

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 111: Slumber - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 111: Slumber

Chapter 111: Slumber

The night passed quickly, and Raiden lay dormant, distant from the world around him, all his wounds from the previous night already healed. As morning approached, the arena began to crowd again.

Raiden's head rested on Noelle's lap, while Ash perched on her shoulder. She had been affected by Raiden's situation more than anticipated.

But his slumber didn't stop Zion from claiming his prize. A few hours into the day, Zion approached Noelle with a soft smile, his fingers rubbing his mustache.

"He's really a strong one you've got there," Zion said as he sat down nearby.

Noelle paid him no mind, her gaze darting between the fighters on the field as the crowd cheered regardless.

Zion glanced at Noelle and Raiden for a moment, then sighed. "Well, his prowess isn't what I'm interested in." He rose to his feet and adjusted his glasses. "You have a duel to the death with one of my people in four matches."

He began walking away. "Prepare yourself."

Noelle seemingly heard every word, but her eyes remained on the field as usual, her hand brushing against Raiden's dark hair, showing no interest in Zion's threat.

Though Raiden couldn't glimpse Noelle's fate as he'd hoped, he fought a different battle entirely. His eyes moved rapidly behind closed lids, yet his mind was utterly blank—no sense of awareness remained.

His thoughts pulsed heavily, matching the rhythm of his heart, while his body twitched relentlessly. He was utterly exhausted from taking a direct hit from Zion's ability the previous night.

This continued for quite a while—minutes stretching into hours—until a young man approached them and spoke up. A yellow aura glowed around him, his brown shirt had sleeves rolled to the elbows, and he carried himself with a cheerful, calm demeanor.

He bowed. "I am Thor, and I'll be your opponent today." Noelle glanced at him, her expression unreadable.

"I'm afraid it's time for our fight," Thor added.

Noelle uttered nothing, but her eyes swept around, undoubtedly searching for a more comfortable spot to leave Raiden while she fought.

"Don't worry, we'll keep him safe," Thor said as another young man in black appeared from behind.

"No, he would be fine," Noelle said bluntly as she carefully placed Raiden's head on the seat. She took a moment to infuse a little of her golden mana into his blue energy, then stood with Ash still resting on her shoulder.

Thor shrugged, and they began descending to the field—and so did Raiden, deeper into restlessness. Soon, he began to feel uneasy on the seat, the rough concrete piercing his skin, making him adjust unconsciously over and over in search of his former comfort.

While he tossed uncomfortably on the seat, Noelle placed Ash on the sidelines and faced Thor. Her face betrayed no interest as she watched him conjure lightning that crackled steadily across his body with practiced precision.

This was a moment Raiden would have loved to witness, but his circumstances trapped him. The uncomfortable seat, however, pierced through his blank mind.

For the first time since falling asleep, he could actually feel something—discomfort stabbing through his spine. Yet his vulnerable state gave the arena's warriors an opportunity to exploit him.

A man in ragged clothes emerged—receding hairline, rotting teeth. His hand lingered on his dagger as he grinned widely, his comrades sitting nearby and laughing at the top of their lungs.

But the man's expression darkened as he reached toward Raiden. He froze inexplicably in place, only his eyes moving in terror. Sweat broke out across his forehead, though he couldn't make a sound while his comrades laughed nearby, waiting for him to finish robbing Raiden.

The uneasiness in Raiden's body grew unbearable, and in that moment, his only thought was the discomfort of his position. He gritted his teeth, his expression shifting through waves of dark emotion while the ragged man watched helplessly, still frozen.

In that instant, the uneasiness exploded through Raiden's body in a violent shiver—as if every sense had ignited simultaneously. He shot up from the seat, bolting upright.

He looked confused, blinking rapidly for a moment before clutching his head in agony and releasing a deep, tormented scream. His thoughts throbbed relentlessly, as if he had been thinking for eternity. But what troubled him most was his vision.

His once gray eyes were now deep golden, and worse, he couldn't see anything. His eyes searched blindly toward the field. He could sense he was in the arena, could hear lightning crackling from Thor and Noelle's fight, but everything remained dark.

"What's happening?" he muttered, running his hands over his face. *"I'm alive, but I can't see anything."*

He kept blinking frantically, hoping his regeneration would kick in and restore his vision, but his eyes felt dead. It was as if his healing power couldn't touch them.

The ragged man still stood frozen, watching Raiden. Raiden brushed his hands against his face, his frustration so intense he felt ready to peel off his own skin as he tried desperately to recall what exactly happened the previous night.

"There was a big eye, a golden light beam, and the pain." His eyes darted frantically. *"What happened next? Why can't I see? Did that light do something to my vision?"*

He began rubbing his eyes, but there was no pain whatsoever. It was as if his vision had never been damaged to begin with.

As he sat there confused, the ragged man trembling beside him, Noelle noticed he was finally conscious. She and Thor both panted heavily, keeping their distance from each other. Wearing a warm smile, she activated her domain as the golden aura ceased flowing from her.

Thor rushed to close the gap at incredible speed, trying to stop her. He moved faster than her thoughts could follow and landed a crushing blow that sent her to the ground, but even that couldn't stop the domain from activating.

Her golden aura formed a sphere encompassing the entire field. The moment it activated, the ragged man frozen at Raiden's side collapsed, prompting blind Raiden to turn in his direction. But the instant the man realized he could move, he bolted away.

Then Raiden heard it: "Wolf wins!"

He glanced in the direction of the sound, confused. If Noelle was fighting, then who had been by his side? But he didn't dwell on that for long.

He'd engaged Zion in the first place to see Noelle pushed to her limits, and now, not only couldn't he watch her fight, but he also found himself in an entirely new predicament. One he never saw coming.

He sighed. *"I can't be blind forever... what the hell is going on?"*

Chapter 112: Retinal Rift

"Stay still," Noelle instructed, gently turning Raiden's face towards hers. "Your pupils and irises have turned golden... I can't differentiate between them."

Raiden's expression darkened as his thoughts raced, trying to piece everything together. Everything seemed blurry to him; was he that badly damaged?

"Can you see anything at all?"

Raiden shook his head. *"No... everything is blurry and without any clear structure."*

Noelle let out a sigh. "Zion's ability is Retinal Rift. It allows him to flood people's minds and vision with his overwhelming truths and visions."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he finally recalled what he'd witnessed when Zion's ability was activated. Those breathtaking yet complex visions, the overwhelming thoughts that screamed in his mind until he felt like killing himself. He remembered every detail too well.

"I don't think you're blind," Noelle added. "It's possible there are fragments of his ability lingering on your eyes, or perhaps your eyes are just too tired to see anymore."

Raiden's mouth parted slightly as he stared into nothing. He couldn't afford to be blind, that would be the end of him. His palms began to sweat, and he trembled internally. He pulled away from Noelle, propped his elbows on his thighs, and tried to think.

Was this the biggest mistake of his life—to fight for something he wouldn't get to enjoy and end up disabled in the process? His thoughts shattered and collided with one another while his body continued trembling.

His eyes widened, and he wore a soft smile. Taking a deep breath, he turned invisible. Yet that cheerful smile faded in an instant as he slammed his fist into the concrete beneath him.

He'd hoped to see through heat detection the way he could when invisible, but unfortunately, it didn't work.

He turned visible again as he ran his hands through his dark hair. If there were fragments left on his eyes, all he needed to do was clear them. But how?

"We came here for a reason, you know? To build up enough mana reserves and get strong enough to visit the Solace Isle and form an alliance with the Apex Circle." Noelle

let out a disappointed sigh. "And worse, the longer we wait, the closer FIRMO gets to the pages."

Raiden raised his head and turned toward her, realization dawning. Noelle wasn't wrong, but her words weren't his main concern. If he remained blind, anyone could strike him down without him even knowing.

"Now, because of your carelessness, we have to figure out a way to deal with you..." She shrugged, then brightened slightly. "Good news though; you can't lose your title because of the bloodline ritual."

Raiden smiled as the mention of 'bloodline ritual' sparked a thought in his mind.

"There's a technique I heard about, one used by my family's biggest rivals. Sight." His grin widened as he began concentrating mana into his eyes.

Alex Dawnbringer had mentioned the simplest technique in their family when they first formed their alliance against the Dawnbringers. If what he'd said was correct, Raiden was eager to combine it with his already sharp dragon vision to create something uniquely his own.

His eyes remained closed as he channeled most of his mana into them, Noelle watching him with confusion. The moment he was done, he smiled and opened his eyes.

His smile broke into laughter as he looked at Noelle's confused expression, watching her dark violet eyes dart up to meet his golden ones. He could see.

However, his expression grew somber shortly after. His vision wasn't stable, vivid one moment, blurry the next after just a blink. He needed constant focus to maintain clear sight and, worse, it demanded a lot of his mana as well.

The moment he stopped channeling mana to his eyes, he instinctively reached for them, teeth gritted in agony, forcing him to reactivate his sight.

Just that brief moment left him panting relentlessly, sweat beading on his forehead. *"I can see now, but I don't think I can ever turn this off."*

Noelle raised an eyebrow, slightly confused. "How so?"

"The moment I deactivated it, his ability kicked in again." He locked eyes with Noelle. *"Worse, I think I'll need limitless mana for this."*

Noelle stared at him for a moment without saying a word while Raiden fidgeted with his fingers, still uncomfortable with his situation. Just like Noelle said, they needed the mana, and now he had to distribute it?

Noelle reached into her pocket and tossed him an aether cigarette. "There's no fire around to light it, though."

Raiden stared at her, confused. *"I don't smoke."*

"You can give it back if you want." Her tone was detached.

Raiden stared at it for a moment. If he remembered correctly, aether was said to stabilize mana flow. He smiled. If that were the case, it would help his situation, even if he didn't smoke. But something bothered him—why was Noelle helping him?

"I thought you said you wouldn't care if I died."

Noelle turned away from him and tilted her head upward. "Honestly, I didn't care. But we both know if you die, my chances of getting the pages and rescuing my mother are slim."

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he suddenly saw her emotions fluctuating in visible form. Red color emerged from her chest area, mingling with her golden aura for a moment before ceasing.

He was a little confused as he touched his eyes. *"What was that?"*

"What?" Noelle turned to him, perplexed.

Raiden stared at her for a moment—no emotional fluctuations this time. He reached for his eyes and smiled.

"Can I see people's emotions now?" he whispered to himself.

"What are you saying?"

Raiden understood he was seeing emotions, though what kind was unclear. He would try testing it once more.

"I was asking if you hate me that much."

Noelle rolled her eyes and shrugged without saying a word, but her emotions still flickered red.

She stood up and set Ash down from her shoulder. "I have a fight up next..." she said, starting to leave. "I will speak with you soon." Yet there were no emotions, nothing.

Raiden watched as she walked away. He stretched, then grabbed Ash and placed her on his shoulder.

Was this going to be a milestone for him, or was it just a curse? He clutched his head as it started spinning—he was growing exhausted from the constant mana drain.

He let out a sigh. *"I have to understand this more."* He reached for his eyes.

Chapter 113: Sight

Screams tore through the crowd and reverberated across the arena. Crimson painted the floor more than ever before as spectators murmured in confusion and fear.

The dark thoughts behind Noelle's blunt expression were unmistakable; this wasn't just combat, it was a massacre. She rained down strikes on her opponent even while clutching her gut, trying to stem her own bleeding.

With his elbow braced against his thigh and fist propping up his chin, Raiden sat contemplatively. An aether cigarette hung between his lips as he stared through Noelle's domain, seeing it now through his newfound gaze.

With each inhale, he felt the smoke spread through his spine. The mana he gradually infused into his eyes helped prevent the technique from overwhelming him, though his vision still blurred intermittently.

His own discomfort, however, was of little concern to him. What held his attention was the brutal fight transpiring between Noelle and her opponent.

He had hoped to witness emotions flickering from their chests, but regardless of what transpired—the devastating strikes Noelle delivered that sent waves of fear through the spectators, the opponent's pleas for help that gave voice to his desperation—neither combatant revealed anything. No crimson aura radiated from their forms.

Raiden watched with a calm expression. Only hours before, he had seen Noelle's emotions shifting around her form. Had it been a fluke? Or perhaps it wasn't emotion he'd witnessed at all, but rather some side effect of his altered sight?

His mind churned through racing thoughts as his golden eyes swept across every movement, from the fighters below to the crowd above. But the audience was so absorbed by the fight's raw intensity that they remained silent.

He leaned backward a bit, remembering. When his eyes had first detected that red sensation, he had felt it immediately—an instinctive recognition that required no explanation. But now there was nothing. So, how was that possible?

Then Raiden heard it: "Wolf wins!"

He let out a sigh, but a voice dragged his attention in an instant.

"I can defeat her... those petty tricks? Spare me your sympathy... what do you take me for?!" A voice boomed from the crowd, and Raiden felt it immediately. He smiled as he observed the man's emotions flickering in red, bleeding through his white aura.

"Could it be?"

he whispered, eyes bright with sudden understanding.

The man's boast was clearly a lie, fueled by nothing but pride. Was it possible that he could only see emotions connected to deception?

He rubbed his forehead, that knowing smile still playing on his lips.

"Why do you look so happy?" Noelle asked. Raiden glanced over to find her torso wrapped in bandages, her bloodstained clothes exchanged for clean ones, while she held out part of her meal to him.

"Do you really want to know why?" Raiden reached out for the offered bread.

"No, I don't." Noelle dropped down beside him.

His expression darkened as he watched her carefully. No emotions flickered into view. If she hadn't wanted to know, why ask in the first place? Shouldn't that contradiction have appeared as a lie to his enhanced vision?

"That was my last fight in this arena," Noelle said, staring down at the ground. "I've been selected to join the Justice Armada."

She looked over at Raiden. "You have to fight for your own meals now."

Raiden's smile was wistful. *"That was too fast..."*

Noelle looked at him directly as she carefully lifted Ash from his shoulder. "I'm taking her with me. She deserves better than this life."

Raiden's hand found his chest. *"That hurts my pride."* He shifted closer, testing whether she might lie. *"Did you mean it?"*

"No, I didn't." No emotions manifested, nothing whatsoever. Her expression remained unreadable as she observed his awkward positioning. "I'd better go."

Rising to her feet, she threw Raiden three additional aether cigarettes. "Make sure to join us soon. We have bigger missions than this." She walked away without a backward glance, heading for the arena's exit.

Raiden felt perplexed, caught between possibilities. Either Noelle had been completely honest, or there were aspects of his Retinal Rift he had yet to discover.

Darkness was already settling over the arena, and the reluctant expressions on the other fighters' faces made it clear none of them wanted to compete. This was the perfect opportunity for him to make his mark as Raven.

He stood up and surveyed the crowd. Everyone was still talking about Noelle's fighter name, Wolf, while he remained unnoticed in her shadow.

"Time to test the lie detection for the night. Maybe I can bait a few people into challenging me tomorrow." A smirk crossed his face as he started moving through the crowd.

"The truly powerful don't view her as a threat, or she'd be dead already."

"That kid Jojo, I've heard about? He wouldn't have to exert himself against her."

Multiple conversations overlapped as people debated which fighters could overpower Noelle without effort. Among all the names being thrown around, 'Jojo' stood out to Raiden. If his memory was accurate, that was the kid who'd earned recognition as a hero in the desert regions.

Raiden focused on a scruffy man wearing a blue bandana that covered his red hair, encircled by people of the same rough demeanor.

"You really believe Jojo can defeat Wolf?" Raiden asked, wearing his most cheerful smile. But as soon as the group registered his presence, fear took hold, and they scrambled backward.

Raiden shook his head; he should have expected this. Being Noelle's only companion meant asking these weaklings anything would make them assume he was either looking to start trouble or gather information to report back.

He raised his hands in submission. *"Don't worry, I mean no harm."* But his words only seemed to make it worse. Terror spread across their faces, and before Raiden knew it, they were running away.

He scratched the back of his head in disappointment. The moment he turned, however, he instinctively leaped backward, stumbling on the stairs but managing to put distance between himself and the six men who had appeared.

Each one radiated a dark aura, clad in black with the Chaos Armada's menacing smile crest emblazoned on their clothes. Perhaps these were the ones the men from earlier had truly feared. However, what troubled Raiden wasn't their threatening appearance, but how he'd failed to notice them.

This wasn't the first time. He'd missed Zion's approach two days ago too. Was his danger sense dulling, or were these people simply that powerful?

Fear lodged in his throat as goosebumps rippled across his body.

Chapter 114: Chaos Armada

Darkness swallowed the entire arena as the men remained perfectly still, while Raiden's mind churned with frantic, fearful thoughts.

Their unseen eyes seemed to drill into his golden ones, the malevolent intent behind them sending shivers through his body. He began taking steps backward.

Whether they planned to kill him remained uncertain, but he wasn't foolish enough to provoke people who could so easily evade his dragon instincts.

Step by step, he backed away while keeping his gaze fixed on them. The entire arena seemed to stop and watch, curious about what would happen next. Raiden hardly registered the crowd's attention; his only thought was escape.

The moment he felt comfortable with the distance between them, he whirled around to run. But quicker than a heartbeat, one of the men was already there, cutting off his escape. Cold dread washed over him as sweat prickled his forehead.

What was that? Teleportation?

Before he could string together a coherent thought, the man was right there, inches away. Terror flashed across Raiden's face as he attempted to flee, but the man's fist buried itself in his stomach, dropping him hard to the ground.

Raiden cried out, eyes clamped shut in pain. The impact disrupted his mana flow to his eyes, flooding his brain with excruciating pain that overshadowed even the blow to his gut.

Before he could collect himself and restore his sight, the other two joined their companion. Fists and feet hammered into Raiden from all directions.

Before he could even process one blow, another would land. His vision was nothing but a haze, making it impossible to see where his attackers stood, let alone fight back.

He covered his head with both hands, gritting his teeth as he blinked frantically and squeezed his eyes tight, desperate for the retinal rift to end and the overwhelming torrent of information to stop.

But every blow landed with bone-shaking force, his body convulsing with each impact as his concentration shattered. He felt himself going numb, his body surrendering despite his healing factor.

He needed to counterattack, or they'd kill him. He tried to push himself up, but the next moment his legs were thrashing in mid-air, his body hurtling through the cold wind as the ground dropped away beneath him.

"Am I actually hovering?" he asked with a trembling voice, his head swiveling frantically as he tried to figure out how this was possible.

He forced mana into his eyes to clear his vision and stared downward in disbelief. Somehow, something was holding him fifteen feet above the ground.

From below, everyone gazed up at him with unsettling calm. He knew he was about to be driven into the ground, and judging by their expressions, the spectators were looking forward to it.

He struggled frantically against the unseen force. At least if he fell on his own terms, he could try to land safely, but his body wouldn't respond. It was like everything except his head was trapped in an invisible straitjacket.

"They're going to kill me," he breathed, struggling desperately against whatever held him.

Suddenly, he was launched downward, plummeting through the air toward the earth below. Panic flooded through him as he realized the truth; hitting the ground at this velocity would obliterate him completely, leaving nothing to regenerate.

In the final moments, he clenched his eyes shut and concentrated every bit of remaining mana into protecting his head, chest, and legs. When he crashed into the floor, the sound of breaking bone echoed through the entire space.

The arena fell quiet as spectators watched blood spreading from Raiden's broken form. His body felt like lead, his heart beating slower and slower as he lay staring at the ground with a peculiar smile.

Shouldn't my berserk mode be taking over right about now?—he thought dimly.

He never understood why they'd targeted him, but as consciousness slipped away, his mind focused on oddly calming things: his own shallow breathing and the blood trickling down his face. His body felt ice-cold as the world receded into distant fog. He was dying, and he could feel it happening.

Despite everything, he'd managed to keep mana flowing to his eyes. Small victory, but it lifted his spirits slightly. The thought that consumed him most was whether death might

transport him back to his old world, back to the people who deserved his wrath. Maybe dying here was actually his ticket home.

Before long, his body had gone completely numb. His heart beat so slowly he could barely feel it, his eyes growing impossibly heavy as his dying senses seemed to whisper: *Sleep now. Everything will be alright.*

He smiled warmly as consciousness slipped away. But when his eyes shut, his blue aura darkened to black, causing the men in black to stumble backward, alarm replacing their earlier confidence.

There was nothing left of Raiden's consciousness, yet his body surged upright without his control, healing at an impossible rate. His golden eyes moved erratically, unable to focus on anything specific, but somehow he knew the precise position of everyone in the arena.

His dark hair transformed into pure, radiant white that seemed to glow with its own light. It became beautifully chaotic, soft and weightless, floating in loose spikes that moved like white fire around his head.

Luminous dark tattoos traced across his hands, running up over his knuckles and winding around his wrists. A massive sigil materialized on his forehead—perfectly balanced and otherworldly, resembling a runic symbol with wing-like extensions that swept across his brow.

He took in his transformed appearance, a devilish smile curling his lips as pure euphoria surged through every fiber of his being.

People began fleeing in all directions, but this version of Raiden was transfixed by his transformation and the luminous moon overhead. The fear emanating from the crowd was tangible, amplifying his euphoria, and the simple thought of butchering them all was almost overwhelming in its appeal.

At that precise moment, Noelle and Ash appeared in the entrance. Noelle was still catching her breath, gazing at Raiden with complete confusion, while Ash wore a strangely warm expression.

This wasn't the same Raiden everyone recognized. Ash was the only one who knew what he truly was beneath the surface, and seeing him in this dark state unmistakably filled her with excitement.

Chapter 115: Chaos Armada 2

The atmosphere became suffocating, thick with confusion and terror as frightened murmurs rippled through the crowd. All eyes were locked on Raiden, his devilish grin stark against his luminous white hair that seemed to glow in the darkness.

Everything looked hazy, but he understood one fundamental truth: the night was his to command. Just then, one of the black-clad men launched himself forward, crossing the space between them in two lightning-fast steps that outpaced even Raiden's mana-enhanced reflexes.

Yet Raiden moved as if he'd seen it all before. When his attacker reached striking distance, three vicious kicks found their mark, two slamming into ribs and one crushing the throat. He shivered with dark pleasure, golden eyes scanning for more prey.

The attacks were impossibly fast, beyond what anyone could perceive, adding to their shock. All they witnessed was the man suddenly hitting the ground, gripping his neck while blood ran from his nose.

Shock and bewilderment crossed Noelle's face as she watched the transformation unfold. Raiden ignored her completely, his attention shifting to the remaining men in black like a hunter selecting his next prey.

He cocked his head slightly, and instantly a deafening blast erupted, sending dust billowing through the air. As it settled, everyone gasped; Raiden's palm was crushing against one of the men's faces. Terror filled the man's dark eyes, sweat dripping despite the frigid night. He struggled weakly but found himself trapped by Raiden's demented stare.

Before the attacker could even react, Raiden drove his head down with inhuman strength, obliterating his skull against the hard ground. Blood erupted in all directions, bathing Raiden in warm crimson.

The remaining four attackers tried to create distance, but Raiden's velocity under the pale moonlight was incomprehensible to them. Only glimpses of his luminous white hair marked his passage through the darkness.

He swept through them like a shadow made flesh, his strikes carrying such overwhelming power they damaged not just their bodies but their souls themselves. Two men dropped before the others could even comprehend his presence, their life's blood staining the arena floor.

As he went for one of the last two attackers, his blow suddenly stopped as if hitting a wall of air. He pulled back and tried once more, but the same invisible force stood between him and his prey.

His malevolent expression cracked for the first time, giving way to genuine confusion. The puzzle grew worse, somehow, one of the men had vanished entirely, while his remaining opponent stood calm and collected, showing none of the terror that had consumed the others.

Fascination sparked in Raiden as his twisted smile crept back across his face. Dragon mana surged into his hand as he unleashed a devastating punch at the bearer. The blow's force created a violent gust that scattered bystanders seeking cover and stirred Noelle's dark hair where she watched from the shadows.

Raiden remained unfazed, continuing his assault with one powerful strike after another, each matching the last in ferocity. While the barrier stood untouched, his opponent's attitude changed—teeth gritted, stance braced against the force that threatened to send him flying.

However, each strike sent waves of overwhelming thrill through Raiden. Soft giggles bubbled up from his throat, growing into light laughter that quickly spiraled into wild, psychotic hysteria.

With Ash resting calmly on her shoulder, Noelle retrieved her aether cigarette and placed it between her lips. Her eyes never left Raiden as she observed his dangerous, unhinged state.

Her face reflected her inner turmoil: confusion tempered by an odd tranquility. She understood that Raiden's secrets were beyond her comprehension, yet something flickered in her gaze, a quiet intrigue about what he was becoming.

Her expression darkened immediately as the vanished figure reappeared behind Raiden. So lost was he in the euphoric rush of his strikes that he failed to detect the presence entirely.

Noelle ran toward them but couldn't reach him in time. The attacker's strike to Raiden's neck was swift and decisive—his body went limp, and he collapsed unconscious.

[ALERT]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+5XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL-50 /100 XP.]

[STAMINA: +5]

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +5

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1080/5000

SOUL OF DRAGON: +5%

HEART OF DRAGON: +5%

MOON DRAGON'S VEIN: +5%]

His transformation unwound: white hair darkening, chaotic aura turning blue, and his tattoos fading into nothing.

The instant Noelle arrived, the person who had attacked Raiden faced her and held up a commanding hand. "Stop!"

Noelle came to an abrupt stop, every muscle primed for violence as she prepared to eliminate the threat to Raiden.

"He belongs to the Chaos Armada now." The voice was steady and composed, clearly belonging to a woman hidden beneath the robe.

Noelle's eyes narrowed as she fixed her gaze on the woman.

"You belong to the Justice Armada, right?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Noelle asked, wariness creeping into her tone.

She released a weary sigh and looked back at Raiden as her ally employed their ability, lifting his unconscious form to float in midair.

"You can't interfere with other armadas' business." Noelle relaxed her stance but kept her gaze alert. "The Justice Armada tested you before they chose you, didn't they?"

Noelle shrugged.

"This is beyond the pre-selection trials."

She took the aether cigarette from her lips and rolled it between her fingers. "I wasn't aware ganging up on allies was permitted."

The robed figure started moving past Noelle, carrying Raiden's suspended form.

"We can do anything we please, just as they did to you."

Though obviously angered by their methods, Noelle remained wary of trusting them. She trailed behind as they exited the arena.

"Can I just check that he's okay?"

The girl turned toward Noelle, her face still hidden within the dark robe's shadows. "We know what your abilities are, Wolf. You're not touching him." She resumed walking.

A sneer twisted Noelle's features, her irritation plain to see. "Rule Domain." Her golden aura abruptly shifted, no longer flowing but forming a perfect sphere that trapped them all inside.

Both Chaos Armada members came to a halt, turning back toward Noelle as she stood with obvious satisfaction, a smile radiating confidence. "Now I get to check on him."

"Like I said, we know exactly what you can do." Both figures turned and strolled out of the domain without concern. "Hell, he was tough. My hands are still throbbing," her companion remarked.

Noelle's eyes widened in horror as she realized what was happening. The aether cigarette tumbled from her shaking hand. "Rule Domain!" she called again. "Stay where you are!" But they passed through her golden sphere like it was nothing.

Her expression flickered between bewilderment and anger as she called forth her domain again. "Cease all movement!" she ordered, but her ability continued to fail against them.

Her eyes flickered with devastating recognition, as if her foundation had cracked beneath her. This was no longer about Raiden's welfare—her pride was at stake.

She looked down at herself as they disappeared completely into the darkness with Raiden.

"What the fuck?" she muttered, fists clenched in helpless rage.

She didn't need to express her embarrassment; it was clear she wouldn't let them have the last laugh.

Chapter 116: Chaos Quarters

Raiden's eyes opened to a blurry haze. His mind struggled to focus, reluctant to process his current situation.

He blinked and subconsciously focused mana into his eyes, sharpening his vision. A dull wooden ceiling came into focus above him, and he shot to his feet instinctively.

The windowless room contained only a small bed. A mirror hung on the left wall, and a wooden door stood ahead. Despite being utterly boring, the room was stifling hot, with deep red scratches carved across the floor and walls.

What perplexed Raiden most, however, was simply being alive. Looking down at himself, he found he was dressed in an ordinary white shirt and black trousers, nothing like the clothes he'd worn before losing consciousness.

He brushed his hand through his dark hair. Nothing seemed right. He remembered dying from his cracked skull, blood draining his life away. But there was no crack now, not even the faintest scar.

Had his berserk mode truly taken control? He looked down at his bare feet in confusion, his body trembling with frustration.

The door suddenly opened. He leaped backward instinctively, dropping into his stance. Being alive probably meant he was now a hostage of the Chaos Armada.

A girl glowing with a blue aura stepped into the room. Her black hair was a chaotic mess of spiky, voluminous strands shooting out wildly. Half-lidded eyes gazed through her bangs with profound boredom, dark circles underneath completing her exhausted appearance.

She was dressed in a white button-up shirt, torn and frayed, with a red tie hanging loose. A dark green jacket drooped off her shoulders, as if maintaining it properly was beyond her care.

Around her neck hung an assortment of necklaces—chains tangled with various pendants.

Her lazy eyes made Raiden drop his defensive stance. She blinked slowly before him, appearing frozen in place.

"Oh, you're up," she said wearily. Without another word, she turned and left, closing the door behind her.

Confusion lingered in Raiden's mind. Beyond her obvious fatigue, her aura seemed scattered and wild. He sighed and chose to pursue her.

However, before he could reach the door, it opened from behind.

A second girl entered, a dark aura swirling around her. She wore her dark brown hair in a short, tousled pixie cut with lighter highlights. While as disheveled as the first girl, she carried herself with a certain style.

Her half-lidded eyes and subtle pout created a boldly defiant expression, one that spoke of confidence and underlying attitude.

Her outfit consisted of a fitted black shirt with a red necktie, partially tucked to accentuate her figure. A tan jacket hung loosely at her waist, completing the look with a light green short skirt.

She locked eyes with Raiden while running her hand near her ear, displaying her multiple earrings and the tattoos that adorned her hand.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he stared into her piercing ones. *"What's going on? Who are you?"*

She studied him briefly before shaking her head in disappointment. "Great, you don't remember anything."

"I'm Snow." She turned and headed for the exit. "Follow me."

Her name alone didn't satisfy Raiden's curiosity, but he had little choice except to comply.

"The other girl was Anya," Snow mentioned as Raiden followed her lead.

Beyond his door lay a short corridor with a dead end nearby. Eight additional rooms lined the passage beside Raiden's own. Snow went left, and he followed her. The turn revealed a massive hall bustling with people, each one glowing with a distinct aura.

"This is the Chaos Armada." Snow glanced back at him as Raiden reached for an aether cigarette in his pocket.

"You're part of the Chaos Armada now, Raven."

The aether cigarette found its place between Raiden's lips as he stepped into the hall. He looked up, taking in the enormity of the space. Hundreds of people wandered freely below while five massive dragons, red and black, over ten feet long, moved among them with wings occasionally spreading. Corridors identical to his own dotted the surrounding walls.

The aether cigarette moved between Raiden's lips as he worked it with his tongue. Snow's face remained impassive throughout her explanation, lending credibility to her words. Testing candidates before the armada selection would be logical.

"Why me? I never fought in the arena."

Snow kept her hands in her jacket as she gazed toward the middle of the hall. There, most people clustered around a square barrier that extended all the way to the ornately carved ceiling.

"You've proven yourself already." Raiden took the aether cigarette from his lips and rolled it between his fingers.

"You're the only one I've seen survive Zion's ability." She shrugged casually. "And you did pretty well against my people too."

Raiden massaged his forehead, squeezing the aether in his hand from frustration. This wasn't the first time his berserk mode had taken over, wiping his memory clean

afterward. Yet he'd been incredibly strong in that state. Why couldn't he tap into that power when he was actually in control?

Snow gestured toward the barrier in the middle of the hall. "Over there is the target barrier."

Raiden frowned. *"What's a target barrier?"*

Snow turned to him. "Not common in your kingdom, huh?"

"A target barrier works like a marked barrier, but with a key difference. While marked barriers target specific people with commands, target barriers only affect concepts, not people."

The crowd around the barrier erupted in cheers that echoed throughout the hall, giving Raiden a better understanding of what Snow had explained.

"So if the command issued is 'death,' it's different from a marked barrier that only affects the targeted person. In target barriers, it applies to everyone within the barrier, and no one comes out unless someone dies, right?"

Snow smiled at him. "You've got it."

She turned to the left. "You can walk around freely. Your first fight within the barrier is tomorrow." She started walking but paused. "Third captain of the chaos armada, by the way."

She smirked. "You're quite strong. I can help you keep the abilities you showed yesterday under wraps." She turned and began walking away.

Raiden stared at her as she walked away. What exactly had he done? His mind began to wander—letting Snow train him would mean she might learn more about his ability.

He sighed. *"I don't have a choice, do I? If I'm still captured even after going into that form, she must have defeated me."*

This wasn't about pride and secrecy anymore. It was about survival.

At that moment, a loud scream erupted from the barrier, someone pleading for their life while everyone around just smiled.

That couldn't be his fate. He had to show his strength and get someone to buy him out of this shithole so he could focus on what really mattered. For now, he was a slave, Raven, not the bookkeeper Raiden.

Chapter 117: Berserker

"Whether you get bought depends entirely on you, Raven. Only if you prove your strength." Snow turned left and walked toward a door in the center of the plain white room. The pristine white door seemed completely at odds with the rest of the chaos base.

"You could become a lieutenant like Anya, a captain, or perhaps a negotiator." She stopped before the door and opened a small window in it, then gestured for Raiden to look through.

Raiden reluctantly walked over and peered inside. Four corrupt crest bearers sat there, their every movement visible under the harsh lanterns against the white walls. Their eyes darted frantically across the floor, flickering and lost in a daze. The frantic speed of their movements and the slight twisting of their faces revealed their terror. Raiden couldn't see their emotions, but it was obvious enough.

Their hands scratched desperately at their skin, trying to tear it away. One on the right raked his fingernails across his flesh, but the wound instantly became smoke and sealed itself.

Raiden gulped, wondering if this would be the fate of his servants, Soul and Speed.

"Why are you showing me this?"

Raiden turned to Snow, who stood with her hands on her waist.

Snow blinked several times, her expression unreadable. "When you go berserk, your aura turns dark."

Raiden's eyes widened and began to flicker, unease coursing through his entire body. His hand flew to his crest. *"What do you mean? I haven't taken the devil milk."*

Snow was quiet for a moment. "You know what? You remind me of someone very dear to me..." Her expression softened into a smile. "Don't worry, he's not dead."

Raiden's eyes narrowed a little. *"What does that have to do with my aura turning dark?"*

Snow sighed. "Your situation is rare. I've only seen it once before, with the person I mentioned."

Raiden didn't have to say a word, his expression told Snow what she needed to do.

"Each corrupt crest bearer, one way or another, reaches the point where their blood becomes too toxic for them to handle." She began walking toward the door once more. "The blood boils, and the heat intensifies with every passing second."

She turned to Raiden. "And worse, the only ability this intoxication grants is insane regeneration."

"So they can't die?"

Snow shook her head. "Their blood keeps getting hotter until it burns them alive from within."

Raiden began rubbing his hands together. *"Is that going to happen to me?"*

She smirked. "That's exactly why we're here. This white door will give us our answer."

Raiden took a step back. He didn't know why, but this time he was genuinely scared. He wanted to control his berserk mode, not die before his time.

"What happens if I become like that?"

"You have a white dragon, right?" Raiden nodded firmly. "When you summon it, do your blue flames turn dark?"

Raiden clenched his fist, the memory crystal clear. It had been unusual to everyone in the palace, including Aeris. The moment the flames turned dark, their intensity deepened—too intense for even him to handle.

"Well, your expression says enough." The instant Snow spoke, she teleported directly before Raiden. His face twisted in confusion just as her fist drove into his gut, launching him backward and slamming him into the floor.

The blow appeared gentle, yet it was easily the most powerful strike Raiden had ever endured. He suppressed the urge to cough blood as his mind shifted from agony to confusion.

"Don't fight back. You want to control your berserk mode, don't you?"

Before Raiden could rise, Snow's leg whipped into his cheek, spinning him through the air until he slammed into the wall.

"The best way to control this version of you is by defeating it."

She was right, Raiden realized. He had no memory of his berserk episodes; he became a completely different person. Understanding it was the key, but how could he manage that?

Snow hammered him with relentless strikes. His regeneration countered the damage, but the pain was so intense he barely kept himself from fighting back, his face growing numb under the assault.

"Keep your mind calm and allow it to take over," Snow murmured, her strikes landing with pinpoint accuracy. Her fists dripped blood while Raiden's face was a mess of cuts and gore, his nose bent at an unnatural angle.

"Stop treating it like another version of yourself. Think of it as an ability."

Understanding dawned in Raiden's eyes as he absorbed the punishment, his head throbbing with agony. Still, Snow's words offered strange comfort. He had never treated his berserk state like his other powers—no experimentation with limits, no attempts to weaponize it strategically. Perhaps he'd lacked the knowledge before, but now he saw a path forward.

His clenched fists uncurled as the impulse to retaliate faded. He let his entire body go slack while Snow's blows continued their savage assault.

He understood this wasn't an ability he could call upon whenever needed, since berserk mode only triggered at the brink of death. But at minimum, he could stay aware and maintain control when it occurred.

The strikes soon became imperceptible to Raiden. His senses retreated into numbness, his eyes losing focus as everything around him blurred into haze.

Raiden struggled to maintain consciousness as everything slipped away. He clung to his purpose: I needed to get back home, for Jobe. If anything could sustain him through this darkness, it was his love for his deceased twin and the vengeance he had vowed to achieve.

Yet even that wasn't sufficient. His mind drifted into darkness while his body ceased functioning. The instant Raiden's breath left him, his azure aura transformed into something sinister.

His hair transformed to pure white, bright as starlight. Wild yet somehow peaceful, the fluffy locks flowed freely and spiked in every direction, floating weightlessly above the ground.

Glowing dark tattoos spread across his hands, trailing down his knuckles and spiraling around his wrists. The markings on his fingers appeared smoother, like coursing energy, while circular designs emerged on his neck, curving from his jawline to his collar and beyond.

When the dark sigil materialized on his forehead, his eyes snapped open and he intercepted Snow's strike mid-swing, a malevolent grin spreading across his face.

Chapter 118: Double

Snow smiled as she met Raiden's golden gaze. Just seeing her was enough to send excitement coursing through his body.

Raiden held Snow's fist tightly in his grip, but from the look on her face, it was obvious she had no intention of backing down either.

They acted as one in that moment, connected by some unspoken understanding. Raiden's punch buried itself in Snow's stomach while her fist crashed into his jaw.

Just that single blow from Raiden made Snow spit blood, yet she savored every moment. The next several minutes filled the space with the sickening sounds of brutal, bone-crushing impacts.

Raiden absorbed each brutal impact, blood streaming from his nose. Snow's relentless speed barely allowed his regeneration to function. Yet this transformed version of him savored the agony, finding euphoria in both the pain he received and the damage he dealt.

As the battle raged, Raiden's awareness sank deeper into oblivion. The physical sensations, the twisted pleasure, the agony—nothing penetrated his mental exile. His body had trapped him in absolute emptiness.

When resolve outweighs adversity, fortune follows. His persistent thoughts gradually penetrated his consciousness. Snow's strikes began reaching him even in that emptiness, each blow reverberating through his essence.

"I need to take control!" The cry emerged from his core. His body remained deaf to it, but his awareness burned on, and that was all he needed.

He started picturing himself in his current form, his body materializing within the darkness that surrounded his consciousness. Gradually, his mind regained enough clarity to think rationally.

As self-awareness returned, he looked around and started understanding his predicament. Every time he entered berserk mode, his consciousness fell into this empty space, remaining dormant while his other self carried out its violent agenda.

"I need to get back," he whispered, his head dropping forward instinctively.

A light appeared ahead, reminiscent of hope at a tunnel's end. But with each passing moment, it retreated further, marking his dwindling control.

Something felt wrong to Raiden, though he couldn't pinpoint exactly what. He knew he had to regain control, and Snow was doing everything she could to assist him.

He clawed at the nothingness, arms pumping and legs churning, but his efforts only accelerated his descent into the depths.

He continued battling against impossible odds, but even in this mental state, weariness began to set in. Then, through his desperation, Snow's words returned to him: maintain a calm mind and accept his berserk mode as part of his being, not merely an ability to be mastered.

His struggles ended as he lowered his head and began centering himself. At first it felt like trying to will himself to sleep, but Raiden's mind had always been his greatest weapon.

While his transformed body and Snow fought above, he turned his attention to finding his heartbeat. Mind and consciousness remained with him; his heart would be the key to reclaiming control.

He surrendered to his state and floated through the emptiness, his consciousness reaching for the core of his being. Soon, he found it, one solitary heartbeat. That single pulse connected him to Snow's strikes, and above, his berserk form froze mid-combat as its violent nature began dissolving.

Success brought a smile to Raiden's lips. He pursued the heartbeat once more, his confidence and determination amplified. The instant he reconnected, he seized hold and wouldn't let go, driving forward with everything he had.

His other self stopped mid-strike and grabbed his skull, releasing blood-curdling screams. The berserker traits began vanishing—hair returning to black, aura flickering out, and tattoos dissolving from his skin. Each shriek reached Raiden's consciousness, but the suffering belonged to something else.

Confusion creased his features as he tried to process what was happening, his eyes darting frantically under closed lids. The screams seemed too near, too immediate. His eyes snapped open, widening with sudden understanding.

He had reached the tunnel's end at last, arriving at the light he'd fought so desperately to find. Before him stood a figure that looked exactly like himself.

His hair was no longer dark but white and wild, tattoos sprawled across his hands and neck in dark patterns, and a malevolent aura surrounded him. Raiden recognized this version of himself from his visions.

He smiled as he watched his other form still screaming out. He realized that not only was his berserk form much stronger than he was, but it also had every ability he was capable of possessing.

"He's struggling. I need to make him feel at home," Raiden said with a soft smile.

Subconsciously, he reached for solid ground below his floating feet. When he found it, he started walking toward his other half.

The moment he got close enough, he looked directly into the berserker's eyes. They weren't his usual golden or gray—they were blue. Raiden ruffled his hair with a sharp smile as the pieces began falling into place.

Before him wasn't just another version of himself. Those blue eyes told him everything he needed to know; it was a blend of him and his white dragon, Ash.

The berserker dropped his hands and instinctively hurried toward Raiden, wrapping him in a tight hug. Raiden's smile only deepened as he began to pat him on the head.

"You are not alone, Ash. We can do this together." The berserker said nothing, but Raiden didn't expect anything either.

The entirety of Ash existed within him: her heart, soul, and being as the moon dragon. His berserk version was simply the protective aspect of herself that she'd shared with him. But by treating this form like a completely different person, he had caused it to doubt its own identity.

Through their embrace, Raiden became fully aware of his heartbeat, feeling how warm and gentle it was growing. As his heart grew warmer, he could sense his other self slowly merging back into him.

"You don't have to be a different person anymore, Ash. We are one, trust me." He murmured, and he could feel the berserker's warm smile echoing on his own face.

Before long, he found himself standing alone, tattoos covering his body and his white hair flickering in the dark aura that surrounded him.

He looked down at his body, torn between confusion and understanding. It only took a blink before his vision became extremely blurry. He quickly concentrated mana into his eyes, and when he opened them, a strike was already heading for his cheek, sending him crashing to the ground.

"Ow, Snow," he said, touching his cheek. *"It's me, calm down."*

"Oh, much better," Snow muttered as she sank to the floor, her nose bleeding and crimson covering her lips.

"Oh, crap!" Raiden rushed toward her and wrapped her in his arms. *"My attacks are quite powerful. Why did you take them head-on?"*

Snow smirked. "Don't think you're the only one with healing abilities."

Raiden smiled as Snow pulled up her dark shirt, revealing bruises on her stomach that began healing before his eyes.

"Please don't tell me you don't know how to turn your transformation off either," she said, her expression shifting to concern.

Raiden glanced at his body to see all the tattoos still visible and his white hair floating behind him. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and everything slowly began fading away.

"Great, now if you want it, just set your mind to it, and it will come. Not your berserk mode though, just the transformation."

Raiden nodded subtly.

[ALERT]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+5XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL- 55 /100 XP.]

[STAMINA: +5

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: +5

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1085/5000

SOUL OF DRAGON: +5%

HEART OF DRAGON: +5%

MOON DRAGON'S VEIN: +5%]

Chapter 119: Curtain Effect

Snow folded herself cross-legged on the floor while Raiden crouched at her side.

"This worked because of the room." Her eyes darted around. "Every corrupt crest bearer's weakness is absolute white."

She gestured toward the door to where the insane crest bearers were kept. "That's why we keep them here. So they die easily."

Raiden gave her a confused expression. She was talking like she was exempt. *"But you have a corrupt crest too. What about that?"*

She smiled. "Well, I have a master. I formed a contract with the very person you remind me of, and contracts prevent insanity. The oath doesn't allow it."

She tilted her head upward. "That's why corrupt crest bearers flock here voluntarily. They'd rather be bought as slaves than face certain death."

Raiden propped his hand on the floor behind him, tilting his head up. He felt neither happy nor sad, just glad Soul and Speed had contracted with him. But one question nagged at him—he'd leave this world eventually, so what would happen to them?

"What happens if your master dies?"

Snow smirked. "Knowing him, he's less likely to die before me." Her smirk faded, and her voice went quiet. "But if he does die, I'll have a few days before I go insane like the rest."

Raiden took a deep breath as sympathy for Soul and Speed hit him. Vengeance for his brother still came first, but he respected them. Losing them would hurt.

He sighed. *"What reminds you of your master when you look at me?"*

Silence stretched between them. Raiden waited for Snow to answer.

When she finally spoke, her voice echoed through the walls. "Have you heard of Dhrathopia?"

Raiden gave her a subtle look, though it was too brief for Snow to notice.

"It was said only dragons existed in Dhrathopia, but it turned out every magical creature lives there."

Raiden glanced at her. *"How did you know that?"*

"I didn't. My master told me, and I believed he'd been there himself."

Raiden's body shot upright. The first time he'd heard of them was through Aeris, if his memories served him right, and she'd said no one had been there. They didn't even know exactly where it was.

"How?"

Snow smirked, "Something he called the Curtain Effect, I think."

"What's that?"

"I don't think I would have the right words for it," she said, rising to her feet, "but look at it as a curtain dividing our world and theirs."

"He returned with one of the seven primordial dragons, and he has a transformation similar to yours." She smiled, eyes closed. "He used to have similar issues to yours."

Raiden lowered himself to the floor once more. This truth would have been crucial information almost a month ago, but now, everything felt like a heap of gunk.

"Prepare yourself. Your first battle is in a few hours." She walked to the entrance door and placed her hand on the handle. "There will be someone who can buy your freedom if you want to leave, but if you stay, I can help you rise in the ranks. Let me know."

Raiden watched Snow leave, then stared up at the white ceiling, his eyes darting back and forth. At first, he'd planned to buy his way out and escape, but now, climbing the ranks seemed appealing—at least he wouldn't be treated like a slave. Still, he knew that positions like captain, lieutenant, or navigator would bring their own complications.

"I don't want anything to bind me to this place," he muttered and let out a sigh. *"Regardless, I need to be on the same page as Noelle before making any decisions."*

He remained silent for a moment, his mind retracing everything that had happened. Before, he would have doubted Snow's kindness, but with his new ability to detect lies, he knew she'd been truthful with him. Even so, he was certain that wasn't the whole story.

He sprang to his feet and brushed the dust off his clothes. A faint smile crossed his face. He had a fight to the death ahead of him, and if he survived, he'd decide what to do next.

He made his way out of the room and opened the door to find a corridor lined with eight white doors, identical to his own hallway. The left end was blocked, and the right led to a wall.

At the exit, he collided with someone, almost knocking them down. He hurried to help, and the sleepy reaction immediately told him it was Anya. Her blue aura pulsed lazily as her shoulders drooped, her jacket sliding down further while she rubbed her eyes.

"Are you okay, Anya?" Raiden reached for her hand to help her up.

"Is that you, Raven?" she asked lazily, lifting her head slightly. Their eyes met, and Raiden smiled softly as she extended her hand toward him. He gently pulled her up.

"Captain Snow sent me to find you," she said, turning toward the barrier in the center of the wall where a crowd had formed. "You're up next."

Raiden's expression fell immediately. *"But I thought I had a few more hours?"*

She turned to Raiden and shrugged. Raiden's expression softened when he saw the reluctance in Anya's eyes.

He was going to fight regardless, so the sooner the better.

He took a deep breath and braced himself. *"Well, I'm ready."*

Anya led the way as Raiden followed, but something felt off about her. *"Hey, Anya."*

She stopped and turned back. *"You're a blue crest bearer, a number four at that. Where's your familiar?"*

Anya's expression became even more sluggish, as though mentioning her familiar pained her. She tugged at her red tie, loosening it, and brilliant white light burst from beneath her shirt. Raiden threw up his hands to block the glare.

"Light fairy," she said simply, covering the creature again.

An awkward smile crossed Raiden's face as he finally understood why she hid her fairy.

"Let's go," she said, and they started pushing through the crowd toward the barrier.

When they reached the barrier, Raiden's eyes widened. Two fighters with black and gray auras were battling, and blood from the gray-auraed combatant had splattered across the entire barrier, painting it crimson.

"Your opponent is someone called Bald," Anya said. Chills ran through Raiden's body, and he swallowed hard to push down his uneasiness.

"Navigator Jojo recommended him."

Raiden's heart skipped a beat as he scanned the crowd for Jojo, but the navigator was nowhere to be seen.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. He knew how powerful Jojo was, so if he'd recommended Bald, then Raiden was in serious trouble.

Chapter 120: Against Bald

"Bald's the name, lad," he said, prowling in a circle around Raiden inside the barrier. He turned to show his back, over a dozen names tattooed like trophies.

"Everyone who dies by my hand has the honor of getting their name tattooed on my back." He adopted a practiced look of sorrow. "So they'll be remembered forever."

Raiden tracked his movements, watching the yellow aura that surrounded him. Metallic sounds rang out from his many earrings as he moved, and he wore a soft smile while his hand traced across his bare torso, preparing to strike.

Raiden had expected someone actually bald, given the name, but this man had red hair brushed neatly back, giving him an almost gentlemanly appearance. Yet his energy was far too chaotic to match that refined look.

Why is he circling me?—Raiden wondered, following his movements.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as frustration built at Bald's circling, but just as he was about to move, he caught himself and slapped his forehead with a disappointed smile.

"Damn me!" he muttered, smirking. He couldn't read Bald's intentions completely, but he knew better than to react in anger.

He rested his chin on his hand, thinking. Bald's circling could mean two things, assuming it wasn't directly related to his ability: either he was trying to find Raiden's blind spot for a close-range attack, or he was simply trying to get under his skin.

Raiden chuckled softly, then sighed. Whatever Bald's game was, he had the perfect counter. He steadied his nerves and vanished from sight.

Bald, and the crowd looked perplexed, their eyes scanning frantically for any trace of him.

Raiden was amazed by what he could see, his eyes locking onto Bald with wonder. For the first time while invisible, he could see clearly instead of relying on heat detection.

But he knew he had to focus and take advantage of the confusion. He moved steadily toward Bald, who was still scanning frantically for him. Raiden struck him hard in the gut, sending Bald crashing down with a hollow scream, blood spilling from his mouth.

"What? He was actually invisible?"

"How?"

No one in the crowd had ever seen a blue crest bearer turn invisible—no magical creature was supposed to be capable of such a feat. But little did they know that these rules barely applied to Raiden, the bookkeeper, and his white dragon Ash, the mood dragon.

Raiden surged forward to deliver the final blow, but something made him pull up short just before reaching Bald. He leaped back, trusting his instincts.

He didn't know exactly what it was, but something about Bald didn't feel right; his dragon instincts were keen enough to sense that much.

"You're intriguing, lad." Bald started getting to his feet, and beginning at his neck, his body slowly transformed into metal. His hair was no exception.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as he swallowed hard, watching the cocky grin spread across Bald's face.

Bald waved his hand blindly, guessing at Raiden's location. "Come on, buddy. Give me another one of those hits."

Raiden sighed. He knew his strikes would damage Bald's physical body, soul, and spirit alike, and he was confident he could end the fight. But he didn't know how tough that metallic transformation was. If it were strong enough, it could break his hand completely.

He started sweating at the thought alone. One wrong move could be fatal if he didn't think of alternatives.

Bald began stretching, and when Raiden saw how the metallic skin flexed and folded like real flesh with each movement, his heart lurched.

Raiden smirked as he watched him. If the metal were as flexible as skin, then his strikes would do serious damage. He giggled at the realization—even if his fists were hurt in the process, his regeneration could handle that easily enough.

Taking advantage of Bald's closed eyes as he stretched, Raiden moved in and landed a devastating strike to his ribcage. But his eyes went wide when he saw his fist buried in Bald's metallic side.

Sharp pain raced through his hand, making it tremble. Before he could understand what had happened, Bald's counterstrike came, and Raiden barely managed to block it.

In that moment, all his attention flew to his left hand as he screamed in agony. Blood splattered on the ground, giving away his position. But Bald didn't attack. He just stood there, confident, hands resting on his waist.

Raiden gritted his teeth, heart pounding, fear unmistakable on his face. His mind scrambled, trying to understand how his ability had failed against Bald. But he knew to reposition himself first.

He clutched his broken hand to his chest, wrapping his white shirt around it. He stumbled a few steps toward the metal barrier about five meters away.

A glance at his left hand revealed that the bone was completely shattered. Though he could feel his regeneration attempting to work, he knew it wasn't enough. It needed time. His right hand trembled, fingers still dislocated from his strike.

Raiden glanced at Bald once more, knowing he was at a disadvantage in both defense and offense. He had nothing in his arsenal to counter it.

Every second made him more anxious as the importance of the fight finally hit him. Trapped within the barrier together, neither could leave until one was dead. And regardless of how he sliced it, he was the one most likely to die.

"I can't die here," he muttered, eyes darting around, sniffing through his fear.

He forced his right hand up, snapping the dislocated fingers back into place as he dropped to one knee. He bit back an agonizing scream.

Chills traced down his spine as the bones readjusted, but he wasn't finished. Grabbing his left hand, he clenched his eyes shut—every nerve screamed against what he was about to do.

He twisted the broken hand into position to heal properly. He felt more dead than alive. His body shook violently, but he endured it, watching Bald casually stroll back to his original spot, hands in his pockets.

"I won't be dying today, Bald," he muttered, pulling off his shirt and wrapping it around his broken hand. *"I have far more important matters to attend to."*

Raiden understood the cockiness. He would've done the same in Bald's position. Victory was already within Bald's grasp, and toying with his prey was just entertainment since Raiden would be dead soon anyway.

"There are things that go beyond strength, lad." He became visible and beckoned Bald forward. *"There's resolve. And there's me."*

Raiden forced a smirk through the pain. *"Unfortunately for you, I have both."*

Bald laughed softly, turning toward him. "Is that so?"