

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 101: Kingdom of Noor 6 - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 101: Kingdom of Noor 6

Chapter 101: Kingdom of Noor 6

The desert whispered its story—one of hardship and torment. Every movement stirred a desperate desire to find something cool, something merciful to cling to.

It took only a few hours to cross to Lunar City, but with the sun blazing behind them and relentless heat bleeding through the dunes, neither could stomach the desert's tale. It was torture.

Raiden and Noelle doubled over, hands on their knees, panting as they tried to soothe their burning skin. Ash rested against Noelle's shoulder, his face crimson from nothing but the brutal heat.

They were a few steps away from covering the distance to the city's entrance, and the thought of finally being away from the desert made them almost languid with relief.

The city's entrance opened onto a bustling marketplace filled with stalls sheltered beneath colorful cloth canopies. Buildings of sand-colored stone rose around them, adorned with arched windows, intricate latticework, and graceful domed roofs. Palm trees dotted the streets while potted plants spilled from balconies above.

The streets teemed with people in flowing robes and turbans, none paying them any mind. Unlike the lifeless Dark City during daylight hours, this was a city worth visiting. If they didn't know any better, they'd call it the most beautiful in all of Noor. But appreciation would have to wait—right now, they only cared about finding relief from the scorching heat.

"I think we should find a place to stay for a bit..." Raiden said, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Yes, I think so too," Noelle said, her voice barely above a whisper as she forced herself upright.

Raiden glanced at her—sweating but obviously in much better shape than him. He couldn't help but berate himself for how weak this new body had made him. But first things first: he needed a shower before his skin started peeling.

"Come on, let's go," Noelle said, already walking away.

Raiden clenched his fists, forced himself upright, and followed her, wiping the streaming sweat from his face.

The moment Noelle took a step past the entrance, crossing the city's threshold, she paused with a perplexed look. As soon as Raiden caught up to her, he paused too. They exchanged glances, and soft smiles spread across both their faces.

Whatever was causing it remained a mystery, but the air within the city felt so different, so cozy. A pleasant chill ran down Raiden's spine, his body practically vibrating with excitement.

Their exhaustion melted away instantly. It felt like the entire city was one giant sanctuary. Raiden couldn't tell if he loved the atmosphere so much because of the hellish desert they'd just endured, but right then, that cool air was the most beautiful thing he'd ever felt against his skin.

"This is a safe haven," Noelle murmured, her expression more reverent than even Raiden's.

They ventured into the city, their eyes darting between faces while sellers beamed at them with welcoming waves. The streets were carriage-free—just one massive boulevard teeming with merchants and tourists, with benches lined down the middle for weary travelers.

However, Raiden snapped out of his daze and hurriedly reached for his pocket. He needed to exchange his currency from Persa to Nou. The instant he felt the money, his eyes started darting around, searching for somewhere to make the exchange.

A fruit seller on his right caught his eye, smiling and waving. Raiden smiled back.

"You guys should wait for me..." he said to Noelle and Ash as he approached the merchant's stall.

He was wrapped in a robe that pulled taut over his considerable belly. His brown eyes followed Raiden eagerly as he positioned himself to grab whatever fruit might catch his eye.

"I want to buy a few things, but I only have Persa money," Raiden said with a gentle smile. *"Do you accept foreign currency, or must I exchange it somewhere?"*

The man's cheerful expression melted away, replaced by disgust and disappointment. "I don't take foreign currency," he said bluntly.

Raiden put on a practiced disappointed expression. *"I would have liked a few apples..."* he said with a sigh. The man barely paid attention to him now, but Raiden wasn't done—he knew he could get more.

"I'm very interested in these apples. Where can I exchange my money to purchase them?"

This should have cheered the man up a little, but it didn't. In fact, he seemed hesitant to interact. Raiden locked eyes with him, tracking his movements, trying to draw him into conversation.

The man let out a sigh and pointed to a white building three blocks away on the left. "There... go there." He wouldn't even look at him.

The man's reaction made Raiden uncomfortable.

Usually, sellers would be enthusiastic about potential customers, but this merchant wasn't his target anyway. Raiden smiled at him and went back to Noelle and Ash.

"We need to exchange our money over there," Raiden said to Noelle, nodding toward the shop as they began walking over.

The moment they were within range, Raiden's expression darkened. Several men lingered in front of the shop, and something about them struck Raiden as wrong.

"These people look very healthy compared to those in Dark City," Noelle commented. Raiden turned to her with a shrug as the men outside the shop began dispersing.

"Every city has its own history, I suppose," he said, stepping up to the shop's wooden entrance.

There were no signs whatsoever indicating what kind of establishment it was, but judging by the noise from inside, it was likely an inn or tavern.

Raiden gently pushed the door open, causing the doorbell to ring, but before he could enter, Ash's voice rang out behind him.

[Something isn't right, Papa.]

Raiden stopped immediately and signaled Noelle to halt while his right hand remained on the door, holding it slightly ajar.

[There is something wrong with this place.]

Raiden knew his instincts were right the moment he felt Ash's heart rate spike in fear. But before he could better assess their surroundings, voices started echoing in his head. They weren't his thoughts, nor Ash's or the System's. The sounds were alien and disjointed—some kind of ancient incantation.

He pulled his hand from the door and clutched his head, Noelle doing the same. The voice brought no pain, only overwhelming stress that made him want to tear it from his mind.

The incantation grew louder, and with it came drowsiness that pulled at his consciousness. He collapsed to the floor, his vision turning blurry.

Through the haze, he saw Noelle collapsing beside him, but before darkness claimed him, he caught sight of the men from the shop returning, rushing toward them with eager excitement in their eyes.

He willed himself to move, but the voice drained what little strength he had left, and darkness swallowed him whole.

Chapter 102: Drake's Shell

By Raiden's count, this was the second time he'd walked straight into something without seeing it coming. The mysterious incident that led to his transmigration, and now this mess at Lunar City.

Through the darkness, though, he could feel hands pushing him, shaking him, as a voice called out. Not the voice in his head this time—this one was distant yet close enough to belong to whoever wouldn't stop trying to rouse him.

Raiden felt no sense of urgency to wake up—the annoying voice in his head was gone, and all he wanted was to keep resting. But the person trying to wake him wouldn't quit. The next thing he knew, a heavy slap landed across his face, jerking him upright so suddenly that his head smacked into his persistent rescuer.

Sunlight stabbed at his eyes, making him throw up a hand to block it. Noelle and Ash were collapsed near his legs, and to his right crouched a young man a few years older than him—a white aura flickering around him, gray eyes above thick brows, face hidden behind a white turban and black cloak that left only his stare visible.

A bone-deep growl rumbled from his left, followed by sand erupting in a massive cloud. He gulped hard, steadying himself with one hand as sweat formed on his brow.

It all moved too quickly—even his danger sense couldn't keep pace.

A massive sand worm, easily seventy feet long, had burst from the ground in an explosion of dust and sand. The terrifying creature was armored in thick, segmented scales of reddish-brown that rippled with raw power—like some nightmarish cross between an earthworm and a serpent.

Its mouth stretched impossibly wide—ten to fifteen times taller than any human—revealing row after row of sharp, inward-curving teeth. The fleshy violet interior crawled

with claw-like mandibles and writhing tentacles, a living meat grinder built for gruesomely efficient consumption.

Raiden stared in stunned confusion, his mind struggling to process what the hell he was looking at and how they'd gotten into this nightmare.

"Hey... we can't protect you forever—get to your feet and fight!" Raiden watched the man race to join a dozen other defenders while far behind them, a handful of elders pressed together in panic, clinging to each other as death approached.

The looks on their faces said it all—they'd been dragged here and robbed. Raiden's hand shot to his neck, checking for the key to the Book of Ashes' chest. Relief flooded him when his fingers found it, but then he noticed something wrong. The cord felt different, like it had been retied. Someone had definitely tried to take it.

What mattered was the key's safety. The battle raging before him made no sense, though. Raiden could see the fighters landing what should have been killing blows, but each time the worm retreated into the sand and resurfaced, it seemed to have grown more powerful.

Just then, Noelle jolted awake from her slumber. When she caught sight of the massive sand worm, her expression perfectly mirrored the confusion and terror Raiden had felt upon waking.

"What's going on?" Noelle asked, rubbing her temples.

"I think we were kidnapped," Raiden said with a dark smile. *"But hey, great vacation spot, right?"*

Noelle lifted Ash from where she'd been lying and settled her in a safer position. "So we just have to kill this monster and we're free?"

Raiden shrugged as Noelle stood up. *"Pretty obvious, if you ask me."*

Her smile startled him. In all their time together, Raiden had never seen her smile—he hadn't even known she could.

"I've heard of these creatures, but I never had the opportunity to face one back in Aurelia." Her grin turned predatory. "What a gift."

She said and bolted straight for the worm. Raiden grabbed Ash, threw her over his shoulder, and stood up just in time to see Noelle charging past the other fighters. They screamed warnings at her to stay back, but she wasn't listening.

By perfect timing or sheer luck—Raiden couldn't tell which—Noelle's leap synchronized with the worm's own lunge into the air. Her strike connected dead-on with the monster's

body, the impact booming across the wasteland as the creature crashed back down into the desert.

Raiden's jaw dropped as he stared. Every fighter around him wore the same expression of shock, all wondering the same thing—how had she destroyed that beast with a single strike?

But the victory was an illusion. The sand worm launched itself back up, striking at Noelle with lightning speed. She had no time to dodge. Raiden watched in terror, a chill of dread coursing through him as his face went deathly pale.

Yet a heartbeat before the beast could reach her, it stopped completely. The elders behind Raiden looked suddenly excited, as though they recognized something Raiden didn't. He stared in confusion as the sand worm simply disintegrated—no blood, no cuts, no trace it had ever existed.

Raiden gulped as he saw the source of the worm's destruction: a thirteen-year-old boy wreathed in a dark aura. White hair, brilliant blue eyes, draped in black robes—he looked like death incarnate.

Yet the men cheered, and the elders practically ran toward him with worship in their eyes, as though he were their greatest hero.

Raiden didn't move, just watched as Noelle joined the man who had woken him. The stranger attempted to check if she was hurt, but Noelle's face twisted with annoyance—not at him, but at herself.

Raiden understood Noelle's anger—her attack should have finished the worm. But that boy troubled him more. Where had he emerged from in this wasteland? How had he simply appeared and destroyed the creature without even moving? What exactly was he?

"Good, you're awake," the man next to Noelle said, smiling. "I'm Stanley. How are you holding up?" He extended his hand for a shake.

Raiden paused, searching his memory for the name he'd chosen before their journey. "*I am Raven.*"

He managed a fake smile, nodding toward Noelle as he shook Stanley's hand. "*She is Wolf.*"

Stanley nodded subtly with a gentle expression, while Raiden's own expression turned cold. "*Where are we, and what's going on?*"

Stanley sighed. "They call this place Drake's She'll."

That explained nothing to Raiden, and Stanley could see it in his face. "Everyone here was kidnapped, robbed, and teleported here."

Raiden immediately remembered everything that had happened before he'd lost consciousness. That relentless incantation that had nearly driven him insane.

"So there's no way out?"

He shook his head grimly. "This is the safe zone. Even here, the sand worms find us." His eyes locked with Raiden's.

"Say you somehow defeat all the sand worms—there's still the Abyss to deal with. It's an underground market where you have to be bought like merchandise before you can leave this place."

Raiden sneered, his jaw clenching with rage. *"We're slaves?"*

Stanley studied him with narrowed eyes. "You're new to this kingdom, aren't you?"

Raiden was too stunned by the reality of being a slave to respond.

"Who's the kid?" Noelle asked, settling onto the sand.

"Oh, him? That's Jojo. He arrived here a week ago and managed to reach the Abyss within days." His expression grew tender. "He's become our hero. Comes back regularly to look after the elders."

Raiden studied Jojo with growing unease. If even a prodigy like him had spent an entire week here, what was going to happen to someone like Raiden? Freya and Levi should have warned them about this nightmare, but he knew this was simply another challenge he'd have to face.

He let out a deep sigh. If a simple desert could overwhelm him like this, what hope did he have of finding the twenty-eight pages? But cowering wasn't an option.

"You look stressed. Don't worry about it—we're all going to die here anyway. At least you won't be alone." Stanley shrugged, but Raiden clearly didn't appreciate the dark humor.

"Say you get lucky, get bought, and escape the Abyss—this is still the safest region in the whole desert. It only gets worse from here."

Raiden stared in disbelief. *"I was told Noorians were dying of starvation. Where the hell did you find the power to pull off something like this?"*

Stanley turned to him. "Look, average Noorians like us? We starve to death. But those strong enough to survive these conditions—they get far richer."

Raiden smirked and tucked his hands into his pockets. Klein el Seer's words were holding true—he really did need to learn everything like a newborn.

Chapter 103: Drake's Shell 2

"You are very lucky, Raven." Stanley turned to Raiden as he sat watching him shadowbox, sweat pouring down his bare chest and flinging droplets with every strike.

"Seems your key held no value to them. When you were teleported, the key was still on your chest—I did you the honor."

Raiden barely glanced at Stanley, his mind solely occupied with training. The desert wasn't just a place he didn't want to be; it was tormenting. His lips were dry, his stomach rumbled relentlessly, and to make their torture worse, the relentless heat gave way to intense cold at night.

Trapped in the middle of the desert without shelter, it felt like a ticking clock counting down to their death from starvation and cold; if the sand worms didn't devour them first.

The sun hung lazily above the horizon, beating against his pale skin, but Raiden knew this wouldn't last forever. He just had to get strong enough to defeat a sand worm on his own before heading into the underground market—the Jangle. He wasn't alone in this mindset. Noelle also trained in her own way, testing her ability, Rule, in different situations.

"How exactly have you people been surviving this long without any meals and shelter?" Raiden muttered as his fist beat against the air.

"Through Jojo... we're the only ones to survive this long, though. They say most people don't last a day."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, letting sweat drip down his face while keeping it from his eyes. He was still baffled by how Jojo had managed to kill that sand worm yesterday—if 'kill' was even the right word.

Someone powerful enough to make a massive monster vanish into thin air, a creature whose mouth alone was more than ten times wider than a human...

He might be a corrupt crest bearer, but that didn't make him less formidable. If someone like that was still available in the market, what kind of monsters were already sold?

However, just as his mind wandered, his danger detection kicked in instantly. His eyes darted left as his heart rate spiked. In a split second, a sand worm burst from the sand, its massive mouth gaping wide, rows of curved teeth gnashing together.

A hollow, menacing growl echoed across the distance as everyone scrambled to their feet; elders panicking as usual while the younger men moved toward the beast.

"What? This doesn't usually happen!" Stanley said, voice cracking.

"How so?" Noelle asked, closing in from behind.

"They usually appear once every five days..."

Raiden stopped training and turned to Stanley, though he kept one eye on the others fighting the worm. If what Stanley was saying held true, then there was something about the worms they hadn't figured out yet.

"What are you guys doing?! Get over here and help us!" one of the fighters yelled.

Raiden wore a soft smile as he approached them. Once within reach, though, his expression darkened. The worm lunged from the exact same spot every time, diving back into the sand at that identical location. It was as if it was caught in a constant loop.

"Is this how Noelle predicted its moves yesterday?" he muttered, concerned.

But he knew it was his turn to show what he could do. He smirked and clenched his fist, waiting patiently for the worm to dive into the sand. Then he began concentrating mana into his legs and arms, timing the exact moment it would burst back out.

The moment he felt a vibration from the ground, indicating the worm was coming up, he yelled out, *"Step away!"*

The psychopathic smile on his face alone was enough to scare them away immediately. The moment the worm lunged out of the sand, everyone witnessed a massive wind eruption, filling the air with enormous amounts of sand and sending waves of panic through the group.

What they couldn't see was that Raiden had closed the distance between himself and the worm in that single second. Euphoria flooded through his body as his fist connected with the massive creature, a sensational thrill making him giggle with delight.

The worm went crashing into the sand with a thunderous impact, releasing a hollow scream as it coughed up blood that splattered in their direction.

Raiden's smile grew more sinister while everyone behind stood shocked by what had happened, including Noelle, whose mouth hung slightly open. But when Raiden looked

at his hand, he saw it bleeding from the impact, several finger joints twisted at unnatural angles. He gritted his teeth and forced them back into place, knowing his regeneration would handle the rest.

However, his danger detection flared instantly. The moment it tingled in his head, the worm was already lunging toward him. Pure survival instinct kicked in—he leaped left, narrowly avoiding the creature's snapping jaws as they closed around three of the other men instead.

The moment Raiden landed, he could hear his heart thundering in his head, his chest constricting with explosive heat, and goosebumps flooding his skin.

Everyone fled out of range as their previous position became the creature's new circling pattern.

Raiden gulped as he watched the scene unfold. *"What are these creatures?"* he muttered, his left hand pressed to his chest.

His strike had affected not just its physical body but its soul and spirit as well. Yet now, the creature before them possessed the same energy it had before his attack landed. It was as if it had never been touched.

"It nearly killed me..." he whispered, trembling.

"Yeah, you're a lucky bastard," Noelle said, closing in on him. "But who am I to talk? I needed Jojo to save my ass, too."

Raiden sneered. She wasn't wrong. He should have been dead meat by now, and worse, his broken hand had yet to heal.

Noelle stared at the worm. "I'd like to kill this thing myself, and I know you feel the same." She glanced at Raiden. "But right now, neither of us is ready for that."

Raiden sighed. "What do you propose?"

"Nothing too extreme... just a reckless plan."

She narrowed her eyes, grinning confidently.

Chapter 104: Drake's Shell 3

Stanley and the others had almost nothing to offer: just Stanley's protective barrier and a bald man with a blonde mustache who had an energy boost ability. Even those two were trembling with fear.

They kept backing away from the worm as it lunged into the air and dove back down, using the same spots for its entry and exit points.

"We need to kill it before it goes back underground," Noelle said as she and Raiden slowly approached the sand worm.

Raiden sighed and braced himself as they both waited for the perfect moment to trap the worm.

"It's too big for me to hold, so you'll need to finish everything within five seconds."

Raiden gave Noelle a firm nod as he concentrated mana into his left hand. It would be a challenge since his dominant right hand was still injured, but he had to make the most of whatever opportunity Noelle created.

The ground began shaking as the sand about ten feet from them started sinking in. What followed was the massive sand worm lunging into the air with its mouth wide open, letting out a hollow growl.

"Rule Domain!" Noelle called out. Her golden aura stopped flowing from her body and instead formed a trap around the giant worm, with its head jutting outside the domain's boundary while the rest of its massive body was caught within.

Raiden clenched his fist and delivered his first strike, making the worm scream even louder. But he could feel it wasn't enough. He needed to use his right hand, or the monster would break free with only minor injuries. That wouldn't finish it.

In the heat of the moment, he subconsciously increased his mana flow. All he could think about was forcing his right hand to heal faster and making use of the remaining three seconds. But the moment mana filled every inch of his body, he felt it happen—his mana exploded outward, flooding Noelle's domain with blue energy, creating his mana zone.

At that moment, the three seconds felt like thirty. He felt no desire to use his right hand, even though he could feel it regenerating faster than it was before.

His mana formed a sphere around his left fist as he delivered strike after strike. The worm's screams and the blood it sprayed went unnoticed by Raiden, and before long, he had landed over twenty strikes. To everyone else, they could only register about three of them.

The instant Noelle's domain fell, she dropped to the floor. The worm erupted in a spray of gore, body parts scattered across the sand as blood rained down. But Raiden only felt crushing exhaustion as he collapsed. Every ounce of strength had been drained from him—he could hardly keep his eyes open, and hunger gnawed at him like death itself.

"Raven! Wolf!" Stanley and the others shouted, rushing toward them.

Their voices sounded distant to Raiden. His vision blurred, and then everything went black.

[ALERT]

[FASTER REGENERATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+15XP]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+20XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL- 35/100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 130

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1000/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 330

STAMINA: 325

DRAGON AURA: 130

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%

—Moon Dragon's Veins: 10%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

Noelle was up in a few hours and returned to training, but Raiden was trapped in his own slumber. Though his strength was still recovering, he was starving—at least water would have been enough to sustain him.

It took him two days of sleep before he finally woke to find Ash resting on his chest, but his attention didn't dwell on her for long. He instinctively turned to his left to see Noelle engaged in a fierce one-on-one battle with another sand worm.

A sharp pain shot through Raiden's head, making him gulp and clutch at his skull. But even as he winced, he watched Noelle fight, perplexed by how exactly she was battling the worm.

He couldn't see her domain activated, but he could see Noelle in her mana zone. He also noticed the worm couldn't delve into the sand anymore—it wiggled its giant body across the desert, forced to engage Noelle in direct battle.

At first glance, it looked like the worm was overwhelming Noelle with its size, but that wasn't the case. Noelle avoided it effortlessly despite its massive bulk and seemed to be attacking only certain joints of the worm.

The moment she was done attacking those specific joints, she started running, creating distance between her and the worm. Obviously, it wasn't going to let her escape. It dashed after her, but judging by the smirk on her face, that was exactly what she'd planned. When the worm came within reach, her eyes lit up with pride.

"Rule Domain," she muttered, and the moment the domain formed around them, the worm ceased moving. Every joint Noelle had touched cracked, and the next moment, its body was forcefully ripped to pieces.

She deactivated her domain and began panting. Reaching for her neck, she touched her golden star-shaped crest and smiled. Raiden was both shocked and confused. This wasn't the first time he'd seen Noelle use her ability without her domain, but what really puzzled him was the scale—their fight had covered over two miles. Could her ability really reach that far?

He let out a sigh and began rubbing his tummy. He had to focus on how to fill his stomach first because he knew there was no way Noelle was going to explain exactly how her ability worked.

[I'm hungry, Papa.] Ash said and turned to him.

Raiden patted her on the head. *"Let's hope the elders have something to spare, because I am absolutely dying!"*

Raiden said and turned to Noelle once more as he could see the others hurrying to check on her. It was getting dark, and he had only one thing in mind—the next kill was going to be his only. But now, he needed to fill his stomach.

"You might be hungry, Raven," an elderly woman said with a smile. "Take this piece of bread."

Raiden smiled.

Chapter 105: Drake's Shell 4

The sun scorched relentlessly as always, and Raiden kept his mana zone activated around him. Surprisingly, it didn't cover as much space as his previous one. Even though this came effortlessly, it only reached about three feet from him.

Still, he could feel the heat within the breeze, even from the edge of his zone. The soft touch of the air against sand, and not just that—even the sound of it reached him.

He sweated heavily, not from the heat alone but from how each movement within the zone felt heavy on his body. Still, they felt more powerful than usual, and that was exactly what he needed.

The rest stood behind him while he faced the vast desert, the direction where the sand worms normally emerged. Their appearance rate was abnormal, but that meant little to him. If he was going to kill one to match Noelle's stats, all he had to do was wait.

However, he had stood within his zone far longer than he'd anticipated. If he kept his mana zone activated at this rate, he'd most likely be exhausted soon.

He gritted his teeth and began stamping his legs into the ground, hoping to lure a worm out with the vibrations. After minutes of that activity, he doubled over and held his knees, panting from exhaustion. The others immediately burst into laughter, teasing his tiredness. The elders were no exception.

But that only made Raiden smile, his mind turning to darker thoughts. He was going to leave them all behind to die anyway; might as well let them have their fun at his expense.

He began laughing out loud as his voice carried through the distance. The others looked confused, but Noelle simply smiled with Ash in her arms—she knew exactly what Raiden was trying to do.

Raiden wasn't only laughing for the fun of it, but if vibration was no use, then he was trying sound. Perhaps, too much noise could lure a worm out to quench his thirst for blood.

However, his laughter didn't last long before he began to cough. His lips were dry, and his throat felt like it was ripping apart. They had limited resources in the desert, and what little moisture he had left was being drained by his mana zone.

At that moment, he felt the urge to deactivate his mana zone for a moment and rest. Maybe a worm would show up eventually.

He dropped to the ground and deactivated his mana zone. The moment he did, sweat began dripping from his body into the sand. At that instant, the ground started shaking.

Raiden's eyes sparkled as he rose to his feet and reactivated his mana zone. He had no idea what exactly lured a worm out, but he didn't care about the details right now.

His eyes glanced around, searching for where the worm would surface. The moment he understood, the exact place he stood began sinking inward.

Fear shot through his chest as he spun toward the others. "*Get back!*" he shouted, concentrating mana into his legs and sprinting about sixty meters in the opposite direction.

He gulped as he watched the worm explode from the ground into the air. Where he'd been standing, he would have ended up straight in its mouth.

However, he knew he had only one chance to finish it off. As the worm's massive body hovered above, Raiden grinned widely and forced himself to release enormous amounts of mana, extending his mana zone by two feet in height and length.

Euphoria coursed through him as his body began to tingle with excitement. He concentrated mana into his legs and fists, the power forming a sphere around him.

He dashed beneath the worm, and just before it could plunge back into the sand, he jumped into the air, meeting the creature midair as he drove his fist below its neck. It released a loud, hollow wail, louder than the usual ones, making everyone cover their ears.

Raiden touched down with a devilish smile, his hand shaking and soaked in blood. The needle-sharp teeth embedded in the worm's tough skin had punctured right through his hand.

But he had the worm right where he wanted it—its retreat into the sand was delayed, and those precious seconds were all he needed.

He threw himself at the monster once more, using his left hand to strike until it also broke. Concentrating every ounce of mana he had left into his mangled right fist, he drove it forward, sending a bone-shaking sound through the distance before collapsing to the ground with euphoric thrills racing through his spine.

The worm growled as it convulsed in midair and finally burst apart. Blood cascaded down on them as Raiden wore a gentle smile, relishing the warm blood pattering against his skin.

Everyone had their mouths slightly open, completely stunned. To them, the whole thing had happened in less than thirty seconds, too fast for them to wrap their heads around.

[ALERT]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+5XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL- 40/100 XP.]

MANA CONTROL: 160

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1060/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 350

STAMINA: 345

DRAGON AURA: 140

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 90%

—Euphoria: 80%

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: 40%

—Moon Dragon's Veins: 15%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

Raiden smiled as he stared at the blue screen before his eyes. That was the only thing he had strength left for; he was so exhausted that even his regeneration was having trouble mending his broken fists.

"Raven?! Are you okay?" Stanley and the other men rushed to his side to check on him.

"You were so cool, Raven..." Stanley said, crouching down beside Raiden. It didn't take long before one of the men spotted his bleeding fists.

"Whoa, his fists are mangled..." the man whispered, voice breaking.

Raiden's eyes moved between their faces, wanting to tell them to just reset the joints in his hands, and he'd be fine. But even speaking those words felt impossible.

"We don't have a healer with us, but hang in there, Raven."

He could see the urgency in their eyes as they contemplated his fate, but Raiden's consciousness was slowly fading.

He appreciated their worry, but now that he'd proven he could take down a sand worm alone, the moment he recovered, he was heading to the underground market, the abyss.

Chapter 106: Drake's Shell 5

With Ash resting on his shoulder, Raiden stood before Stanley and the others as they prepared to leave for the underground market, all under their watchful gaze.

Stanley looked down at the floor, then smiled. "I am very happy for you two. I mean, not only did we get to see your incredible strength, but you've helped us survive another week, just like Jojo did."

Raiden's eyes narrowed slightly as he observed Noelle approaching the elderly women who stood behind the others. Her head was bowed submissively, yet she smiled warmly.

"This place may not be the abyss, but it's still dangerous, so you guys have to be careful," one of the men added.

Raiden raised an eyebrow. He'd been concerned they might want to tag along—there would still be sand worms to deal with on the way to the underground market. But judging by their expressions, they had no desire to join them.

"We wish we could go with you guys, but none of us are strong enough to make it through the abyss."

Raiden gave them a subtle nod with a smile. He admired their courage. They knew from the moment they arrived at Drake's Shell that it was their end, yet they had all accepted their fate.

Staying in the desert meant they would be devoured by sand worms sooner or later, and leaving for the underground market meant they wouldn't have the strength to survive the journey. To accept such a fate required courage and self-awareness, and he respected that.

After finishing her conversation with the elderly women, Noelle walked toward them.

"We have to leave now. The sun will come out soon," Noelle said, taking her position behind Raiden.

Before Raiden could take a step, Stanley wrapped him in a hug. Raiden could feel the man's rapid heartbeat through their clothes, his body trembling against him.

"Don't die, okay?" he said, his voice cracking. "I know you're strong, but the things in the abyss are monsters."

He sniffled. "I want you to stay alive, Raven, and don't forget me." A pause, then quieter: "Don't forget us."

Raiden let out a sigh. He didn't plan on dying, but he hesitated to make any promises. Yet Stanley and the others were staring down inevitable death, and the least he could do was give them something to believe in.

"You won't be forgotten, Stanley."

He gently pulled away from the hug and turned to the others. *"None of you will be forgotten," he said with a smile.*

"Can we leave now?" Noelle asked. She began walking away before Raiden could respond, leaving him to turn after her with a perplexed expression.

"Okay, Raven." Stanley smiled, "Bye then."

They all waved as he turned to follow Noelle, quickening his pace to catch up. He needed to understand her behavior. Either he was reading too much into it, or Noelle showed compassion toward women while harboring disdain for men.

"Hey, what was that for?"

Noelle didn't respond, continuing to walk forward without acknowledgement.

"I know you can be a bitch sometimes, but that wasn't called for, Noelle."

She paused, turning back to him. "Didn't you start speaking with them before I did?" With an eye roll, she continued walking. "You were supposed to be done first, not me waiting on you."

Raiden slapped his forehead in frustration. The stark contrast between her current fury and the gentleness she'd shown those women was striking. This wasn't the first time either—back in Persia at the Astro Society, she'd displayed the same tender behavior toward women.

"Do you only respect women because your kingdom is almost entirely women?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Can't you just drop it?" She shook her head in disbelief. "And what's wrong with respecting women more than men? Women are superior in everything."

Raiden chuckled, starting to tease her. *"But when you needed someone for this journey, you chose me."*

He relaxed his posture, watching as Noelle's face began twitching with barely contained irritation.

"I don't really think either gender is better than the other. It depends on the individual person."

His expression grew somber as he thought beyond his casual words. He rarely showed authentic emotion unless he was manipulating someone, but Stanley had been so genuine with him. A man who knew neither his real name nor anything about his true nature, yet had allowed himself to be utterly vulnerable.

He smiled. *"When needed, even a cat can serve as a watchdog, despite lacking a dog's natural instincts."*

Noelle turned slightly toward him. His head was tilted back, a gentle smile playing across his features. With a quiet sigh, she followed his gaze to the sky.

Raiden had been emotionally hollowed out since childhood, a condition that persisted even now. Yet he couldn't help but admire what he'd witnessed from his comrades—their vulnerability, their willingness to navigate conflict through genuine feeling. Still, he believed such emotional openness could become a liability when circumstances demanded strength.

Soon enough, his expression darkened. He started scanning the area with heightened alertness. They had traveled roughly three miles, yet not a single sand worm had appeared. Even his danger detection ability remained completely quiet.

"Can't you feel that something's off?" Noelle turned to him and nodded. "The worms. They should be more active around here, especially this close to the abyss."

"Don't tell me you don't know why..." Raiden didn't need to reply—his face gave him away.

Noelle released a heavy sigh. "They're attracted to moisture. The reason we encountered so many during training was our sweat drawing them in." She kept her eyes focused straight ahead.

Raiden nodded, his eyes drifting skyward again. The mystery of yesterday's worm encounter now made perfect sense. But other questions lingered—why did the sand worms always surface in predictable patterns? It was as though they were confined to certain routes. Before he could voice these concerns to Noelle, however, another realization hit him.

"Tell me you told the old ladies about this..."

"I'm not as heartless as you, bookkeeper." She kept her eyes forward, not bothering to look at him.

Relief flooded through Raiden, though he couldn't explain why it felt so appropriate. His logical mind suggested a swift death would be more humane than the prolonged suffering ahead—after all, this knowledge couldn't alter their final outcome. Yet despite this reasoning, he felt genuinely pleased that Stanley would have some additional time.

Relief washed over him, but it brought with it thoughts of his dead twin brother, Jobe. Jobe had been everything Raiden wasn't—perfect in every way. Whether his thoughts were driven by emotion or logic, they all seemed to circle back to his brother.

After a moment, both stopped dead in their tracks, staring at a massive dark aura that dominated the distant horizon. The energy was far too immense for a single source, and its spherical boundary seemed to have swallowed Drake's Shell entirely.

Raiden's throat tightened as he swallowed his fear. *"Do you think that's the abyss?"*

Noelle couldn't look away, sweat forming on her brow. "Definitely."

Chapter 107: The Abyss

The sight perplexed Raiden and Noelle. What appeared to be a simple desert was exactly that—and yet it was only a stage. The dark aura they'd glimpsed wasn't near the surface as they'd believed, but buried far below.

What stood before them was beyond anything they had anticipated.

Towering arches of sand surrounded the top of the formation, each supporting a large crimson banner. The banners displayed sailing ships in black ink, each bearing a distinct crest: an hourglass, a sword, an arsenal, and most ominously, a menacing smile.

The banners, however, were the least of their concerns. A massive, partially ruined circular arena stretched beyond the stones, crowded with thousands of barbaric figures glowing with gray and black auras. Blue crest bearers watched from the mountains alongside their black dragons, while two red dragons dominated the sky above.

The crowd buzzed with dense anticipation, bone-breaking sounds echoing through the air. Everyone in the pit appeared to be forced participants rather than observers. The real spectators watched from above, presumably smirking at the death matches below.

Raiden gulped. *"This must be where the selection happens."*

"Looks that way. So we need to get selected if we want to reach the underground market."

Their hesitation was plain to see, though it had nothing to do with fear or dread of what awaited them. Noelle's knuckles cracked repeatedly, betraying her readiness, while Raiden practically vibrated with anticipation. The problem was simple: they had no idea how to join the crowd below.

Raiden pulled his clothes closer to smell them, his face darkening the instant the acrid odor assaulted his senses.

"We could probably fit in, but these people are disgusting," Noelle said with a sneer, then sighed. "Let's go in."

Raiden hesitated, unmoving. He'd learned to ignore foul smells during their journey, but the prospect of wading into that reeking crowd turned his stomach. Nevertheless, he realized they had little choice.

Following Noelle's lead, he pushed through the crowd behind her. To their left, up a short flight of stairs, they spotted an empty section. They took advantage of the crowd's focus elsewhere and quickly climbed up to claim the seats.

Both of them sighed with relief.

Their peace, however, was short-lived.

"Well, well—a rich girl?" a voice called from behind them, followed by harsh laughter from his companions. "What brings you here?"

Noelle's face began twitching with irritation, her fist clenching tight. Raiden turned back to get a look at whoever was mocking them.

The man was shirtless, his form wreathed in a gray aura. His dark brown hair hung in messy tangles over tanned, weathered skin that spoke of endless exposure to harsh heat. Faint bruises, marks, and scars decorated his body like a map of violent encounters.

The man could have passed for gentle and well-mannered at first sight, but his demeanor suggested otherwise. Raiden remained unconcerned. Noelle could handle him easily if things turned violent—she'd advanced to level five while he was still languishing at seven.

Noelle rose to her feet and turned toward him, her smile painfully artificial. "Would you like me to demonstrate what women are capable of on the battlefield?"

The man's laughter intensified, bordering on hysteria. "You... you actually think you can defeat me?" he wheezed, barely able to speak through his mirth.

A genuine smile replaced Noelle's fake one as she gestured to Raiden. "You see this blue crest bearer here? His name is Raven."

"He has five powerful servants under his command." Her smile grew menacing while Raiden puzzled over her strategy. "Kill me in the arena, and you can claim him and all his servants for yourself."

Raiden's mouth fell open as he gaped at her. *"What the fuck?!"*

"Shut up!" Noelle said without glancing at Raiden, her violet eyes boring straight into the man's.

The man stopped laughing and looked back and forth between Raiden and Noelle. His eyes narrowed as he considered something, while the people beside him started whispering to him urgently.

"Deal. Fight to the death!" He shifted his gaze to Raiden. "And you better not try to run, or I'll kill you myself."

He got to his feet—considerably shorter than Raiden had imagined. With a gesture, he led Noelle away from the stands. Immediately, the men who'd been with him moved to encircle Raiden.

"Don't think of running away, you little shit."

Raiden shot them a bored glance before settling back, elbow on his thigh and chin resting on his fist. He had no doubt Noelle would win, but her using him as a wager stung his pride. She'd treated him like he was expendable, which felt deeply insulting.

"You kids think this is a joke? Don't you see that Master Beeman carries a corrupt crest?" one of the guards shouted.

"They're completely stupid. He's about to join the Chaos Armada cohort, and she thinks she can beat him?"

"Once Master Beeman kills her, he's heading straight to the second strongest cohort." They all began laughing.

Their disgusting behavior irritated Raiden, but at least their words gave him some insight into the situation.

The red banners across the mountains were probably cohort markers, and those upstairs reveling in the violence were likely from each cohort. Once selected, they stood a chance of being bought out of Drake's Shell completely. Just like their original theory.

But something felt off about him. Why bother forming a group if they'd just be bought off anyway? And why call themselves an armada—were they supposed to be sailors of the desert in a place with no sea?

Raiden sat there thinking, but he could still hear the bastards beside him turning their focus to Ash, his familiar. She was a white dragon, the only one among the three without any abilities at all. Her tiny size seemed to fascinate them most.

Despite himself, Raiden found their stupidity endearing and began to smile softly. Completely oblivious as they were, he would have made the same assumptions if he were in their shoes.

However, time dragged on—minutes, perhaps hours. No one there seemed to have any sense of time except for the rise and fall of the burning sun. Raiden's stomach started rumbling from hunger when suddenly the bastards beside him began cheering like never before.

He raised his head to see Noelle and Beeman squaring off—it was their turn. He sneered with annoyance. The fact that Noelle had used him as a bargaining chip still stung, but he couldn't help being intrigued by their upcoming fight.

The only corrupt crest bearers he knew were his two servants, Soul and Speed, and Seth—the only opponent he'd ever considered truly formidable. All of them were undoubtedly strong enough to threaten him. Would Beeman prove the same?

Chapter 108: Beeman

The crowd buzzed for the duel, though none of them seemed genuinely interested. Their eyes wandered elsewhere, scanning each other for potential opponents. They seemed to be cheering merely to keep the spirit alive.

But Raiden was invested. Despite Beeman's followers constantly insisting that Noelle would be easily destroyed, he kept his cool. He needed to understand how the abyss worked before doing anything reckless.

"Beeman vs. Wolf. Fight!" As soon as the announcer's voice echoed from the upper levels of the arena, Noelle dropped to one knee and grasped at her neck.

Raiden began to stand, bewildered by what was happening, but the bastards pulled him back into his seat. Their touch barely registered. His face darkened as he watched Noelle break into hysterical laughter, her voice echoing at the top of her lungs.

"Ha... Master Beeman got her."

Raiden activated Gaze Beyond, focusing his enhanced vision on Noelle. Her neck appeared clear, but what he was seeing couldn't be the real Noelle. She would never laugh like this during a fight she'd initiated herself.

He looked past her to Beeman. Tiny holes covered his hands, bees pouring from each opening.

"Now that Beeman has fucked with her emotions, it's over," the bastards beside Raiden began to mock.

Raiden sneered as Beeman charged at Noelle and slammed his fist into her gut. She doubled over, clutching her stomach as she fell to her knees. Even through the pain, she couldn't stop laughing.

Raiden clenched his fists, irritation flickering across his face, as Beeman unleashed a barrage of strikes on Noelle. All she did was laugh through each brutal hit.

Not only was Noelle about to die, but she'd dragged him into this mess as her bargain. Now when she died, he'd be left scrambling to save himself, and nothing infuriated him more.

Blood began spilling from Noelle's mouth as she laughed through the pain, and Raiden started plotting his next move. Turn invisible and run? Or face Beeman head-on once he was done with her?

Still, he had limited knowledge of Beeman's power. Could his bees only manipulate people into laughter, or were there other emotions? If it was just laughter, he thought he could counter it with his euphoria.

He doubted Noelle would survive the duel. With Gaze Beyond active, he could see her face drenched in blood, her nose twisted and broken. Her survival looked unlikely.

"Women are so weak!"

Raiden turned his lazy gaze to whoever had spoken. He took in the man's receding hairline and rotting teeth, then looked back at Noelle. A smile crossed his face as he slapped his forehead in disbelief.

"How can I be this quick to judge?" he muttered as he shook his head.

He didn't know much about Noelle, but from their brief time together, he knew she would never lose to someone who looked down on her and all women.

Yet his newfound confidence changed nothing. Noelle was still getting her ass kicked from every angle, all while laughing maniacally.

It wasn't long before her golden aura started pulsing violently. Raiden's eyes widened as spectators in the upper levels leaned forward, curious about what was unfolding.

Her aura ceased flowing from her body, gathering into a massive sphere that engulfed the entire thousand-meter field. Beeman froze mid-strike while Noelle's laughter finally stopped, replaced by violent coughing as she expelled clots of blood from her throat.

Raiden's eyes narrowed in confusion. How had Noelle activated her rule domain? She hadn't said anything—hadn't even attempted to speak. The way her aura had fluctuated so aggressively suggested it was a desperation move.

"Freya was right. She's strong," he muttered, taking in the scene before him.

Beeman's followers, who had Raiden restrained, grew nervous, about to cry out to their master. But Raiden's attention was fixed on something else entirely.

Noelle's movements were sluggish as she walked through her domain, but Raiden could see her wounds from Beeman's assault slowly closing. It wasn't as powerful as his own healing, which could reconnect shattered bones, but her skin was mending with tendrils of smoke that mirrored her cigarette aether.

Raiden barely had time to take in her healing process before she wheeled around to face Beeman.

"No breathing." She muttered, gesturing toward Beeman.

Beeman's face turned red as he fought for air, frozen in place and unable to make a sound. The rapid convulsions wracking his body suggested either Noelle's rule was working fast, or Beeman was remarkably bad at holding his breath.

Within moments, Beeman erupted into gray liquid. The substance splattered everywhere, outlining Noelle's previously invisible domain for those without the sight to perceive it.

Beeman's followers rushed down to check on their master as Noelle dismissed her domain and walked away from the scene.

It was growing dark, and the crowd was dispersing, but Raiden couldn't care less about such mundane concerns.

What made Beeman explode like that? Was he human at all? Was this unique to him, or did all corrupt crest bearers share this vulnerability?

He stared down at the floor, taking deep breaths and exhaling slowly to clear his mind of all these complications. This wasn't Persia. As Klein el Seer had told him, he had to approach everything like a newborn would.

While he sat there, Noelle approached with a chunk of bread and a water bag, one hand nursing her broken nose.

She sat down next to Raiden and split the bread, giving him half. Raiden took it, studying her with a puzzled expression.

"Weren't you supposed to take two?"

Noelle sighed and took a bite of her bread. "Only winners get to eat... you should be grateful I'm sharing."

Raiden gazed at the bread, his mind elsewhere. He longed for the royal treatment he'd known in Persia, but now his wealth was stolen, and he found himself caught in this relentless cycle of fighting and servitude.

"Up there," she said, snapping Raiden out of his daze as she gestured to the former spectator area. "Those who were sitting there will select the strongest to join what they call the armada. There are four positions."

Raiden turned to her. *"So once we're selected, that's when we can be bought?"* He started on his bread. *"That's what I gathered from the bastards beside me."*

Raiden paused and looked at Noelle. *"What exactly can your ability do?"*

Noelle didn't acknowledge him, just kept eating.

"Care to share?"

"..."

Raiden wouldn't give up. He had to know how her ability worked so he could turn it to his advantage if needed.

"You healed yourself. How did you do it?"

"Would you shut the fuck up?!" She turned on Raiden. "It's not like I know a damn thing about you anyway."

She narrowed her eyes through the dim light, her expression still clear to Raiden. "Oh, wait. Even your so-called trusted comrades don't know what you really are."

Raiden put on a rehearsed smile, though her response irritated him. She wasn't wrong, but he still had to figure out how her power worked. They had a long journey ahead, and he wouldn't think twice about sacrificing their lives for his survival—Noelle was no different.

"I could have sworn you two seemed like close friends from where I was watching." A voice drifted from the darkness behind them.

Chapter 109: Zion

Raiden's eyes flickered as he stared at the person before him. He felt nothing—no presence, not even a whisper of one. That scared him. His dragon instincts had failed him, and worse, so had his assassin's instincts.

He was a masculine man with short, messy, dark hair that had volume and slight waves. Golden-yellow eyes gleamed behind thin, round-rimmed glasses, giving him an intense, almost mysterious air. His mustache and goatee were neatly trimmed and dark, matching his hair. He wore a white shirt, black tie, and black vest—formal and precise.

"My name is Zion," he said with a cocky smile, approaching them from up in the stands with his golden aura flowing around him.

Both Noelle and Raiden shifted into ready positions, prepared for anything.

"Don't be scared..." Zion said as he sat down, keeping his distance.

"What do you want?" Noelle asked dryly, her tone demanding.

His voice turned deep and steady. "I want to fight with you."

"No, I'm not interested." Noelle's response came instantly, cutting through his words.

Raiden was confused as he looked between them. Zion was a number five, just like Noelle. Considering they had come all this way just to get stronger, why wouldn't she fight? Was he missing something?

"There are four armadas," he gestured to the banner, a menacing smile crossing his face. "That is the Chaos Armada. They sail the deserts with some of the strongest and most powerful forces."

He gestured to the next banner, the one with an arsenal depicted on it. "The Fertility Armada. Strong and determined, the most decent among the armadas."

He pointed to the red banner with a sword across it. "The Misery Armada." Turning to them with a smile, he added, "As the name suggests, they show no mercy."

"The one with the hourglass is the Justice Armada. They sail even beyond the borders of this kingdom."

Zion narrowed his eyes and stood up. "To survive in this shithole, your only option is to get selected by one of them—bought as a bodyguard or work your way up the ranks in whichever armada takes you."

He turned and began walking away from the arena. "I was hoping to see your full potential, but I think you enjoy the idea of living among the stench."

Raiden narrowed his eyes, watching Zion walk away. Noelle wasn't bothered by his words at all; she simply kept eating her bread. But Raiden wanted more, something beyond what he had witnessed from Noelle.

He slapped his forehead and began shaking his head with a smile.

What was I thinking?—he thought.

He always got things his own way, and so why was he treating Noelle like she was above his schemes?

He set Ash down on Noelle's lap and hurried after Zion. *"Hey, wait a minute."*

Zion paused and turned to him with a fierce expression. Raiden smirked, still walking toward him. *"What if I give you a fight instead?"*

Zion's expression softened, obviously intrigued. *"If I win, you do everything in your power to pave a path for us to join one of the armadas."*

"And what's in it for me?"

"If you win, Wolf is yours. Test her abilities to your heart's content."

Zion smiled, gesturing toward the few warriors still remaining in the arena. "There are plenty of people here who would kill each other just to prove their strength to me. I wouldn't even have to lift a finger."

Raiden giggled. *"But those aren't the ones you want, are they?"*

Zion squinted at him.

"The person you want is Wolf. That's why you went out of your way to interact with her directly." Raiden shrugged with a smile. *"This seems like a pretty good bargain to me... you get access to her ability either way."*

Zion let out a sigh. "Not many people have a mind like yours, kid."

He looked toward Noelle. "How sure are you that she'd be okay with this?"

Raiden looked at her—sitting peacefully, patting Ash gently while eating her bread. *"Trust me, she wouldn't have a choice."*

Zion brushed past him, heading to the field. "Let's finish this in the next two hours... I am a busy man."

Raiden watched as Zion headed to the field. He began to feel cozy, finally appreciating the cold breeze of evening, even with his black scarf wrapped around his neck.

He didn't intend to win—the outcome mattered little when he'd get to assess Noelle's abilities either way. Still, unease settled over him. His emotions felt tangled, and confusing.

But he didn't let himself dwell on it. He released a slow breath and walked over to Noelle.

"You're fighting him, and I'm what's at stake," Noelle said, cutting him off before he could say a word.

Raiden shrugged.

"I suppose that's fair—getting a taste of my own medicine. I was the one who made you a wager first."

She turned to him with an unreadable look. "Just so we're clear—I don't care if you live or die. Ash is already well cared for."

Though she spoke of Ash as if she were mere property to be fought over, her words planted a seed of worry in Raiden's mind. What would happen to his familiar if he died before she did?

He descended toward the field to meet Zion. He had no intention of dying, so worry seemed pointless. While winning had its appeal, it wasn't worth his life. If the fight became too much, he'd forfeit without hesitation.

As soon as he stepped onto the field, he found Zion waiting—calm, hands tucked casually in his pockets, golden aura rippling gently around him.

"Night fights go unrecorded, so our little arrangement stays private..." He beckoned Raiden forward. "Don't hold back. I want everything you've got, kid."

Raiden smiled. *"Getting cocky, aren't you? Let's have a little fun while we can."*

Confusion rippled through the crowd. Seeing someone of Zion's stature face an unknown like Raiden should have sparked excitement, yet they kept their voices low, heads bowed, exchanging only hushed whispers. Everyone knew how this would end, Raiden included. This wasn't a fight—it was an examination.

Chapter 110: Zion against the Raven

Though only a few hundred occupied the arena, Zion's presence opposite Raiden held their attention more completely than Noelle and Beeman's fight had drawn from the thousands who'd witnessed it.

Raiden settled into his stance, eyes locked on Zion. The arena lay shrouded in darkness, lit only by pale moonlight, but this worked in his favor. With Ash's Moon Dragon essence flowing through him, the night belonged to him—his vision was sharp, his strength far greater than in daylight.

But before Raiden could act, Zion closed the distance. Confusion flickered across Raiden's face as he watched the strike arc toward his chest. The blow would have shattered ribs if it connected, but to Raiden's heightened senses, it seemed sluggish.

Raiden slipped past the strike by mere inches. Before he could register what had happened, Zion was already following up with another blow—which Raiden barely managed to evade.

Zion kept coming, and Raiden realized he needed breathing room to analyze his opponent's patterns. As another strike whistled past, Raiden countered instantly—channeling mana through his fists, he hammered three brutal hits into Zion's chest. The older fighter skidded backward, hands pressed to his torso.

The attacks had come too quickly for Zion to counter or even fully comprehend. Blood bubbled up from his throat as he doubled over, clutching his chest desperately.

But Raiden's eyes narrowed as he studied his opponent, perplexed. Zion's aura remained as serene as before the fight began—which made his sudden speed all the more puzzling. Even if Zion used a mana technique similar to his own, something was off. Raiden required focus to channel his power, but Zion's explosive acceleration had been seamless, almost casual.

"Exceptional mana control," Zion said, smirking as he turned toward Raiden. "Those strikes pack quite a punch."

Raiden knew better than to get drawn into conversation, so he stepped back, putting more distance between them.

Zion sighed. "I suppose I should take this seriously."

His mana zone erupted outward, golden aura flooding the field and spilling into the closest rows of spectators.

Raiden's throat tightened as he took in the zone's scope. The golden aura rose past his waist, and with each moment, his discomfort grew. He hadn't known a mana zone could be this overwhelming—so dense, so vast.

As Zion casually cracked his knuckles, sweat beaded on Raiden's forehead despite the cold. He was trapped within the zone where Zion would sense his every move. The only escape was speed—he'd have to move faster than he ever had, fast enough to overwhelm even Zion's enhanced perception.

The thought of forfeiting crossed his mind, yet he found himself curious about his own limits in such desperate circumstances. He understood that retreat would only damage him down the road.

Zion closed the distance and attacked. Raiden slipped the first strike with ease, but the follow-up came lightning-fast. He couldn't react in time—the blow hammered his ribs and drove him into the dirt.

There was no rush in Zion's movements now; he carried himself like a man assured of victory. Though Raiden clutched his ribs with gritted teeth, the searing pain held no importance for him.

Alternative after alternative cycled through his mind. Each one crumbled as he examined it—another dead end, another useless option. He could hold his ground for a while with something, anything, and use that time to learn how to counter mana zones in the future.

Invisibility dissolved under scrutiny. His other abilities followed suit, one by one proving themselves worthless.

He began getting to his feet, one hand clutching his gut, smiling. His mana zone wasn't as impressive as Zion's, but he was curious what would happen if he activated it within someone else's zone.

His blue aura erupted from him, spreading three feet in every direction.

Zion smiled. "You can use the mana zone too, huh? Impressive."

Raiden frowned in confusion. His blue mana was still flickering visibly within Zion's golden zone. He had expected interference or complications, but both zones seemed to function normally.

Zion released his mana zone, letting it fade. "Both of us using our mana zones is pointless... there's no clear winner in such situations."

He smirked. "This has dragged on long enough. I'm ending it."

Raiden realized Zion was about to use his ability, but he had no interest in continuing since he'd already learned what he wanted about mana zones. However, before he could forfeit, Zion's golden aura shaped itself into an asymmetrical sphere around him, staying only inches from his body.

Raiden's eyes began flickering in fear, his body trembling, frozen in place. His words struggled to come out as his heart raced beyond comprehension. In that moment he wasn't seeing Zion at all, but rather a giant eye staring at him with a soft gaze.

When the eye blinked, the beam of golden light flashed through Raiden's eyes. All the truth behind reality seemed to slam into his vision at once. His eyes grew heavy as tears poured, his mind spanning dimensions as he collapsed to his knees, screaming and clutching his head.

Noelle hurried down there to check on him, and Ash also woke abruptly from her slumber. Noelle had claimed she didn't care if Raiden died in the duel, but the fear in her violet eyes as she dashed toward him said otherwise.

[Are you okay, Papa?] Ash's voice echoed in Raiden's mind, but he was too far gone to hear her.

At that moment, all Raiden wanted was to tear out his eyes and mind. He screamed as his grip tightened around his skull, crushing it as blood poured down his face.

Noelle and Ash finally reached him, immediately checking on him.

[Bloom, Papa... Say, Bloom.] Ash clearly knew what might help him, but her words went unheard. She began whimpering in fear, obviously feeling what Raiden was experiencing too.

Ash turned toward Zion, but before she could act, Noelle rose to her feet and started walking toward him.

Zion deactivated his ability and gave her a soft smile. "Wow, he's still alive."

"Cut the bullshit... I'm here. You can have me," she said, voice trembling with anger. "Now let him go."

Zion shrugged casually. "There's nothing I can do now. He's a dead man."

Noelle gritted her teeth, clenching her fist in frustration, then turned and walked back to Raiden.

"Rule Domain." Her domain activated and spread across the entire field.

"That will be of no use. He's already dead."

"Shut up!" Noelle gestured at him, and Zion found himself unable to move or speak.

She tried to cancel Zion's ability affecting Raiden, but it was useless. No matter what rule she commanded, Raiden continued screaming in agony.

However, Raiden could think of nothing but the unbearable information being forced into his mind. Ash wasn't giving up on him, though. She lay down next to him and calmed herself to sleep.

Even through the agonizing visions, Raiden sensed the full moon and felt himself in that smoky world. Everything existed in shadowy hues—the air, the earth beneath him as he crouched. The feeling of home was unmistakable, though the pain remained.

[Say Bloom, Papa...] Ash appeared before him as a dark mist in this dream world.

This time, her words broke through, but she had to repeat them over and over. When Raiden's mind finally registered her voice, he forced his eyes open. His gray irises had turned golden, and blood poured from them.

Though his eyes were open, his mind remained partially consumed by the overwhelming universal truths. He had left the dream world, but he saw nothing.

"Bloom." He muttered words through sheer will and determination, fighting against Zion's overwhelming ability.

And just like the dream, everything on the field became enveloped in smoky darkness. The effect lasted mere seconds, yet it was enough to shatter Noelle's barrier entirely and completely purge Zion's ability from his mind.

He collapsed to the floor, too exhausted to move a finger, while Ash lay dormant beside him. Noelle was puzzled by what had happened to her domain, but her main concern was checking whether Raiden was still alive.

She let out a deep sigh of relief when she confirmed Raiden was still breathing.

"Wait, don't tell me he's alive," Zion muttered, bewildered. From his expression, it was clear he'd seen a flash of Raiden's Bloom, but it had happened too quickly for him to understand it.

"Could it be?" he whispered, watching Noelle carefully reposition Raiden to help him rest more comfortably.

Just confusion filled the air. Raiden was still struggling to think and see anything clearly. He had no choice but to give in to sleep.