Noelle asked as she prepared for the inevitable.

*"Only if it's as weak as before..."* Raiden muttered, bracing himself as he held his stance.

However, the man paused and began taking quick steps backward. Raiden and Noelle let their guard down for a moment as they watched him reach the street before the gothic building and gesture for someone.

They exchanged confused glances. His movements were childish for someone who was supposed to be killing them. But Noelle's expression turned annoyed in an instant while an uneasy sensation surged through Raiden.

The person he was calling for was Klein el Seer. He walked in with the same huge smile from Raiden's previous encounter, eyes still blindfolded. Like his comrade beside him, he radiated no aura whatsoever.

"I told you he's with the Nightmares," Noelle said, resuming her stance. Raiden remained motionless, his mind turning over the questions he should have asked when they first met.

However, Klein fell to his knees and bowed his head to the ground. "Please forgive my friend for the trouble he's caused you."

Both Raiden and Noelle grew more confused, standing there as Klein's friend tried to pull him back to his feet.

The moment he got to his feet, he closed in on Raiden. "You will forgive me, right?" Raiden just stared at him, confused by everything that was transpiring.

Klein hesitated. "Okay, okay... you have to go to Noor, right?"

Raiden tilted his head at him, even more bewildered.

"I can help you get there as my way of apologizing..." He smiled and leaned closer, waiting for a response.

Raiden wasn't only confused; he was coming to a realization. It was clear Klein could see everything—or if not everything, he'd said enough to show he knew more than the rest of them.

So if Klein stood before him now, trying to help with something that had troubled Raiden since discovering they had to go to Noor, then accepting that help was obvious. He needed Klein's assistance.

Raiden smiled. *"So if I understand correctly, your friend attacked us to give you an opportunity to apologize and offer help?"*

Klein sighed and patted Raiden on the shoulder. "I was hoping this would be more fun, but no, that wasn't it..."

He wore a big grin once more and gestured toward his friend behind him. "This is King, my best friend." He turned toward him with a warm smile.

His behavior seemed to annoy Noelle to no end. "You sent your friend to kill us, and now you're laughing in our faces?!"

Klein immediately hurried to Noelle and became even more apologetic, though his sarcasm was obvious. "Oh, my rulekeeper." King appeared embarrassed behind him.

"Can't you see I'm trying to apologize, princess?" Klein said, but Noelle pushed him away.

He feigned being hurt by her actions, but his expression changed instantly. "What Raiden fought was his double walker." He gestured for them to follow him.

Raiden and Noelle exchanged glances before following him.

"King's double walker ability lets him create a double of someone based on how others see them, using the person's shadow."

Raiden looked down at himself, finally realizing he was right. The shadow double had been based on how everyone present saw him. Things would have been very different if they knew his actual limits, or if they viewed him as stronger than he really was.

"In Raiden's case, I guess his friends didn't know him all that well."

"So why Raiden? Couldn't it have been anyone else?" Noelle asked, confusion evident in her voice.

Klein turned slightly toward her with a soft smile. "He was the strongest among you... that's what you all thought."

Noelle shot Raiden a disgusted look. The moment he caught her glance, he began moving away from her. He wasn't going to wait around until she killed him.

But Raiden knew he wasn't the strongest. His comrades didn't really know how strong he was. They knew nothing about him, actually, so they filled in the gaps with their imagination based on what they'd seen him do. He only won that battle because his shadow's strikes didn't affect the soul the way his attacks did.

As he was lost in thought, they arrived at their inn to find everyone else waiting outside. The group stared at Klein and King in confusion as they approached. Though Klein el Seer was blindfolded but could still see clearly, they focused mainly on King, the one who could have killed them on their way to the city.

As soon as they approached, MK closed in on Noelle and started checking her over, particularly the blood stains on her from killing Steve.

Freya walked directly to King and stood in front of him, tilting her head back to glare directly into his eyes. But Klein leaned closer with his hands touching his chin, pretending to be thinking.

"You are the Arch Hell Phoenix, right?"

Freya's expression instantly shifted to confusion as she wondered how Klein could know that. But she knew if someone had told him, it had to be Raiden. She turned, walked toward Raiden, and locked her hand around his neck.

Raiden raised his hands in submission. *"I wasn't the one—he can see everything."*

"And you think I'll believe that?"

"It's true, he kind of knows everything," Noelle said politely.

Freya turned to her with a disinterested look. "Bitch, who asked you?"

Noelle forced a smile as she clenched her fist, stung by Freya's words.

*"Come on, guys... as much as I'd love to see you recreate your tournament fight, we've got serious matters to attend to."*

Freya was still irritated but let go of him anyway, knowing she had to.

"You guardians should follow me," Klein said and started walking toward the gothic building near their inn.

Raiden remained where he was, watching them leave, while Aeris and Levi stayed behind and came over to him.

"We went to a club called the Cultivation Club, but they didn't have anything to offer," Aeris said politely.

"Freya and I found a newly formed society too—Barton," Levi said with a shrug. "They had nothing to offer as well."

Raiden sighed. *"Well, we found something, and we have to go to Noor."*

Levi's expression darkened. "Noor?!"

Raiden nodded gently. *"We got it from the leader of the Transmitters Cohort, Steve. Before Noelle killed him for being greedy, he said, 'we should go to Dark City.'"*

Levi let out a sigh and smiled. "Dark City?... if I remember correctly, it was the most notorious city in Noor."

Raiden's expression was unreadable. *"Well, that's where we must go,"* he said, and started walking toward the gothic building with his hands in his pockets. The others followed.

They opened the door to the gothic building and entered a massive hall. A small girl, around thirteen, with white hair and blue eyes, stood in a white dress, petting her three familiars—seven-foot white serpents. Her expression was cold and distant.

In the corner sat another woman about Raiden's age with short black hair, cross-legged on the floor in a red bra and black trousers, with an eight-foot red dragon lying dormant behind her.

Raiden paused at the entrance, staring at them. Like Klein and King, neither woman had any aura.

"Welcome to the Nightmare Cohort," Klein said enthusiastically.

He gestured toward the young girl, but she barely acknowledged their presence. "This is Tesoro, and that one in the corner is Charis." Charis turned to them and gave them a big grin and a wave.

Suddenly, a blue spherical portal appeared on the wall, and a boy emerged from it. He was a year or two younger than Raiden, dressed in a black shirt with snowy white hair like Tesoro's. His expression was just as cold as hers.

Klein gestured toward him. "And finally, this is Matoe."

Two blue crest bearers and a yellow crest bearer, all without auras. What exactly was the Nightmare Cohort? he wondered.

With Levi and Aeris flanking him, Raiden entered the room while Klein approached.

"This is Raiden," he said with a smirk. "We're going to help him on his journey."

The moment Raiden came within reach, he paused. Noelle approached Klein. "What exactly are you gaining from this, Klein el Seer?"

Klein said nothing—he simply turned to Noelle and smiled.

Raiden let out a sigh. "If you can see everything, then our future holds something that intrigues you, and you want to make sure that happens..."

"Oh, is that so?..." Klein grinned.

Without a word, Matoe opened another portal on the wall.

Klein gestured toward the portal. "Let's take you home."

Raiden wanted complete clarity on what future Klein was seeing. All he wanted was to return to his original world, so what was intriguing about that? After thinking for a moment, he took a deep breath. Whatever Klein was seeing, it didn't matter—he would get the twenty-eight pages, go back to his world, and seek his vengeance.

#### *Chapter 95: Advent of el Seer 2*

Unlike the usual teleportation portals Raiden had walked through, this one seemed to thicken the air itself, pressing against the skin with a presence that remained frustratingly beyond comprehension.

It lasted only a moment, a fleeting second that made the strangeness all the more difficult to grasp. Yet Raiden's dragon instincts picked up on it immediately, and the wary look that crossed Noelle's face as she emerged told him she'd felt it as well.

Still, the ability to cover vast distances so quickly was a relief, and given how little Raiden understood about Matoe's capabilities, puzzling over the sensation seemed pointless.

Raiden paused before his mansion, eyes closed as he absorbed the familiarity of home washing over him. The others had already gone inside, leaving Matoe, Klein, and King to wait with him.

After a brief moment, Raiden turned to Klein and his crew. Klein wore his typical eager expression, a stark contrast to King and Matoe's composed demeanor.

Raiden narrowed his eyes slightly before sighing. *"If you can actually see everything, then there must be a timeline where I asked the questions that mattered."*

Klein drew a deep breath and moved closer, his excitement replaced by something unreadable. His hands settled on Raiden's shoulders, and despite the blindfold, his gaze seemed to pierce straight into Raiden's gray eyes.

"About timelines, there's one where you died," he said with complete seriousness, his voice steady and grave. The next second, he completely broke character, erupting into uncontrollable laughter.

Raiden's irritation was written all over his face, making King giggle.

"You know I can't tell you anything I see, right?" Klein managed to say while suppressing his laughter.

*"I didn't ask you to tell me the future!"*

Klein's laughter finally died down, and he grew serious. "I know that," he sighed. "This journey is going to open your eyes to many things."

Raiden stared hard into his blindfolded eyes as he listened.

"Consider this journey your second birth—learn with a newborn's curiosity and react with a newborn's innocence."

Raiden rolled his eyes with a smirk. He already knew nothing. If someone asked, he couldn't even thoroughly explain this new life he was living.

Klein looked back with curiosity. "Where's everyone else?"

Raiden gave him a lazy look. *"Couldn't you see that in the future?"*

Klein chuckled softly. "Not everything in the future is set in stone, you know?"



Raiden shrugged, turning toward the entrance behind him. *"I think they're resting, but Freya's probably eating."*

"You people are leaving now."

Raiden raised his eyebrows. *"Now?!"*

Klein patted him on the shoulder once more. "Don't worry, no one will realize you've left your duty." His smile widened. "I'll take care of everything."

Something in Klein's expression suggested he wasn't referring to Raiden alone. He wanted the entire group to go.

"I mean, all of them." He added.

This wasn't an easy thing to accept. Leaving the book of ashes behind and unprotected would mean Klein could take it at will. And what if that was precisely his intention?

Raiden stared at him for a moment, lost in thought. Klein could kill them if he chose to, and he obviously had allies strong enough to help. He wouldn't need to trick them to get the book. But what if he actually couldn't kill them?

Raiden stood frozen, uncertain about his next move.

"Okay, we're ready to leave." Noelle called out from behind him, with MK carrying their luggage.

Klein smiled once more as Matoe began creating a new teleportation portal, the opening hovering in midair.

Raiden had few choices available. Klein remained impossible to read, and once he had the twenty-eight pages, the books of Devourers would be crucial for getting back to his world. The pages were his priority now. But was such a gamble really necessary?

He sighed. Noelle wasn't going to back down because she had her own strong motivation for the pages—destroying them to free her mother. This wouldn't be only his burden to bear, and they were already in a situation where risk was unavoidable.

Moments later, the others began emerging from the house; Soul, Speed, and Leo, who was carrying both his own luggage and Raiden's.

Raiden took a deep breath and looked at Klein, who gave him a skeptical smile and shrugged.

*"Alright... we'll leave now."* His expression grew dark. *"You're taking us to Dark City, though."*

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Klein said, looking toward the portal. "We're not taking you anywhere close to there, though."

Klein sounded suspicious, but given that it would take them at least a month to sail there by themselves, this was preferable in many ways.

Raiden remained silent, just motioning for his comrades to move forward. They walked through the portal one by one without difficulty.

However, Klein motioned for Noelle and Raiden to hold back. The moment the others went through the portal, he positioned himself in front of the pair.

For the first time since they'd known Klein, his expression was genuinely serious. "I meant what I said... learn everything like a newborn and react like you know nothing."

Noelle kept flicking the aether cigarette between her lips, radiating disinterest, while Raiden's eyes seemed to look through dimensions as he tried to determine if Klein was speaking with purpose.

"Be reborn by each knowledge..." he added.

Raiden waited for a moment for his words to settle in before he shrugged it off.

*"Okay... we will be leaving now,"* Raiden said and began making his way past Klein, King, and Matoe while Noelle followed behind.

Raiden waited a moment for Klein's words to settle before dismissing them with a shrug.

*"Alright... we'll be leaving now,"* Raiden said, stepping past Klein, King, and Matoe as Noelle followed.

"I mean it!" Klein yelled as Raiden stepped through the portal.

The moment he emerged, a harsh, dusty wind struck him, almost knocking Ash from his shoulder. Raiden grabbed his familiar before she could fall and covered his eyes against the wind. Sandy gusts obscured everything around them, making it nearly impossible to tell one direction from another.

"We're in the desert near Dark City!" Levi shouted over the wind.

"I used to train my mana here," Freya called out. "There are sand wolves in this area."

Raiden's expression turned disgusted as he understood why Klein had looked so strange when mentioning where they'd be teleported.

The air burned with dreadful heat, making their bodies sweat instantly, while the powerful wind provided no relief whatsoever.

Now, they had to somehow find their way through the harshest landscape Raiden had ever encountered.

*Chapter 96: Kingdom of Noor*

"There's something I can do," MK called out, desperation edging his words. "Form Shift can give us the protection we need to move, but I need to know—how far out is the city?"

His gaze fixed on Noelle with an intensity that spoke volumes, the protective instincts of a guardian blazing fiercely and undeniably.

Desperation flickered in Raiden's eyes as they darted wildly, his form still dancing away from the relentless sand. The howling wind made detecting mana creatures all but impossible, but if Levi and Freya spoke the truth, direction was irrelevant now. They needed only to break free from the storm's grip, then worry about finding their proper path to the city.

*"Let's head to the south!"*

MK whipped toward Raiden, offering a resolute nod. His crimson eyes ignited with power, and the golden aura that had been streaming from his body suddenly condensed, hardening into a shimmering cube that surrounded them.

Though the wind had stopped its relentless assault, MK trembled under the strain, sweat beading on his face while his features set in fierce resolve, teeth grinding together.

"We need to hurry!" MK shouted over the chaos as they pressed forward, though his movements lagged behind. The sheer violence of the wind left him no choice but to take cautious, controlled steps—even the slightest rush of panic could send him spiraling into the storm's maw.

Raiden's thoughts spun wildly as dread crept in. At this devastating pace, remaining in the desert much longer would bleed MK's mana dry, leaving them defenseless.

"I could nullify his weight, make him weightless so I can carry him," Leo offered, eyes fixed on MK. "The question is—will that interfere with his power?"

"Don't worry, I can handle it," MK replied, the words rasping through his desert-burned throat.

Leo caught Raiden's eye with a brief nod. In one fluid motion, he canceled out MK's weight and lifted him with ease onto his shoulder, their bags and gear coming with them.

MK's protective cube flickered, its surface sending out a surge that rippled against everyone inside and made them grab for balance. He tightened his focus almost immediately, bringing the shield back to steady strength.

*"Faster! We need to be faster!"* Raiden ordered, desperation bleeding into his command.

MK strained against Leo's shoulder, maintaining their protective barrier with fierce concentration as they traversed the desert. The journey proved less grueling than Raiden had anticipated. Though the heat leached every drop of moisture from their bodies, they eventually reached solid ground at the base of a towering dune.

Exhaustion drove them to their knees, their lungs burning though they'd traveled merely three miles. Noelle, however, appeared untouched by the brutal journey and immediately began scanning the landscape for traces of the city.

Noelle exhaled slowly and flicked away her sand-dusted aether cigarette. "Klein's a bastard," she said with cold indifference.

Raiden shifted his attention toward him as Aeris helped MK drink some water.

"Whatever direction we chose, the city was always our destination."

Raiden stood and ascended the sandy slope to join her. He traced her line of sight to the city spread before them—an expanse of golden sandstone buildings adorned with bulbous domes, sweeping arches, and towering minarets.

The avenues pulsed with life as robed inhabitants moved through them, their forms shrouded entirely in cloth that masked even their mouths.

The city pulsed with activity yet felt utterly devoid of life. Sunlight carved deep into its heart while bone-dry air whispered against the buildings with the endless hiss of shifting sand.

The atmosphere hung thick and suffocating, so oppressive that even the wind seemed to recoil from entering.

No greenery existed, no creatures stirred, no hint of moisture remained—only the distant echoes of hollow voices and the stark shadows that sunlight carved across barren stone.

Raiden drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly as a sharp ache rippled through his frame. *"So this is Dark City."*

Freya pulled a black cloak over her face as she climbed up to join them. "Yes... this is what most cities look like now."

Raiden's gaze shifted to Freya as questions flooded his mind about the agony Noor's people must have endured simply to survive. Even the act of swallowing felt like grinding sand between his teeth.

"This city doesn't truly awaken until nightfall." Freya adjusted her cloak into place. "We need to find our targets before the sun goes down."

Noelle's lips curved into a smirk. "These people already look like corpses—what could they possibly do that would make us need to run?"

Levi climbed up to join them, his hands buried deep in his pockets. "In Noor, cities like Dark City treat death as routine—every night brings fresh pleasure in culling their numbers."

As they remained motionless, a pack of sand wolves began closing in on them. Their brownish forms appeared gaunt and drained, stripped of both nourishment and moisture, with hollow stomachs that made their ribs painfully visible from a distance.

They bared their fangs with saliva streaming from razor-sharp teeth, yet something held them back from striking.

Raiden stepped a few paces away from the group, his eyes fixed on the wolves. He felt no urge to harm them—he could see their desperate hunger and understood it. Soul's overwhelming aura had clearly intimidated them, making any attack unnecessary.

*"Let's leave, guys..."*

Without waiting for a response, Raiden started down the mountain and passed its perimeter, heading straight for the city below.

Looking at the city's lifeless condition, Raiden began to doubt they could ever locate the Apex Circle. Steve, the leader of the Transmitters, had described them with such reverence that Raiden had formed an image of prestigious, influential figures.

He'd anticipated finding something akin to Klein's Nightmare Cohort and their grip on Westland City. But in this wasteland of a place, how could they expect to uncover the pages?

A few steps into his stride, Raiden turned to check behind him and spotted the others walking casually in his wake, keeping their distance. He had no intention of slowing down for them—he was perfectly content to see this through on his own.

Soon enough, Raiden approached the city's edge where two weathered yellow towers flanked a street, likely the ruins of an ancient gate. A handful of elderly Noorians, devoid of both aura and mana crests, gathered there and watched him with obvious interest. They could tell immediately that he wasn't one of them.

Before he could enter the city, a ragged kid about eight years old sprinted toward him and grabbed his hand. No aura, no mana crest—completely magicless. Raiden turned on him instantly, annoyed, a thought away from smacking the kid in the head.

But the kid stared up at him with piercing blue eyes, his hair so dirty Raiden couldn't tell whether it was brown or just grime.

His irritated expression faded instantly, replaced by a smile. He wasn't seeing a kid anymore—he saw an opportunity.

*"Do you want water?"* Raiden asked gently in Noorian.

The kid's eyes sparkled with excitement as he nodded eagerly. His desperation alone told Raiden he could exploit him further.

*"Come with me,"* he said as they began walking toward the others. *"What's your name?"*

The boy looked down. *"Nico."*

*"That's a nice name, Nico,"* Raiden said with a smirk as they approached the others.

*"Have you heard of the Apex Circle, Nico?"*

Nico paused, his eyes flickering rapidly as they darted across the floor. He tried to yank his hand free, but Raiden held it tight, that rehearsed smile never wavering.

*"Don't be scared, Nico."* He crouched down beside him and touched his dry cheek. *"I'm not like them. I'm here to get rid of them for you."*

It was an empty promise, but from the kid's expression, he knew the Apex Circle was killing them each night. False promises like that were his only way in, and that worked on everyone in this city.

The others closed in an instant. Raiden gestured toward Leo. *"Water, Leo,"* he said in Persian.

Leo hurried to toss him a sack of water, and the moment Nico saw it, his expression shifted—transfixed by the water as he would have drooled if his body had any moisture left.

Raiden gestured for him to open his mouth and poured him a little water. Nico let out a loud, satisfied sigh—clearly his first taste of clean water. But Raiden gave him only enough to create need, not satisfy it.

*"Take us to the Apex Circle, Nico." He smiled softly. "And I'll give you the whole sack."*

Nico was startled for a moment, his eyes sparkling with excitement, he couldn't quite hide. He was too scared to let himself hope.

"Do you promise to kill them?" Nico muttered, his eyes fixed on the floor.

*"Don't worry about that, Nico." Raiden's smile never wavered. "I'll do what I have to."*

Nico finally looked up and smiled. "Okay, Mr. Hero."

He gripped Raiden's hand and pulled him left. Raiden had to run to match the kid's pace as they climbed a sandy hill. Nico pointed into the distance, and Raiden activated Gaze Beyond instantly.

Four tents spread across the encampment in a rough circle. A low wall, barely reaching the middle of the tents, enclosed the area with a clear entrance. Crates, pots, rugs, and baskets were scattered around the perimeter.

A few young men stood before it—seemingly drunk, but glowing with white aura. Raiden tossed Nico the water without a glance, and the kid immediately bolted down the hill, clutching his prize.

The moment Raiden turned and saw the kid was gone, he smiled. *"We can't tell if it's really them until we get there."* He gestured behind him. *"But the circle is back there."*

#### *Chapter 97: Kingdom of Noor 2*

Just at the circuit's entrance, ahead of the intoxicated wanderers who couldn't distinguish up from down, a young man about Raiden's age had claimed a weathered chest as his seat.

He projected controlled intensity, his keen eyes fixed and unblinking beneath a shadowy, ornate hood and mask that shrouded his mouth and nose.

His gloves caught the eye immediately—complex metallic designs inlaid with glowing blue and red gems that looked suspiciously like recorder stones.

With the others flanking them from behind, Raiden and Noelle faced the young man directly, their eyes locking with his.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Is this the Apex Circuit?" Noelle inquired, folding her arms across her chest.

"What's it to you?" he demanded, his tone parched and eerie.

Raiden let out a quiet laugh and moved closer to Noelle. *"Let me do the negotiations while you handle the combat?"* he murmured.

Noelle's lips curled into a sneer as she placed her aether cigarette in her mouth and retreated a step. Raiden smiled and dug into his pocket, producing the badge that Steve, the Transmitters' leader, had given him.

*"We've come with a referral."* Raiden's face grew impassive. *"Now, can we talk like civilized people? This matter is both important and time-sensitive."*

The young man examined them with calculating eyes before his cold, dark stare bore into Raiden's. "Are you telling me that's from the Transmitters?" he asked, clearly unconvinced.

Raiden gave an affirming nod, which made the young man pause momentarily, his gaze sweeping across their faces. He let out a sharp sniff of annoyance, stood up, and signaled for them to accompany him to a tent off to their right, well away from the wandering drunkards.

The tent's entrance was veiled by a cloak that the young man swept away as he ducked inside, Raiden and the others trailing after him.

Two enormous brown chests dominated the tent's left corner, their frames extending about three feet each. At the tent's heart sat a table topped with a burning candle, an unfolded map, and three chess pieces. Beyond it lounged a young man roughly three years older than Raiden, golden aura flowing around him.

His face was all sharp angles and aristocratic lines—silver-grey hair, pronounced cheekbones, an elegant nose, and steel-gray eyes that sparkled with arrogant charm and tired seduction.

He wore confidence like armor, his expression playfully condescending, radiating the poise of someone who commanded attention effortlessly.

He sported an elaborate white turban wrapped with delicate gold chains and decorative pieces, and was clothed in a luxurious deep violet robe featuring gold threadwork around the chest area, with a clean white layer visible underneath.



The sheer opulence of his attire proclaimed his authority, standing in sharp contrast to the starving masses that supposedly populated this kingdom.

"These people are here to see you, Chrono," he said, at last recognizing their existence, while Chrono stayed quiet and simply watched.

Raiden held back from speaking hastily. They hadn't actually verified this was the Apex Circle, and beyond that, he remained uncertain whether they possessed any knowledge of the pages.

Chrono's smile widened as he leaned back in his chair. "Really?"

Raiden's face hardened. The voice that emerged from Chrono didn't match his seductive exterior—it was arid and intimidating, unnaturally deep for his seemingly relaxed demeanor. Still, Raiden understood he needed to push forward, no matter what it required to get Chrono to reveal what he knew.

"Yes..."

Chrono adopted an expression of complete disinterest. "And who are you?"

Raiden stepped forward and placed the badge on the table's surface. He understood that admitting they were the Guardians of Ashes and Silence might damage their prospects, yet he wondered if they could gain Chrono's cooperation without that revelation.

Following a brief pause for thought, he released a quiet sigh. *"My name is Raiden, and this is my team."* His tone steadied with determination. *"We're here looking for the twenty-eight pages."*

Chrono was visibly shaken by the statement, his uncertainty and surprise evident in every line of his face.

"What did you say?"

Raiden smiled with quiet confidence. *"We want Aaron's twenty-eight pages."*

At that moment, Chrono seemed more confused than confident, Raiden's declaration both shocking and challenging for him to comprehend, particularly from an outsider like him.

Following a brief exchange of stares, he let out a laugh. "Do you have any idea what the pages actually are?"

"That's the whole point!" Noelle interrupted, beating Raiden to the answer.

Chrono leaned forward, elbows braced on the table, chin propped on his fists. Raiden narrowed his eyes, observing. He had expected laughs, underestimating—just like Steve had done. But Chrono was different. He seemed to know better than to underestimate anyone, making him impossible for Raiden to read. Too composed.

"Normally, I wouldn't tolerate this conversation, but being recommended by Steve means there's more to you than meets the eye." He smiled, locking eyes with Raiden. "Perhaps you people killed him."

Raiden and Noelle were surprised that Chrono already knew about Steve's death. It hadn't even been a day. They sharpened their senses instantly—if he knew, they were likely already marked for death.

However, Chrono raised his hands in submission with a soft smile that finally matched his appearance. "I don't really care about Steve's death." His smile deepened, eyelids tightening. "Killing him was good enough to tell me you have what it takes to go after the pages."

*This sudden change*—Raiden thought, confused.

"If it's the pages you want, then you're in the right place."

Relief surged through Raiden, making his skin tingle. At last, someone who could help him get back to his world. But his expression shifted in an instant—what if Chrono's desires for helping were more than he could afford?

"The Apex Circle is after the pages as well," he said, leaning back in his seat. "Which means we need to form an alliance."

That was too easy. Raiden knew cults well enough—they never gave anything for free. He needed to know the price.

*"What's the catch?"*

Chrono smirked. "Dealing with people like you is always a pleasure." The tease barely left his lips before his expression darkened.

There are quite a handful of organizations after the pages as well," he said, leaning forward. "But if you're willing to take care of our transportation with your mana, I'm willing to cooperate."

Raiden and Noelle exchanged glances. Chrono clearly believed they knew something about the pages' location or how to reach them, but they knew nothing. Meeting her eyes, Raiden recalled what Klein el Seer had told them—keep their ignorance hidden and learn everything from scratch.

Raiden took a deep breath and faced Chrono. *"We don't actually know anything about the pages. We just know we must get them."*

Chrono stared at them, instantly puzzled and lost in thought. "You don't know anything?" His tone was thick with confusion.

*"No, we don't, but we're willing to learn."*

Chrono slapped his forehead in disappointment. "Do you realize how long it will take you to learn all this?"

Raiden's eyes narrowed. He wouldn't speak for the others, but he knew the pages were his only way home. If he had to learn everything in one night, he'd make it happen.

*"I'm a very fast learner, trust me."*

Chrono nodded subtly in understanding. "Being number six at such an early age speaks volumes." He gestured toward his cheek, where his turban partially covered his yellow crest.

"I turned 6 at twenty, but huh?" He smirked.

Raiden remained silent, his mind racing. He needed to start learning everything—now.

"Well, come closer and let me show you. This will be a journey."

#### *Chapter 98: Kingdom of Noor 3*

A brief silence settled over the tent as Chrono's fingers drummed repeatedly on his armrest. Raiden and Noelle stood before the table while the others positioned themselves around the tent.

Chrono's eyes swept across the map on the table, his expression calm as he searched for the right words to explain things to Raiden and his comrades.

He sighed and gestured at an island near the Kingdom of Noor, which lay south of the Kingdom of Persia.

"There is an island, Solace Isle," he said as Raiden raised his eyebrow in confusion.

"This is where all negotiations and alliances across the realms are held."

*"Domain Realms?"* Raiden asked, confusion clear in his voice.

However, Chrono met them with an even more perplexed expression. "Don't tell me..." his eyes darted between their faces in disbelief. "Don't tell me you know nothing about the realms."

Raiden and Noelle shrugged in unison, and Chrono slapped his forehead in disappointment.

"Why would you guys search for something you don't even understand?" he asked desperately. He needed answers.

With each passing second, Raiden understood more why Klein was so hooked on having them learn everything like newborns. He let out a sigh.

Before he could speak, Freya's voice echoed from behind. "Are you talking about the absolute domains?"

Chrono's eyes widened in relief. "Thank you, pretty lady."

Freya blushed for a moment but quickly moved past it. She took a deep breath to clear her mind while Raiden and Noelle turned to her.

"There are three magical realms, and we are all familiar with the first two."

She closed her eyes and unleashed her mana, flames swirling within it. Chrono smiled. "That's impressive, girl."

Freya couldn't help but blush once more, causing her mana control to falter and stop. But the moment she stopped, Chrono unleashed his mana, the golden aura radiating from him covering the entire tent.

Only Raiden, MK and Noelle were able to see it, and they were all amazed, their eyes darting around. Raiden had always been impressed by Freya's mana control, which only went a few inches from her body, but compared to Chrono's, she was an amateur.

"This is mana zone," Freya said, unaware that Chrono had already activated his own mana zone. "The mana zone doesn't do much—it only increases your sense of awareness and control within the area it occupies... but if you have elemental abilities like mine, you can infuse your elements with the mana zone to increase their effectiveness."

Chrono smiled and gave her a gentle nod.

"The next realm is the domain, which comes naturally to most gold crest bearers." She paused for a moment, searching her mind.

She sighed. "I don't really understand it myself, but I think sustaining a domain is about aura and ability... the fusion of those two."

Raiden turned to Noelle, who stood there lazily, her violet eyes fixed on Freya's dark ones.

"What?!" she snapped, her tone annoyed.

*"Care to tell us if she's right or not?"*

Her lips curled in a sneer. "Rule domain." She activated her domain as a golden aura radiated from her, seizing and forming a sphere around the tent.

"Well, it has nothing to do with mana." She glanced at Raiden. "It stays active as long as I'm conscious unless I deactivate it myself..." She shrugged. "And obviously, my ability works on anyone within it at my will."

Raiden narrowed his eyes as he began to understand it. The mana zone only increased awareness—for instance, if someone stepped into his mana zone, he could notice their presence instantly, but unlike a domain, his ability couldn't work on them unless he infused it with elemental magic, if he had any.

Worse, overuse could exhaust him. But domains were different. Since aura radiated effortlessly, combining their ability with it to create a domain did no harm to their bodies.

He smiled—*this wasn't so hard after all*.

Freya shrugged. "Well, I don't know anything about the last one."

Chrono applauded them, drawing their attention. "Well done... I knew you weren't all that useless."

Raiden's expression darkened as he stared at Chrono, his smile more sinister than genuine.

*"What do you know about the last one?"*

Chrono leaned back in his seat. "Everything you said was spot on," he smiled. "The last one is where strength actually lies: absolute domain."

Raiden's eyes swept the area in confusion. *"Are you going to show us?"*

Chrono giggled. "Not everyone can get an absolute domain, lad..." She gave a casual shrug. "Unfortunately, I have none."

His expression darkened, his eyes narrowing. "That is why I want the pages... I need an absolute domain of my own."

"What exactly is an absolute domain?" Noelle asked, turning to Chrono.

Chrono paused for a moment, her eyes finding Noelle's. The coldness and intensity in his expression from a second ago had vanished—he looked lost in his own world.

"Absolute domains are the combination of mana zones and domains." His eyes narrowed, and his tone dropped lower. "It may seem simple, but you need an outrageous amount of mana and aura to create."

A soft smile formed on his lips. "And once you do, you become like a god within it." He locked eyes with Noelle once more. "You become strong enough to trap people in it and overshadow countless domains."

Noelle's eyes widened as she abruptly slammed her fists on the table in aggression, snapping Chrono out of her daze. Chrono found himself gazing into the darkness in Noelle's eyes.

"What do you mean? Can it trap other domains in it?" Her voice cut sharply through the air, unleashing the rage and desperation she'd been holding back.

"Calm down, girl." Chrono offered her a soft smile. "Nobody really knows the full extent of an absolute domain, but yes, it's possible."

She shrugged. "And I think that will be their end."

Raiden watched Noelle's hand begin to tremble. She was scared, because if what Chrono had said was true, then her mother was trapped in an absolute domain.

"What do you mean by 'their end'?" she asked, voice trembling.

Chrono stared at Noelle for a moment, her eyes flickering as she obviously fought back tears. A brief silence stretched between them.

She gestured at the map. "There are islands across the ocean..." He looked back at Noelle.

"Each island is occupied by individuals with absolute domains." He glanced at the map. "And among them are the Elusives—the ones who hold the twenty-eight pages."

Raiden moved to where he could see Chrono clearly. Her expression didn't falter; not even a hint of a smile, blunt and distant.

"However, traveling into an absolute domain isn't easy... you have to use what they call the Leviathan Path." He rose to his feet.

"You need an immense amount of mana to use the path, to pay the price and fuel your journey. How fast you can get there depends on the mana you use for fuel."

He looked at Raiden. "If you want the pages, get the mana needed for both the price and fuel. Then we'll head to the Solace Isle to seal our alliance."

Chrono started walking out of the tent, but Raiden felt more confused than satisfied. *"The price is different from fuel?"*

Chrono paused and turned around, his expression unreadable. "I'd suggest you hurry... there are organizations already going after the pages."

Raiden's mouth parted in shock as Noelle stood frozen behind him and Chrono walked out. What Chrono was asking was unfair, but right now, they were his only hope of getting the twenty-eight pages. He was going to feed off their desperation. This was something Raiden usually enjoyed doing, and now it was being turned against him.

While he stood there lost in thought, Noelle broke from her daze and headed for the tent exit, MK following behind. Screams suddenly rang out from the city nearby. It was nighttime, and Chrono and his people were attacking the city.

Raiden took a deep breath and looked at the map on the table. It had no labels besides the kingdoms. He couldn't go with Chrono even if he wanted to—she held all the details in her mind.

Raiden smirked. *"I will kill this bastard the moment we get the pages."*

#### *Chapter 99: Kingdom of Noor 4*

Screams, tears, music, and laughter filled the air from the direction of the city. Raiden stood in the Apex Circle's quarters, looking toward the sounds while holding a piece of bread. Ash and the others had been given a newly opened tent at Chrono's command.

He needed a moment of peace to collect himself and consider how exactly he was going to get the minimum mana pool for their journey.

The mountain overlooking the city entrance wasn't just the best place to watch as the people got slaughtered—it also provided enough space for him to think.

He began making his way toward the mountain. Despite the dry afternoon wind, the evening brought a chilled breeze unusual for a desert city. He rolled down his sleeves as he climbed the mountain, fearing the worst.

When he reached the mountaintop, he let out a sigh of relief and sat down, gazing into the city. He couldn't see much even with his Gaze Beyond ability activated.

Despite the screams echoing from parts of the city, especially the dark areas, he could see young women dancing for men as they spent money on them, drinking and eating meat. They were completely oblivious to the danger.

However, it didn't take long before something bizarre caught his attention. He saw someone familiar, and after a careful look at his blue eyes, he realized it was the kid who had taken them to the Apex Circle: Nico.

Raiden smiled as he watched him fight off a grown man who apparently wanted to take the water Raiden had given him. But Nico held his ground, refusing to let go of the water sack, teeth gritted in determination as he threw his body weight against the man.

"What do you want?"

A voice from the left snapped Raiden out of his daze, and he turned toward its direction. The shock of it sent a shiver through his body in the cold evening air.

He sighed. *"I didn't know you were here, Noelle."*

Noelle lay on the ground facing the dark sky, her domain activated around her. She gave no response to Raiden, but he understood her situation. Her mother was possibly dead, and if not, in a very dire situation.

But she couldn't do anything even if she wanted to. Not only was she bound by responsibility as the rulekeeper to always put the safety of the books first, but wherever her mother was, she couldn't reach her in her current state.

Raiden didn't want to say anything, but his relationship with her wasn't special, and he knew this was an opportunity he couldn't let slip. If he played it right, not only might he develop a better relationship with Noelle, but he could also use her.

He let out a sigh. *"I know you don't want to hear anything from me."*

He glanced at her. *"Possibly you've even created a rule where my words can't penetrate your domain."*

He tilted his head upward and began staring at the stars and the moon to his left. *"I'd suggest you have a little faith in your mother?"*

He paused for a moment. *"My mother, Jane, was always a pain in the butt, but I never doubted her skills."*



He let a nostalgic expression cross his face. *"When I was a kid, she used to save me from most of my failed missions..."*

*"Even though I was pissed when she interrupted, whenever there was trouble, I knew she would come and save me."* Raiden turned to Noelle, who turned to him as well. *"I'd suggest you have a little faith in your mother."*

Noelle's expression darkened. "What do you mean? That's nothing like what they told me about you."

Raiden smirked. He had forgotten that no one knew he was actually Jack, an assassin. But in Raiden's memories, there wasn't anything related to Noelle's situation. Though he doubted his story was anything close to her reality, he knew it was better than nothing.

*"How about we build up our strength and track down the FIRMO so that you can save your mother?"*

Noelle remained silent for a moment. "Do you realize how ridiculously powerful we have to be to even endure an absolute domain?"

"I do..." Freya joined them from behind, placing her hands on her waist as she stood upright.

*"What's it?"*

"Number 5 or below."

Raiden's hand moved to his neck, fingers tracing the star-shaped blue crest.

*"Not only do we have to build up enough mana, but we have to increase in ranks, too?"*

Freya started down the mountain in the direction of the city. "I know absolute domains are incredibly powerful—walking into one is suicide."

She paused and turned to face them, her voice turning cold. "That's why you need to get stronger, Raiden... I don't know, but I feel like Free would've wanted to tell you that."

Raiden watched Freya and the others descend the mountain along the path to the city. Ash, who had awakened, was now perched on Leo's shoulder.

Raiden looked down at his hands, remembering Free, Freya's Arch Hell Phoenix familiar. He had pushed all thoughts of him aside after asking Freya to deliver that message, but hearing his name again stirred unease. He found himself drawn back into the mysteries surrounding Ash, the moon dragon—something he'd hoped to avoid.

"You seem distracted. Did you kill Free or something?" Noelle asked, resting her aether between her lips.

Raiden let her words sink in for a moment, though his mind was elsewhere. He possessed Ash's heart, soul, and everything that defined a moon dragon. Did that make him a moon dragon, too?

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. "We need to start training, and each of us must build up enough mana for our journey."

This was what truly mattered: securing the pages before the other organizations could and returning to his original world. His vengeance was what counted most, not questioning whether he was human or moon dragon.

"This is the first time I've heard you say anything sensible to me..." Noelle said, smoke curling from her lips.

Raiden turned to her and sneered.

"What about you and I," she said, turning to Raiden, "we travel across the cities and come back when we're strong enough."

Raiden locked eyes with Noelle's dark violet ones. What she suggested was a good idea. Not only would they get to explore the kingdom of Noor, but they would return stronger. If he gave the others similar missions, they were all bound to return far more powerful than they would have become staying in a single place.

He smiled. *"That's a great idea, rulekeeper."* Raiden tilted his head back to look at the stars. *"We'll speak to the others when they return and leave as soon as possible."*

*"Yes, I need to get stronger."* He muttered it more to himself. *"I need to go home."*

#### *Chapter 100: Kingdom of Noor 5*

The sun hung lifeless above the horizon, scorching everything below. The only sound was dry air breezing through the desert in the distance, making the atmosphere thick and heavy.

Raiden stood before the others outside the Apex Circle's premises, with Ash lazily resting on his shoulder and the nonchalant Noelle at his side.

They prepared to divide into groups for their journey in pursuit of strength and mana reserves. Chrono's crew remained dormant, still exhausted from their mission the previous night.

Raiden let out a sigh. *"Not all of us speak Noorian, so to make this journey easier, I suggest we break into groups."*

Raiden gestured toward Levi. *"You'll be traveling with Speed and Soul."* Levi responded with a subtle smile.

*"I don't think separating the twins would be a good idea—and you already get along well with Soul."*

"They will be taken care of," Levi said with a cocky grin, but Speed's grim expression showed he wasn't okay with those words.

Raiden turned to MK, then glanced back at Noelle, who gave a blunt shrug. He sighed. *"I thought Noelle would want you with her since you're her guardian, but I guess that isn't the case."*

MK gave Raiden a soft smile. *"Well, I'll be leaving you with Leo."* Raiden turned to Leo, who was adjusting the bandages on his hands. *"I'd like you to return strong enough to defeat me, Leo."*

Leo smiled, but before he could speak, Freya cut in. "Are you seriously leaving me with the traitor?" She gestured at Aeris, who gave her an awkward smile.

Raiden turned to Freya before giving Aeris a sharp look. She had been composed this whole time, and though she hadn't been very useful since Levi always beat her to the relevant news, Raiden could see she was trying. She held back her words, wanting to prove herself. However, to Raiden, a traitor would always be a traitor—it was only a matter of time.

*"Kill her if you must,"* he shrugged. *"She would be useful to you, though..."*

The moment he finished speaking, he gestured for Aeris to approach. From her expression as she moved toward Raiden, it was clear she wasn't happy with her situation. She was the oldest among them, yet she was the least respected.

The moment she approached, Raiden whispered something in her ear. She hesitated for a moment, then smiled.

"Just trust me with it," she said with a soft smile, her worries finally easing.

Raiden let out a sigh. *"Noelle and I are leaving now, and you should too."*

He glanced at Soul; she was more timid than usual, though her dark aura remained stable. *"We need to get the pages and save Noelle's mother. I'd be glad if we conquered this kingdom in the process."*

Raiden walked over to Soul and took her by the hand. She was his treasure, his ace in the hole for anything he couldn't handle himself. She had to remain in top shape.

*"You said you wanted to help like everyone else, right?"* Raiden whispered to her. She gave a subtle nod. *"Then this is your chance, Soul. Get stronger."*

Raiden narrowed his eyes. *"I won't be around, but your brother will be there. Don't exhaust yourself, okay?"*

Soul's eyes darted to the ground as she nodded repeatedly. Before Raiden could step away, she surprised him by pulling him into a hug.

Raiden's uneasiness was unmistakable—his face turned crimson as he struggled with what to do with his hands. After a moment of confusion, he patted her head until she was ready and stepped back.

The moment she did, Raiden sighed and took a step back. *"I hope the money I gave you all will be enough to take care of yourselves once it's exchanged into the Noorian currency, Nou."*

Leo and Aeris gave him firm nods while the others just stood there. Raiden's expression turned somber. *"If you return before we do, make sure Chrono sends us a message."*

Raiden was out of words. He searched his mind for something encouraging to say to them, but found nothing genuine—only manipulation. He feared too much of that would make them think he was trying to get rid of the weak ones among them.

"What city is after Dark City?" Noelle finally spoke up, folding her arms across her chest.

Freya narrowed her eyes and sneered. "To our right is Silver City, my city, and to the left is Lunar City." She raised her eyebrows. "There are others across from us, but they're too far."

Noelle shook her head and said nothing, turning toward Lunar City with a shrug.

Freya gritted her teeth. "We fight again when we return, you scam."

Noelle shot her a sharp look and sighed. "You can't win against me, even in my sleep."

Raiden looked between Noelle's mocking expression and Freya's irritated face as she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

Clearly, there was more to them than met the eye, because Raiden couldn't quite remember when their hatred for each other had become so intense.

If he stood there any longer, it wouldn't take long before those two went at each other. *"We're leaving now,"* he said with a practiced expression of encouragement.

*"Make sure you don't die."* He smirked and fell into step behind Noelle as the others dispersed.

Noelle walked through the entrance with casual confidence, her aether resting between her lips. But Raiden started to reconsider their whole partnership. They might work together when necessary, but how exactly were they going to handle everything together if he could barely manage a conversation with her?

Just as he was lost in thought, Ash stirred awake, stretching on his shoulder.

[Papa...] her voice echoed in Raiden's head, far more energetic than before.

*"Hey, you're up."*

Ash flapped her wings and launched herself off his shoulder, landing on the floor before dashing toward Noelle. Raiden was confused—Ash hardly paid attention to anyone else.

She wrapped herself around Noelle's leg, nearly tripping her but successfully getting her attention. Noelle paused with a soft smile, crouched down beside Ash, and lifted her up, giving Raiden a chance to catch up.

Ash began acting playful with Noelle, nudging her affectionately while Noelle gently rubbed her hand along Ash's scales, both with soft smiles. Raiden watched, his face twitching with annoyance.

*This is very disrespectful, Ash*—he thought.

[I'll come to you later,] Ash replied, giving him pretend puppy eyes.

Raiden paused, his mouth opening slightly in confusion. *"You can speak better now?"*

he blurted out.

Noelle also paused and turned to him. "What did you say?"

Though still confused, no one knew he could communicate with his familiar telepathically, so he needed to cover it up or risk being thought insane.

*"Uhm... I was asking, 'Why do we have to go to Lunar City?'"* he said awkwardly, scratching the back of his head.

Noelle started moving through the desert again, Raiden following behind. "Freya will probably head to Silver City first since she's from there."

Raiden's expression lightened. *"Oh, I get it. You don't want to be in the same place as her."*

Noelle turned to him. She seemed calmer than her usual self, more open perhaps. "I plan on killing as many people as I can."

Raiden's expression shifted in disappointment. She didn't even let the praise last a moment longer.

"We need fake names. I don't want my name getting around."

Raiden gave a subtle nod. He hadn't thought of it himself, but it was a good idea. Just then, several sand wolves burst from the ground and charged toward them.

Noelle simply turned and gestured, and the wolves immediately turned on each other, teeth tearing through dry skin with savage snarls and yelps, leaving Raiden bewildered.

"I'll go with Wolf..." She paused, noticing Raiden's confused expression. "What about you?"

Raiden remained confused, wondering how Noelle had used her ability without activating her domain. *"How did you do that?"*

"What?"

*"Making the animals kill themselves?"*

Noelle turned to him, eyes narrowing. "Your servants have worked under you for months, and none of them knows a thing about you." Her expression twisted into disgust—finally becoming the Noelle Raiden knew. "What makes you think I'll tell you?"

*"Fair enough..."*

Raiden let out a sigh. He repeated his own name over and over in his head, then tried others, searching for something better. *"I'll go with Raven then."*

The moment he said that, both Ash and Noelle turned to him with disappointment written across their faces.

[That sounds exactly like your name, Papa.]

Raiden shrugged. *"It sounds different to me."*

He truly wasn't good with names, but the familiarity bothered him only a little. Ash could speak clearly now, and that was a relief. Finally, he could get answers to most of his questions. But how exactly had this happened?