

The Bookkeeper

#Chapter 121: Against Bald 2 - Read The Bookkeeper Chapter 121: Against Bald 2

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Raiden found himself taking small but steady backward steps, his mind scrambling to piece together his cockiness while Bald casually advanced.

Bald dashed forward, launching a strike straight at Raiden's chin. Raiden's eyes snapped wide as he watched the fist hurtle toward him.

The strike hovered, fast enough to make the crowd's eyes widen in amusement, but Raiden felt confused. To him, it seemed sluggish.

His smile stretched wide, teeth gritted in excitement. The moment he dodged, another strike followed. Then another. And another. Still not a scratch on Raiden.

"You may be strong, Bald," his whole body quivering with excitement, *"but you are too slow!"* He burst into laughter.

Bald's irritation was clear as he began attacking even faster, but the increased speed only made his movements more laughable to Raiden.

But Raiden's smile slowly faded as Bald switched tactics, constantly striking from his left side, targeting the broken arm. Raiden's movements grew sluggish, teeth gritted in agony as each twist sent unbearable pain coursing through his hand. Yet his speed was still leagues above Bald's.

This was a milestone for Raiden, even with the difficulty. He wanted to drain Bald's mana completely, wear him down until he had nothing left—but with the pain shooting through his hand, it was only a matter of time before he made a mistake.

"You fucker," he muttered through his agony.

His reflexes stayed in sync with Bald's strikes, avoiding each by a hair's breadth while slowly adjusting his left arm behind his back. The moment his arm dropped to his waist, he leaned forward in agony. Bald smirked, seizing the opportunity. His strike shot directly at Raiden's head, and in that instant, Raiden's heart lurched.

It was as if time froze; he had little confidence he could survive such a strike. But in that critical moment, instinct took over. His mana zone activated, blue energy spreading across the field as he easily dodged to his right.

"You can use mana zone?" Bald gritted his teeth in irritation.

Raiden smirked, taking a few steps back. With his mana zone active, he could detect even the slightest movement in Bald's body.

"Don't tell me you can't do it?"

Bald sneered, "Tsk... I can."

Raiden's eyes lit up with amusement as he detected the red aura flickering around Bald's form. He was lying.

Raiden's grin widened. *"Come on... do it then."* He gestured for Bald to approach.

Bald's pride flared at Raiden's taunt. He dashed forward, launching strike after strike with barely a breath between them. But unlike before, it was as if Raiden could see his attacks coming before he even threw them.

Soon, Bald doubled over, gripping his knees as he panted. Raiden observed him taking cautious steps backward, attempting to disguise his retreat.

That alone made Raiden suppress a laugh, his body trembling with amusement. He glanced at the sweat running down his bare chest, then smiled dangerously as he began his own retreat, pretending not to notice Bald's plan.

When Bald paused, Raiden mirrored him, drawing in his mana through controlled breathing and channeling it into his legs and fists.

If his hunch was right, Bald would have to deactivate his power. The metal layer covering him was like wearing a too-tight bodysuit that hampered his agility.

He narrowed his eyes, waiting for the perfect moment to attack. But Bald was hesitant, his dark eyes flickering between Raiden's face and that unsettling smile.

But now, Raiden was confident in his victory. With such a glaring weakness in Bald's power, patience was his only weapon. Bald would either collapse from overheating or deactivate his ability, creating the perfect opening.

Bald's expression showed he understood this as well. He hadn't anticipated Raiden's speed. But the need to cool down was something he couldn't escape.

Raiden watched Bald's every move until he detected the change; beginning at his neck, the metal coating started to dissolve.

Raiden's expression grew even more sinister as he instinctively read Bald's plan, his eyes tracking the raised hand.

At that very moment, a tremendous gust tore through the barrier, cracking it partially. In the next heartbeat, Raiden's hand had punched clean through Bald's neck, warm blood spraying across his chest.

The crowd was shocked into silence, mouths hanging open as they watched Raiden standing before Bald. All they had witnessed was a massive explosion, and suddenly Bald was gasping his last.

Raiden trembled with suppressed laughter, euphoria flooding through him at his victory.

"How did you do that?" Bald whispered, blood trickling from his lips.

Raiden shrugged, his smile almost gentle. *"Let's just say I have exceptional mana control."*

His eyes narrowed suddenly as he wrenched his hand free, completely destroying Bald's throat. He let the metallic body drop to the floor, its impact ringing sharply through the shocked crowd.

Raiden's teeth clenched as his legs erupted in searing pain, followed by a sharp jolt from his fist. Three of his fingers were broken.

He sighed, then smiled as the barrier finally crumbled around them. It wasn't his best fight ever, that still went to Seth, but it was one where he'd fought blind, not knowing what to expect.

"My whole body's wrecked," he muttered, dropping to the floor.

[ALERT]

[MANA SOLIDIFICATION SUCCESSFUL]

[+5XP]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL-60 /100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 180

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1090/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 385

STAMINA: 370

DRAGON AURA: 160

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—Swordsmanship: 90%

—Euphoria: 100%

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: 50%

—Heart of Dragon: 55%

—Moon Dragon's Veins: 35%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

As he lay there, Anya walked over and knelt beside him. "Using mana to enhance your speed that way could destroy your legs completely."

Raiden looked up at her with a tired grin.

She waited a moment, studying Raiden as she figured out the best way to move him without making his injuries worse. After scratching her head and sighing, she casually slung him over her shoulder.

Raiden's body ached, but he was more surprised that Anya was actually helping him. He'd figured she was way too lazy for this.

"Rest up," Anya said. "Captain Snow will likely check on you later."

Raiden sneered. Now he faced the real challenge: his future.

Chapter 122: Affinity

"I heard your fight with Bald was brutal," Snow remarked casually, standing behind Raiden. He faced a small mirror mounted on the wall, delicately adjusting the bandage around his left arm, layering it piece by piece.

"What about it?"

Snow's sneer faded into a sigh. "Time to decide. Do you want to be sold, or will you join us?"

Raiden paused, rolled his neck, and turned to Snow. It had been two days since his battle with Bald. His wounds still ached, but he'd kept training with Anya, who gave him pointers on mana-boosted speed from the sidelines—too lazy to actually show him how it was done.

He still hadn't found time to see Noelle and plan their next move. He slapped his forehead in disappointment.

"How was your mission?" he asked, adjusting his reflection in the mirror. *"Two days away... must have been rough."*

Snow moved backward and settled onto Raiden's bed. "Nothing major. I took a small group to deal with some bandits who were pushing into our territory."

Raiden's gaze sharpened. *"So that's what the armadas do? Just territorial protection?"*

Snow watched him adjust his bandages in silence for a moment. "You'll discover that after you've joined."

Raiden faced her, fishing an aether cigarette from his pocket and putting it to his lips. Snow flicked her fingers in a casual gesture, and the cigarette sparked to life. The sudden smoke caught him off guard, triggering a coughing spell.

"You don't know how to smoke, do you?"

"No, no. Aether's supposed to be smooth and flavorless, like breathing air." He stared at her. "But how did you light it? I didn't see that coming."

"That's aether?" She propped her chin on her hand. "I've heard about those."

Raiden raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I lit it with dark flames."

Raiden removed the aether from his mouth and began massaging his throat. *"I didn't know it was possible to learn dark flames."*

Snow stood up and dusted off her clothes. "I don't have all day, Raven. What's your decision?"

Raiden moved to his bed and picked up his shirt. *"I need to talk it over with my partner."*

Her eyes narrowed. "The wolf girl?"

"Yes."

He dressed while Snow moved toward the exit. "I want an answer by tonight," she said, and slammed the door.

As Raiden fastened his black shirt, he pondered Snow's ability with dark flames. She definitely wasn't lying—he could sense that much—but everything he knew said only elemental magic was teachable: air, fire, water, and earth. If Snow had learned dark flames, did that open the door for ice and lightning magic too?

Given how casually Snow had responded, she clearly expected him to already know about these abilities. He sighed heavily.

"Guess we know nothing," he muttered, heading for the door.

The hallway hummed with its usual activity as he made his way right toward the exit. Other men brushed past him, moving deeper into the facility. Outside, he paused to examine their quarters. The entire compound lay underground, concealed beneath the desert except for this single entrance.

He looked back at the entrance, noting the dark aura that radiated from the ground in expanding circles across the desert. Nothing unusual there, so his gaze moved to the iron sign above the entrance with 'Chaos' etched into it.

This was his first time outside the quarters since Snow had carried him there unconscious. The problem was, he had no clue how to find Noelle, who belonged to a different armada, Justice Armada.

The arena where armada selections took place lay to his right, and he walked toward it without a second thought.

"Maybe I can find someone to ask for directions."

He walked with his hands in his pockets, eyes scanning the area while the aether hung from his lips. A few minutes in, he noticed someone approaching. Arms crossed over his chest, white sleeves pushed up, radiating a golden aura through his glasses—it was Zion.

A bitter laugh escaped Raiden. This was his first encounter with Zion since the man had almost killed him, gifting him these cursed golden eyes in the process.

He picked up his pace and moved closer. Settling beside Zion at the arena entrance, they both turned their attention to the brutal fight playing out below.

Zion barely looked his way but knew immediately who it was. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Raiden's smirk widened. *"I thought you'd be trembling by now, seeing as I'm still breathing after taking your best shot."*

Zion shifted his gaze to him with a knowing smile. "I would be trembling, if you understood how you really survived."

Raiden glanced toward him. Zion was right. How exactly he'd survived that attack was a mystery, and until now, he hadn't even thought about it. He was just glad to be alive.

"You were the first to survive, but obviously it left you with something unforgettable," Zion said cockily.

Raiden let out a heavy sigh. *"You're right. Now I need mana constantly flowing through my eyes just to see."*

Zion's voice dropped as he faced the arena. "Something like this was always going to leave its mark. Seeing the truth of reality and living to tell about it... I don't think blindness is where it ends."

Raiden turned toward the field. Naturally, he hadn't healed from it. The ability had its perks—lie detection, for one—but it remained a curse. Stop concentrating mana into his eyes for even a moment, and it would all come flooding back: the excruciating burden of perceiving every universal truth at once, through both sight and mind. Just thinking about it sent ice through his veins.

"It's really not that big a deal," he said, his sarcasm barely concealing the bitterness.

"By the way, how do I get to Wolf?"

Zion looked at him. "You haven't seen her in a while, have you?"

Raiden shrugged noncommittally.

"She's been training and killing like never before." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Look, there's something you need to know, but it's not my place to say. She should tell you herself."

Raiden's expression darkened, his mind spinning with possibilities. But Zion's grave look said it all; this was serious, and only Noelle could tell him what it was.

Chapter 123: Trial

[Papa, I miss you,] Ash's voice echoed in Raiden's head from across the room. She bounded down from Noelle's shoulder and sprinted toward him.

[You look tired... are you okay?]

Raiden caught her in his arms and pulled her into a hug. *"I should be asking you that, Ash,"* he muttered, stroking her fur.

"You can speak now, but it's like you're ignoring me."

Ash gave him a faint smile, enjoying the feel of Raiden's hands brushing against her scales. He placed her on his shoulder and turned to Noelle. The aether cigarette rested between her lips, her golden aura glowing beautifully around her as her short dark hair flickered behind her, hands tucked in her pockets.

"I'll leave you two to it." Zion's voice cut through from behind Raiden, and he turned to go.

Raiden gave him a firm nod as he watched him descend into the arena.

*Ash, what happened? Noelle seems a little tired—*Raiden projected to her.

[She will tell you, Papa.]

Raiden glanced at Ash resting on his shoulder and shook his head in disbelief. He'd hoped she would be more helpful, maybe even gossip a little.

"You look beat up," Noelle said as she drew closer to Raiden.

Raiden sneered. *"I could say the same for you."*

Noelle looked down at her black shirt before massaging her neck, her fingers tracing the choker tattoo around her throat. The ink was stark against her skin, made more prominent by her dark clothes.

"Why did you want to see me?"

Raiden narrowed his eyes as Noelle stood before him, violet eyes clashing with gold, both flickering intensely. *"From the look of things, you should have done this earlier."*

Noelle let out a deep sigh. "Have you been smoking the aether?"

Raiden shrugged. *"Mostly no, but I was smoking a few minutes ago."* He caught the tenderness in her violet eyes, her concern unmistakable. She did care.

Raiden rested his chin on his hand, lost in thought. Perhaps she believed everything was her fault.

Noelle narrowed her eyes a fraction. "You're talking trash about me in your head, aren't you?"

Raiden shook his head. *"Trust me, I would've said it to your face."*

Noelle smiled softly and walked past him to stare down at the arena field. Raiden followed, puzzled by her sudden shift.

"I'll be in a life-and-death fight tomorrow. Against the Justice Armada's vice captain."

Raiden blinked in surprise. *"Can you take them? I mean, those people are monsters."*

Noelle whirled on Raiden, eyes blazing with fury and disappointment. "What do you take me for? You think I can't win?"

Raiden recognized the determination in her gaze—whatever drove her ran deeper than he would ever know—but he couldn't shake his concerns.

He sighed and pulled his bandaged left arm from his pocket, gesturing in Noelle's direction.

"I fought someone called Bald two days ago," he smiled. *"He was a nobody. Just let me handle this."*

His expression darkened as he turned toward the arena. *"I was outclassed, and when it became life and death, I had no doubt I was going to die."*

He gave a slight shrug. *"But I knew giving up wasn't an option."* Turning to Noelle, he added, *"Somehow, I killed him instead."*

A faint smile crossed his face. *"It doesn't really matter who's stronger or weaker. The question is: are you willing to kill yourself to win? When it comes down to it, could you break your own bones to bypass their defenses?"* He paused. *"How strong is your resolve?"*

Noelle watched Raiden tilt his head back to stare at the sky. *"I think you're too arrogant. You want to be the best, and you thrive on being the best."*

Raiden turned back to Noelle and saw her calm demeanor had given way to irritation. *"But that's the truth..."*

"It doesn't matter if you are the best. I believe you just need enough strength to fight for what you want." He brushed his fingers through Noelle's hair with a gentle smile while her face twitched. *"Will this bring you closer to your goal, or hold you back?"*

"You could have easily said you don't believe I can win," she replied with clear annoyance.

Raiden shook his head in disapproval and turned back to the arena, slipping his hands into his pockets as he searched for the right words.

"I believe you can win. The vice captain might be strong, but I believe in you." Noelle stared at him, her cheeks flushing slightly, though her confusion was unmistakable.

"I want you to reconsider why you're going to fight. Is it for you, your mother, or a completely different goal?" He shrugged. *"Once you understand that, then think about how much strength such motivation gives you. Is it something you could die for?"*

His eyes flickered as he began to think about his own life and aspirations. Realization dawned on him, his heart sinking as his body shivered with creeping anxiety. Truthfully, he had no dreams of his own. He had lived his entire life to avenge his dead twin brother, Jobe. A cold sensation surged through him as he trembled, though he maintained a soft smile.

"I need to avenge my brother. That's all that matters, and that's all that will ever matter," he muttered under his breath.

"I can't tell you what I'm fighting for, but trust me, it's something I would die for." Noelle's voice cut through Raiden's daze as he turned to face her.

He let out a soft sigh. *"Well, just don't die. I can't lose you yet."*

Noelle's eyebrow shot up in surprise before she turned from Raiden to face the arena.

"By the way, I came to ask what our next move should be," he said with a big grin. *"Unlike you, I've already been given the opportunity to join the ranks of the Chaos Armada."*

"I will win," Noelle said, her voice cold and steady. "And when I do, we leave here as soon as possible."

"How?"

"We go on a joint mission to protect our territories and never return." She turned to leave, her gaze avoiding Raiden's as she stared at the ground. "Thanks for your words, and trust me, I won't lose."

Raiden smirked, watching her walk away. *"You better not die on me."*

She raised her hand in a thumbs-up without looking back.

[I think this is the most effective communication you've ever had with anyone, Papa.]

Raiden looked over his shoulder. *"I don't know why, Ash, but it felt right."* His hand moved to his chest. *"But there's something else. Can you feel it too?"*

Ash gave him a gentle nod. [You're becoming more human. You doubt yourself now.]

Raiden's expression grew dark. *"It doesn't matter. I will go back to my world and avenge Jobe if it's the last thing I do."*

Ash glanced at him for a moment, then let out a sigh and settled back.

Chapter 124: Captain Kimberly

Soon, Raiden and Snow entered the final corridor of the Chaos Armada wall. Surprisingly, this passage had a cozy atmosphere, with lamps guiding their way and walls carved to mimic a ship's interior instead of housing rooms. Silence enveloped them as their footsteps echoed through the hollow space.

"We are going to meet Captain Kimberly." Snow's words echoed through the passage. "She will most likely ask us about the vice captain's whereabouts."

She turned to Raiden, who walked with his hands tucked into his pockets and an aether cigarette resting between his lips, his eyes gently darting around as Ash rested on his shoulder.

"I'd like you to say you've met him if that happens," she added.

"Who is the vice captain anyway?" Raiden asked, curiosity evident in his voice.

"My master... he's on an important mission right now."

Raiden's eyebrow arched in confusion. *"Is it a personal mission? One that the captain can't know about?"*

Snow gave him a gentle nod, and Raiden smirked. He hadn't known people could leave Drake's Shell for personal reasons. If that was the case, he would use it to his advantage.

His expression shifted to a rehearsed, dark look. *"I won't do it."*

Snow turned to him, her expression calm and gentle as she adjusted the jacket over her shoulders. "You want to strike a deal, don't you?" She sighed, her eyes darting to the floor. "What do you want?"

"You catch on fast..." Raiden said with obvious appreciation.

"I told you already, you're literally like my master." She shook her head. "Actually, thinking about it, you two are the same person in different bodies."

Raiden rested his chin on his hand. *"Really? I can't wait to meet him then."*

They stepped into a massive walkway that branched left and right, making their previous path seem like a narrow corridor. Pillars lined the edge before them, and beyond stretched greenery that extended about three miles into the distance. Raiden squinted in confusion as Snow turned right. How had they managed to cultivate so many plants and forests in this place?

"We'll be reaching the Captain soon. What are your demands?" Snow asked, barely glancing in Raiden's direction.

Her words snapped Raiden out of his daze as he turned to her. *"Oh, about that..."* He removed the aether from his lips. *"Three things."*

Snow turned to him. "Go on..."

"I want you to teach me how to use dark flames, teach me any tricks you've got up your sleeve to get stronger and build mana reserves, and allow me to go out on a personal mission." He wore a soft smile, holding up three fingers.

Snow paused and stared at Raiden, her dark eyes gazing directly at his soul through his golden eyes. After a brief moment, she extended her hand for a shake. "Fine."

Raiden stared for a moment, searching for any faltering in her emotions, any sign of hidden intentions, but found none. After a short while, he placed his hand in hers, sealing their agreement.

"Now, let's get to the Captain," Snow said, beginning to lead the way. Raiden followed in an instant.

Before long, they began running into several golden doors on their right, but none of them caught Raiden's attention like the figure who appeared three doors away. The figure had silver-grey hair with a white turban wrapped around his head, and his appearance spoke of elegance and confidence.

Raiden narrowed his eyes as he stared. *"Is that Chrono?"* He muttered.

The figure turned to him, tilted his head a little, and then wore a soft smile.

"You know him?" Snow asked. They both paused, and Raiden gave her a subtle nod.

Chrono walked toward Raiden. "So this is where you've been," he said playfully. "You need to hurry, pretty boy. Time is running."

He stopped before Snow and leaned in slightly toward her. "I already told you there are others after the pages as well." Snow leaned back, pushing him away.

Chrono brushed off his shirt. "You haven't changed at all, have you?" he asked Snow. She replied with an annoyed sneer.

"Get back before I leave you behind," he added, then began walking away as he waved at Raiden over his shoulder.

Raiden stared as he walked away, confusion and curiosity warring within him. He wondered what Chrono was doing at Drake's Shell, and more importantly, it seemed like he and Snow knew each other.

"Let me guess... the personal mission you spoke of is the twenty-eight pages," Snow said as they both watched Chrono walk away.

"Is that what your master is also after?" Raiden asked, turning to her.

"Yes and no." She turned to Raiden. "Be careful with Chrono," she said, then began walking. Raiden followed in an instant.

"Who is Chrono anyway?"

Snow tilted her head slightly upward toward the white ceiling. "He's the vice captain of the Arsenal Armada, and his team, the Apex Circle, protects their lands at Dark City."

Raiden finally began understanding the armadas' roles and what they meant by territories. The entire Kingdom of Noor belonged to Drake's Shell—they indeed sailed the desert. Perhaps Lunar City, where they'd been kidnapped, also belonged to the armada. He slapped his forehead in disbelief. Of course, it belonged to the armada; that's where they got kidnapped.

Snow's fists clenched tightly, her face twitching with irritation. "Both Dark City and Lunar City, but that bitch used his influence with Drake to get them from us."

Raiden's expression darkened with confusion. *"Wait, what? Drake is a person?"*

Snow turned to him with obvious disappointment. "Of course, who did you think that Drake's Shell belonged to?"

Raiden's mouth parted in concern at how oblivious he had been. It never crossed his mind, not once, that the entire place had a ruler.

He shrugged his shoulders. *"I thought it was just a title."*

Snow blinked at him repeatedly, her disappointment still unquenched. "So, who did you think the dark aura surrounding the desert belonged to?"

Raiden paused, his mouth opening even further as his heartbeat grew uneven. *"That belonged to one person?"* He gulped. *"I thought it belonged to all the corrupt crest bearers in here."*

Snow shook her head as she approached the first door. She knocked as Raiden walked up beside her.

"Come in," a voice announced.

Snow opened the door to reveal a woman, about twenty years old, with long grey hair that glowed with a blue aura. She had a white towel wrapped around her chest and was drying her hair. She stood between four green Victorian couches, with a desk stuffed with dozens of papers behind her.

They both walked in and closed the door behind them. The moment Captain Kimberly turned to face them, her blue eyes meeting theirs, she somehow tripped and fell to the ground, her towel flying through the air.

Raiden barely got a glimpse before Snow covered his eyes.

"Don't watch. The Captain can be very clumsy sometimes." She sighed. "All the time, to be precise."

Raiden started giggling. He didn't know why, but he found everything amusing.

Chapter 125: Arch God Beast

"Raven has proven himself strong enough by defeating Navigator Jojo's strongest subordinate." Snow said with her voice steady and calculated. Raiden glanced at her as he hadn't seen her this concentrated before.

"I want him to be my lieutenant."

Kimberly began playing with her hair. "And why didn't you discuss this with the vice captain?"

"He asked us to come meet you directly." Snow's eyes shifted toward Raiden. "He was unsure about Raiden's ability."

Kimberly's face hardened as she leaned forward, palms pressed to the desk. "Tell me about the vice captain... He handpicked Ekko and Anya for you, correct?"

She let the silence stretch before delivering her final words. "Because he owns you."

Snow's face lit up with an unsettling brightness, like she'd just heard wonderful news.
"Absolutely right."

"Raven's abilities are absolutely broken. I'd put him on the same level as Ekko and Anya, maybe even the vice captain." Kimberly settled back, studying Snow's reaction. "Of course, he doesn't see it that way. Typical insecurity."

Kimberly exhaled slowly. "Alright. I need to speak with him privately."

"Yes, Captain." Snow pushed back her chair and walked toward the exit.

Raiden's eyes darted about, taking in the tense atmosphere. Captain Kimberly looked cheerful enough, but something felt off.

The instant Snow was gone and the door closed, Kimberly's posture relaxed into a lazy stretch.
"I can't stand all that professional bullshit."

Raiden looked around in confusion, still trying to make sense of what had just happened.

"Let's start simple. You're Raiden Night... current bookkeeper for the Kingdom of Persia, correct?"

Raiden's blood ran cold. He gripped his chair to keep from bolting upright, sweat already beading on his brow. How could she possibly know?

She propped her chin on her hand. "Raven pretty close to Raiden, don't you think?"

"I... yeah, maybe." His laugh came out strained. *"But why call me by that name?"*

She swept her hair back, securing it in a ponytail. "Don't worry if you don't remember me. I walked away from the Night name when you were just six years old."

Raiden's eyes widened as his uneasiness began to slowly fade, the tension leaving his shoulders. *"You are a part of my family?"*

"Yes..." she said with a smile that seemed to bridge the gap between strangers and kin.

Relief flooded through him like a dam breaking. Apart from his mother, who had also turned her back on the family name not long ago, this was the first person he had met who shared his blood.

But somehow, this only irritated him further. He clenched his fists, jaw locked tight.

"If you're strong, why leave everything to me? You clearly know my father is dead, so why?" His voice cracked with barely contained emotion.

"You look strong to me." She turned toward Raiden's white dragon, her smile softening. "I mean, you have the moon dragon."

Raiden's face contorted with anger at her seemingly indifferent response. *"How does that matter? How can you be this strong and abandon such responsibility to me?"*

The moment the words left his lips, something clicked. Raiden's expression shifted, growing dark with suspicion. *"What do you mean? How could you possibly know Ash is the moon dragon?"*

Her smile widened cryptically. "I'm not in the right place to tell you that." Her expression shifted, becoming calm and sorrowful. "But trust me, learning of your father's death and what you've endured—it truly saddened me."

Her expression grew grave, shadows crossing her features. "But trust me, I didn't leave because I wanted to shirk responsibility... Something much more dangerous forced my hand."

Raiden swallowed hard. There wasn't a trace of deception in Kimberly's voice, and the way her gaze flickered nervously to the desk told him her reasons ran deeper than he could imagine.

The anger in his chest began to dissolve at her genuine expression, but resentment still burned beneath the surface. She was still the reason he was trapped in this nightmare.

"It's alright," he said, brushing his hair backward. *"Where's your familiar, anyway?"*

Kimberly smirked with obvious amusement. "How adorable—you let things go remarkably fast."

Raiden shrugged, the gesture heavy with resignation. *"I don't like what you did, but anger won't fix anything."*

Her blue eyes settled gently on Raiden as something immediately took him aback. He stared at her in confusion as two sharp horns began to emerge from her forehead, growing larger and starting to curl as they extended. Her eyes transformed into a glowing, pitch-blue intensity.

"My familiar is the arch curse doll," her voice resonated off the walls. Raiden's eyes darted frantically as her aura became suffocating in its intensity. "I don't have to say this, but you surely know by now; I am at your service."

The instant she finished speaking, her eyes dimmed to their original blue and her horns began to recede. Where they had pierced her skin, the wounds closed and vanished completely.

"Wait... you have a God Beast inside of you?" Raiden asked, trying to make sense of it all, even though his confusion ran deeper than he showed.

Kimberly closed her eyes, wearing a satisfied smile. "I could tell it was what he wanted, so we performed essence rebinding." Her pride was unmistakable. "Even though mana reconstitution could restore him separately, I prefer this unity."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "I never feel lonely this way."

But Raiden's confusion didn't lessen. He'd performed the same essence rebinding for Freya after her familiar's death, and soon after, her familiar started calling himself the arch hell phoenix and pledged his allegiance to Raiden as the moon dragon—exactly like Kimberly just had. Yet none of it was clear to him. Why were they all swearing loyalty to him rather than Ash?

"This isn't the first time I've heard of an 'arch' familiar. What does that mean?" He leaned forward, his heart beginning to race. *"If all the familiars are in Dhrathopia, why not approach Ash yourself? She's the moon dragon, after all."*

Kimberly's expression fell flat. "There are many arches out there, and that's all I'm saying." She raised an eyebrow with a mocking smile. "But honestly, you'd have to be pretty obtuse not to figure out why everyone talks to you instead."

Raiden slapped his forehead, shaking his head in frustration. *"Look, I know enough has happened that you could call me stupid, but Ash is still alive."*

He paused, locking eyes with Kimberly as she stared back. He didn't want to press for more details, and it was clear she couldn't reveal anything beyond what she'd said. Ash had found her voice—if someone was going to answer his questions, it would have to be the moon dragon herself.

He turned to his shoulder with a soft smile, patting Ash reassuringly. *"Okay... time for us to leave."*

He paused before getting up, eyes narrowing with curiosity. *"If God beasts are practically immortal, what does that make you?"* He shrugged. *"You look about my age, but you've got to be way older than you appear."*

Kimberly's cheeks reddened slightly. "Oh, don't sweet-talk me like that. Do I really appear so youthful?"

Raiden stared at her childish expression briefly before sighing. He got to his feet and headed for the door, but a sudden crash made him whirl around. Kimberly had tried to stand and tumbled back down.

She stared up at Raiden from where she'd fallen and offered a cheerful thumbs-up. "Regardless, you have my full approval to go after the pages."

Raiden watched her for a moment, a smile tugging at his lips. He found himself wondering if the rest of his family shared Kimberly's nature. She was impossible to dislike.

"Bet," he said under his breath, then moved to the door. His hand settled on the wood as he gathered himself with a deep breath.

"I need to cut through this confusion." His eyes closed as he centered himself. *"None of this matters as much as going home and avenging Jobe."* He whispered the words like a vow, then yanked the door open.

Chapter 126: Flame

[ALERT]

[CURRENT STATUS: NUMBER 6: LEVEL-60 /100 XP.

MANA CONTROL: 190

DRAGON MANA POOL: 1015/ 5000

PHYSICAL STRENGTH: 395

STAMINA: 390

DRAGON AURA: 170

SKILL PROFICIENCY: ACTIVE 2

—**Swordsmanship: 90%**

—**Euphoria: 100%**

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: 60%

—Heart of Dragon: 60%

—Moon Dragon's Veins: 45%

—Invisibility

—Gaze Beyond

—Soul Condemn

—Others Locked.]

[You will know everything soon,] Ash said as Raiden sat cross-legged on the floor, sweat trailing down his shirtless torso. They were positioned in the middle of their new training room, dimly lit and decorated with walls of menacing grins.

"You know I have to return to my world, right?" Raiden murmured, reflecting on all the techniques Snow had drilled into him over the past two days—how to summon and control his own dark flames.

Ash moved in a slow circle before lying down, clearly troubled by what he'd said. [Have you ever stopped to think? Would your brother want you to dedicate your entire existence to avenging him?]

Raiden turned toward her, feeling an unexpected sting from her words, though he couldn't pinpoint what made them cut so deep.

[Don't you think he'd want you to find happiness and build a future, not spend your life haunted by his death?]

Raiden's eyes fluttered with confusion, sweat breaking out across his forehead as his hands clenched. His blood was boiling, though he couldn't fathom why. Ash was right—he'd always known that, had tormented himself with the same question—yet something else gnawed at him, more puzzling than his tangled feelings.

"Since when do you talk like this? Shouldn't you still be speaking like a child?"

Ash offered him a gentle, knowing smile.

Raiden released a heavy breath. *"You're probably right, but this isn't only about avenging Jobe."*

His hands balled into tighter fists. *"If I don't see this through, I'll carry that guilt forever."*

[And what happens after that?]

Uncontrollable shaking seized Raiden's body. *"Wait, what is this? Why am I trembling so much?"* He slapped his face repeatedly, desperate to regain control, but the shivering wouldn't stop.

"I need this," he said through gritted teeth, his voice betraying him with a crack. *"That's the only way I can move forward."*

Ash looked at him sleepily, her eyes drifting shut as exhaustion claimed her, leaving Raiden alone with his struggle to control the violent shaking that consumed him.

"I have to do this," he repeated under his breath as his trembling finally subsided.

Looking toward Ash, he saw her sleeping peacefully. A small smile tugged at his lips—he had someone who cared about him again, the way Jobe once had. But he pushed the thought aside, centering himself for one last training session before the day ended.

He closed his eyes and remembered what Snow had told him. "Everyone has different magical affinities; some have just one, others multiple. But if you want to create dark flames, you need fire affinity first."

Raiden had yet to determine if he possessed any fire affinity at all. While it didn't bother him much, he recognized that dark flames would provide long-range capability and synergize perfectly with his dragon powers.

It wasn't exactly promising since elemental magic was limited to rank five and below, but Leo had done it at rank five. That gave Raiden hope he might manage it too.

"Channel your mana into your hand and imagine the feel of the four elements... cool water, hot fire, gentle wind, rough earth." Snow explained, "Your mana will naturally align with one of them. You'll sense it in your palm, and that's your elemental affinity."

Raiden tried to focus from his position on the floor, but after a few moments he gave up and dragged his hands down his face. Ash's words wouldn't stop replaying in his mind. But whatever decision he had to make, he couldn't afford to waste this opportunity to get stronger.

He pulled himself together and tried again, channeling mana into his palm. That part was simple, but the effort soon had him sweating even more. He cycled through each elemental texture repeatedly, but his mana remained unchanged.

Perhaps he'd been too fixated on the fire's blazing heat. He turned his attention to water's embrace, envisioning the vast sea. Through his mind's eye, he felt the wind dancing across the water's surface—gentle and soothing, yet concealing the fierce, untamed power that lurked below.

He repeated the visualization for several minutes. While the ocean imagery brought him inner calm, his mana gave no indication of any affinity.

He let out a frustrated sigh and stood up. Two days of repeating this same exercise, and he had absolutely nothing to show for it. No sign, no feeling, nothing.

"I might not be anything special after all." He moved to the corner and picked up his black shirt. *"At least I know how it works now. I can try again when I reach rank five."* With that, he started walking toward Ash.

He paused, fingers moving thoughtfully to his chin. *"But is Noelle still alive? I haven't heard from her in ages."*

He crouched down, and his back let out a series of sharp cracks that echoed through the room. Carefully, he lifted Ash and settled her on his shoulder.

"I need some rest. I'll check on her later." He exited the training room and turned left down the corridor. Beyond, he could see the bustling activity of the main hall, though this particular corridor was off-limits to anyone below lieutenant rank.

A few steps down, he stopped at the third door on the left. The room opened to reveal a bed twice the size of his old one, a desk and chair set up near the right wall by the entrance, and a couch positioned on the left side near the bathroom. A small chandelier cast light over the bed.

He entered and closed the door, gently placing Ash on the bed before collapsing beside her.

The unease coursing through his body wasn't just from training fatigue; Ash's words had affected him far more than he'd expected. But his resolve remained firm. He would go back to his world and avenge his brother.

Chapter 127: Beneath the Facade

Her violet eyes cut through the darkness, leaving traces of luminous light in their wake. Smoke from her aether cigarette drifted around her in lazy circles, weaving through her gentle golden aura.

She moved with distant purpose, arms folded across her chest, approaching where Raiden and Ash stood in the shadows as spectators streamed out of the arena.

"You really are something else." Raiden shook his head with a smirk as Noelle closed the distance between them.

She sneered and closed the remaining distance between them, stopping mere inches away. Her head tilted back to meet his gaze, violet eyes squinting as they bored into his with unreadable intensity.

Raiden was confused by her proximity, feeling her warmth against his chest. This behavior was completely unlike her.

He started to step backward, but her hand shot out to grab his, keeping him locked in place.

Raiden swallowed hard, unnerved by her unfamiliar behavior. *"Noelle, are you alright? What's happening?"* Confusion laced his voice.

But she remained silent, her violet eyes boring into his. Unease crept through Raiden as her stare seemed to pierce right through him, as if she were reading his very soul.

After a moment, she pulled the aether cigarette from her lips and dropped it to the floor. She sighed and shook her head in apparent disbelief. "You don't smoke aether often, do you?"

Raiden suddenly looked exasperated and smacked his palm against his forehead. *"All of that drama was just to ask me that?"*

She smiled softly as she reached past Raiden to pet Ash on his shoulder. After a moment, she produced an aether cigarette from her pocket and, hesitating briefly, pressed it into Raiden's mouth. Her fingers moved in a small gesture, and golden flames flickered to life from her aura, lighting the cigarette.

Raiden stared at her with bulging eyes, completely bewildered. Her strange actions were confusing enough, but the casual way she'd summoned those flames, rank five or not, was still impressive to witness.

"Long-term aether smoking accelerates mana development beyond the usual rate." She took a step back, hands folded behind her. "It enhances mana control as well. Your eyes especially need the help."

Raiden had never heard this before. He'd smoked aether several times now, and while it wasn't as often as Noelle did, he'd thought he was doing well for a newcomer. If anyone had mentioned these advantages sooner, he would have been smoking it nonstop.

"Is that so?"

He looked down at the aether cigarette, then realization hit him and his expression darkened. *"Hold on—there's more to aether than that, isn't there? Is that how you heal so quickly?"*

"You ask too many questions," she replied with clear annoyance. "Anyway, when are we leaving?"

Raiden narrowed his eyes, studying her with growing concern. These sudden shifts between warmth and coldness were becoming unsettling.

He watched her in silence for a moment, then shrugged. *"She's Noelle after all,"* he murmured under his breath.

"What did you say?"

Raiden sighed heavily. *"You asking that question tells me everything—you fought the old vice captain and won."*

He pushed his hair back while Noelle regarded him with a soft gaze.

"I already have clearance from my captain and the third captain, so no issues there." He shrugged casually. *"You?"*

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "How did you convince them?" Then her expression crumpled, eyes falling to the ground. "Ever since I killed the previous vice captain, it's like everyone despises me," she whispered, her voice threatening to break.

Something twisted in Raiden's chest. Her reaction felt wrong somehow. While he'd seen her withdrawn before, this was entirely different—the quiet pain in her eyes, the crack in her voice. For the first time, she was showing him who she really was beneath the facade.

Something surged through him suddenly, his blood racing and his chest burning with unexpected heat. The next thing he knew, he was moving closer, words pouring out before he could stop himself.

"We've both seen plenty of kindness and cruelty, haven't we?" He smiled gently and placed a comforting hand on her head. *"Those people would have resented you no matter who started the fight."*

Noelle looked up into his eyes. *"I'm so glad you won. MK and the others—they'd be thrilled to know how far you've come."*

His smile broadened even as he squeezed his eyes shut. *"That's all that matters, doesn't it?"*

Noelle's eyes slowly shifted to annoyance, and before Raiden could react, her fist connected with his gut. He doubled over, clutching his stomach in agony. Though her strike had seemed soft, it

wreaked havoc on his insides. His mouth gaped as he struggled to straighten up, remaining bent at the waist until the pain subsided.

"Why are you patting me like a child?" Noelle asked, her expression cold. "And what were you getting all sentimental for?"

Raiden began forcing himself up, his hand still resting on his gut. *"I met Chrono the other day, and as it turns out, he's the vice captain of the Arsenal Armada."*

Noelle wore a shocked expression. "Really?"

Raiden nodded gently, feeling the pain in his gut start to vanish. *"Yes, and he said we don't have much time."*

Noelle reached past Raiden's shoulder to Ash.

"You need to find an opportunity for us to leave. I'm ready."

Noelle gave him a firm nod and rested Ash on her shoulder. "Okay, two days from now." She let out a breath. "I need time to see if I can threaten people into covering for me."

She smiled and shrugged. "It's not like I would ever return to this place."

Raiden wore an awkward smile as he wasn't sure about that. Now that he'd finally realized Kimberly wasn't just his family member but an arch cursed doll who had sworn loyalty to him, this place felt like a refuge he could return to if everything went south.

But this wasn't something he was going to let Noelle know. In fact, Noelle was acting more unusually than usual. *"Bet, I also need some training."*

Noelle turned and started leaving the arena, waving over her shoulder. "Same time, same place!" she called out.

Raiden watched her leave, then turned right toward the desert. Across the expanse, warriors moved back and forth in training.

"So this is where the unselected stay." He smirked as the desert reminded him of Stanley, the first person to ever ask him not to be forgotten.

"Dead or alive, you're not forgotten, buddy."

Chapter 128: Fury

"Remember, your mana must be let out little by little." Anya sniffled and rubbed her nose, her eyes lazily rolling toward Raiden at a slower pace. "I've taught you enough, and I believe you

can do better on your own now. But I don't know if you're doing something wrong since your entire body is hurting."

Raiden offered her a warm smile as he struggled to pull on his black shirt, his fingers clumsy against the buttons. Heat coursed through his body while tremors ran along his frame, each movement sluggish and unsteady, like someone relearning how to inhabit their own skin.

Anya's gaze lingered on him, soft and concerned as she took in his pathetic condition. After a moment, she shrugged her shoulders. "I wouldn't have fought you if I knew you were this sick," she sighed. "Now I feel bad."

"Raiden turned to her. *"Don't worry, Anya,"* he said, voice cracking. *"I don't think this is a normal situation."* His eyes narrowed as he drifted into his own daze.

He was certain this wasn't normal. Sure, he had regeneration abilities, not healing ones, but he doubted that was the issue—without question, his ability should have instantly regrown stronger cells to fight off any disease. What made it stranger was that he hadn't actually fought Anya at all.

She'd kept him at arm's length, asking him to rapidly increase his energy to match hers, something he still couldn't manage. No strikes. No damage. And it had all started the moment his system updated his stats. Could it somehow be related to his abilities?

"If you say so, Raven," Anya said, moving toward the door. She paused at the threshold and turned back. "Once you're done with your mission, you will be coming back, right?"

Her words snapped Raiden from his daze, and he turned to face her. His golden eyes found her dark ones, and the gentleness he saw there sent an unexpected chill through his feverish body.

He felt perplexed. He'd only ever seen her wear that lazy, bored expression, but this—this spoke of genuine care and concern. Before he knew it, he was smiling again. *"Of course, Anya. I'll be back before you know it."*

Anya held that same expression for a brief moment longer, then opened the door and slipped out without another word.

"Poor girl... she's blaming herself for this," Raiden muttered, glancing down at his hand as it trembled.

"I must hurry; Noelle might be waiting." Without hesitation, he gathered himself and hurried from the room.

He was glad he'd already said his goodbyes to Snow and Captain Kimberly, because even as he left the Chaos Armada quarters, each step felt impossibly heavy. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite feeling strangely lighter than usual.

Moving as steadily as he could manage, he made his way toward the massive wall, weaving through the crowd while his body swayed dangerously from side to side, catching himself just before each potential fall.

The moment he stepped outside the wall, darkness had swallowed everything. Though his vision made it all crystal clear as daylight, the sight only deepened his sense of defeat.

His heart pounded like never before, each step feeling as though he carried a ten-foot giant on his back. Staring at the remaining meters ahead, he began to reconsider his decision to leave that day.

His body felt like it was being torn apart, and worse still, he had no idea what was wrong with him. The uncertainty made him feel unhinged, almost psychotic, as he began murmuring incomprehensible words born of pure frustration.

Yet he knew this journey was worth it. Given his unexplainable condition, the one person who might have answers was Ash—she was the only one capable of inflicting such random pain on him.

With a deep sigh, he started toward the arena's entrance. People streamed past him, some heading to their respective Armadas, others making their way toward the desert that stretched above to his right.

However, a crowd in the distance caught his attention. They had gathered right where he was meant to meet Noelle, and from the heavy murmuring, something suspicious was clearly happening.

He knew that if something was wrong, Noelle had to be involved. He couldn't explain why, but the hunch was too strong to ignore. She was overconfident enough to create exactly this kind of situation.

He paused, activating his enhanced sight to peer at the crowd, but there were too many bodies for him to see through. Without wasting a moment, he reached out and caught a passerby by the shoulder.

"What's going on over there?" he asked, barely glancing at the person he'd grabbed as his eyes remained fixed on the crowd, still trying to pierce through.

"Four people from Justice Armada challenged Wolf, their new vice captain, to a duel," the man said with a laugh. "And trust me, they're absolutely demolishing that fraud."

Raiden's expression twisted with irritation as he released the man. Noelle had told him she would fight her way through to create an opportunity for them to leave the Chaos Armada, but he hadn't realized she meant it quite so literally.

Despite his strange uneasiness, he clenched his fists and forced his body into motion. He didn't have time to spare. If Noelle was in trouble, then so was his familiar Ash, and worse, her situation could easily jeopardize their mission. At least, that's the excuse he gave himself.

As he approached, fury alone triggered his transformation instinctively. His dark hair shifted to pure white, bright as starlight; wild yet somehow peaceful, with a fluffy, dreamy quality that flowed freely and spiked in all directions.

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

As the dark sigil materialized on his forehead, his presence became impossible to ignore. Everyone turned toward him, eyes widening in shock, while Raiden tried to summon his usual devilish smile. His condition wouldn't let him manage it, twisting his expression into something far more sinister.

But he knew there was something his uneasy situation couldn't rob him of: the fact that he was going to whip their ass.

Chapter 129: Ash

The crowd carved a path for Raiden, and he peered in Noelle's direction. Her eyes were solid white, no pupils visible, as metal erupted from the ground to coil around her body where she lay thrashing against the restraints. Worse still, Raiden couldn't spot Ash anywhere.

He gritted his teeth, growling like a mad beast. His fists clenched tight as veins popped along his trembling frame.

The four Justice Armadas turned as they sensed his presence. Raiden hardly looked at them, catching only flashes of dark and yellow auras before the air itself seemed to ripple. In the next instant, he stood before the closest of them.

A lightning-fast strike to the gut, then chest; too quick for any defense. He flowed to the next target, snapping the neck with a wet crack as blood sprayed hot across his face.

However, before he could make another move, dizziness hit him like a wave. Everything slowed—his movements growing thick and clumsy as he stood locked in place, knees bent.

The ground rushed away beneath him as he plummeted from the elevated platform. Through the chaos and darkness, the crowd could only register fragments: the sudden storm and two armadas crumpling in under a minute. Meanwhile, Raiden's mind drifted sluggishly, thoughts scattering like he was dissolving from within.

His transformation started to fade, and he knew this wasn't an attack. He'd pushed too hard through his illness, and now his body was failing him.

He dropped to his knees, collapsing, when suddenly he felt someone catch him. Forcing his heavy body to turn, he saw it was Noelle.

Her eyes blazed with a fury that dwarfed his own. She crushed him against her in a fierce embrace as her golden aura suddenly condensed, no longer flowing free but crystallizing into a dome around them—her domain made manifest.

When Raiden realized she was awake, a warm smile crossed his face, and his racing heart began to settle. He knew everything would be alright. But his body had reached its limit, and consciousness slipped away, leaving only Noelle's face and the murmur of confused voices from the crowd.

This was the first time he'd used his transformation since Snow helped him master it. He wished he could have wielded it better, but the next sensation after cold night air and warm blood was blazing sunlight searing the back of his skull.

His eyes slowly opened to see the ground passing steadily beneath him. The burning fever and bone-deep exhaustion had lessened from before.

But what drew his focus was a child, about ten years old, walking nearby with white hair cascading past her knees, pointed ears, and skin a smoky pale-gray like moonstone. A black robe draped around her small form.

His eyes widened as an odd familiarity washed over him; he knew this child somehow, yet was certain they'd never met. Panic crept in; maybe the armadas had taken him after all. He twisted to see who was carrying him, and the sight of short hair and smoke curling from her lips immediately told him it was Noelle.

He looked back at the child. *"Who's that?"* he asked, confusion clear in his voice.

Hearing his voice, Noelle immediately released him. He crashed to the earth, landing flat as sand coated his hair.

"What was that for?" Raiden asked, struggling to sit up. The child looked at him then, her large blue eyes locking with his golden ones, and his heart stuttered.

"Ash?"

"You are okay, Papa," Ash said, her smile radiant as she moved closer. Raiden sat motionless, confusion written across his face as he watched her approach.

Ash extended her hand and helped Raiden to his feet.

"Don't act so surprised," Noelle said with a sneer, starting to walk ahead. "Even I wasn't this lost."

"Is that really you, Ash?" Raiden asked again, ignoring Noelle completely.

Ash nodded gently. But none of this made sense to Raiden. When he'd last seen her, she'd been a dragon.

As Ash started after Noelle, he stumbled along behind them. *"How? What happened?"*

Ash stopped and looked back at him. "Aren't you used to strange things by now, Papa?"

Raiden raised an eyebrow. *"Are you going to tell me or not?"*

Ash sighed and started walking again. "I transformed like this because you've reached 50% mastery in all three abilities."

Raiden's jaw dropped. *"And that's why I was getting sick?"*

Ash nodded firmly.

Raiden's eyes narrowed as the pieces fell into place; his mysterious weakness had been because of her transformation. But he still had concerns, and some things felt unfair that he needed to address.

He clenched his fists until his nails bit into his palms.

"And don't you think it would have been best if you told me about it?!" Raiden's roar cut through the air like a blade, sending a visible tremor through Ash as fear flashed across her features.

The sound was so sharp it pulled Noelle's attention away, her head snapping toward the confrontation.

"Hey, come on," Noelle said, her voice steady as she began closing the distance, hands slightly raised in a peacekeeping gesture.

Raiden ignored Noelle completely, his gaze burning into Ash's wavering eyes. The fear rolling off her was palpable, but his patience had finally snapped. He was sick of being kept in the dark about her secrets, and her pleading expression wasn't going to work on him anymore.

"Go on, tell me,"

he demanded, his voice sharp enough to make Ash's fingers start their anxious dance while her eyes fled from his, finding refuge in studying the floor.

"I didn't know, Papa." The words came out strained and small as Noelle positioned herself next to Raiden, creating a united front. Their combined stare bore into her, demanding more explanation.

"I can only know things you've evolved enough for me to know," she said, her voice breaking apart like fragile glass. "I can't see what's coming until it's already unfolding."

She forced herself to look up, her eyes locking with Raiden's burning stare. "When I finally recovered that piece of my memories, I was with Noelle. There wasn't any way I could tell you about it."

She moved closer to him, tears spilling freely from her eyes, while Raiden stood like a statue, unmoved and unforgiving. "I can't lie to you, Papa. You have a piece of my heart... if I tried to lie, you'd feel it."

Noelle glanced at Raiden, still frozen in his silent standoff with Ash. She stepped forward and enveloped the crying girl in her arms, her thumbs brushing away the tears with tender care.

He could tell she wasn't lying. His new eyes would have detected any falsehood, and her heart would have betrayed her with its rhythm. But all he felt radiating from her was genuine worry and confusion.

But she should have realized the position this put him in. He was drowning in confusion, feeling as though her life was gradually swallowing his own through all these mysterious forces—and all because he possessed a fragment of her being.

A weary sigh escaped him just as Noelle stepped back from Ash. *"It's okay,"* Raiden said, the anger draining from his face as he managed a reassuring smile and ruffled her hair gently. *"Just promise me; if you remember something, you'll tell me right away?"*

Relief washed over Ash's features as she smiled warmly, her eyes drifting closed while she nodded. "Okay, Papa."

A thousand questions about Ash and the moon dragon still swirled in his mind, demanding answers. But he forced himself to focus on the immediate priority; if he could secure those twenty pages, the rest might become irrelevant.

Turning toward Noelle, who adjusted a gray robe around her neck, likely hiding her tattoo. Raiden felt a bit confused about why she always did that. However, he brushed it off and gestured for them to start walking.

"Where are we anyway?" he asked as they fell into step together.

Noelle turned her head slightly toward him. "Turns out we weren't as far from Lunar City as I thought. That's our destination."

"Right!" he replied, though his gaze instantly moved to Ash when he felt her fingers intertwine with his as they continued forward.

A smile crossed Raiden's face. *"I wish we could actually stay together. I would have had more time to help you sort through all this confusion,"* he murmured.

Ash glanced over at him and smiled softly.

Chapter 130: Snow and Noelle

"I could have won," Noelle muttered, her gaze falling to the floor. "They ambushed me and had me restrained before the duel even started." Despite everything, pride crept into her voice. "I still could have handled it myself, though."

Both Raiden and Ash stared at her briefly before dissolving into teasing laughter, hands pressed over their mouths. They knew her all too well.

The last place they wanted to rest was Lunar City due to their last encounter. So they spent every ounce of strength they had making sure to minimize their time there, forcing themselves to keep moving as they maneuvered through the Dark City.

The streets teemed with people in robes and turbans, none acknowledging their presence as they marched past them, their minds preoccupied by their duties. Not even a glance.

The air was unlike anything they'd felt in a long time, wonderfully cozy. A pleasant chill ran through Raiden's spine, his body tingling with familiarity.

He was expecting Ash's unusual appearance to trigger some kind of reaction, but no one cared. It was as if they had seen worse.

Noelle tilted her head toward the dark sky. "I don't know what's going on between you and Ash, but the two of you have to protect each other."

Raiden wore a startled expression, not anticipating such an abrupt change in character.

"And thank you, Raid." Noelle's eyes darted toward the sky while Raiden's darted to her, confused.

"What for?"

[Raid?] Ash asked, tilting her head upward, her eyes darting across their faces with a mocking smile. Her words drew Raiden's attention back to what Noelle had said, his expression shifting to confusion.

Noelle paused and turned to them. "Fuck off." She sighed as Raiden and Ash exchanged confused expressions. "I was trying to be good to you for a moment, and then you fucked it up."

Raiden gave her a lazy look, then sighed. *"What was I expecting?"* he muttered as they all began walking past the benches lined along the middle of the street, making their way out of there once more.

However, it wasn't long before they approached the shop where they had been captured. But as they neared, Raiden's eyes narrowed as he saw not only the men who had captured them weeks ago, but also sensed a familiar presence.

Not long after, two people emerged from the shop, covered in black robes with the portrait of a menacing smile etched across the fabric.

His expression darkened as he realized they were part of his armada. But something about them was off—they seemed familiar, yet he knew it could be anyone since they had their faces covered.

Still, as they approached, the two individuals turned their way and began walking toward them. Raiden began feeling uneasy. Were they sent to cross their path and attack them for killing the justice armadas? Was that something Captain Kimberly would even do after swearing her allegiance to him?

"These two again?" Noelle asked through gritted teeth, her fists clenched as her face twitched with anger.

She began quickening her pace to meet them, which made Raiden even more confused as he wondered if Noelle knew them.

The moment they closed in, Noelle didn't hesitate for a second before blurting out, "Let's have a rematch."

The two individuals paused for a moment, confidence radiating from their dark aura.

"I heard you became the vice captain of the justice armada," she said, her voice gentle and cold, but somehow familiar to Raiden. "But trust me, you still can't defeat me, wolf."

Noelle clenched her fists even tighter as Raiden was taken aback for a moment. "*Snow?*"

Both figures turned to Raiden. "Hey, Raven."

Raiden let out a sigh. "*What are you doing here?*"

"I should ask you the same question," Snow replied. "I thought you were at the Apex Circle by now."

Raiden shrugged while Ash's eyes darted at their faces in confusion, and Noelle stayed silent, her anger deepening by the moment.

"Walking isn't all that easy."

"Why didn't you use the teleportation portal?"

Raiden blinked at her in confusion, disappointment already settling in that no one had told him about that.

"Clearly, Anya didn't tell you about it. I figured." She shook her head and slapped her forehead, then turned to the person behind her, getting a glimpse of Noelle's expression—her face had turned completely red.

"This is Ekko, the third lieutenant alongside you and Anya." Raiden raised an eyebrow as she gestured toward him. "And Ekko, meet Raven, the new lieutenant."

Raiden could only see his blue eyes through the robe, but somehow he remembered him very clearly.

"He's been on a mission in this area for a while now, so you two haven't had the opportunity to meet officially."

Raiden sneered. *"He's the one who nearly killed me, wasn't he?"*

Ekko smiled, the expression somehow visible even through his mask. "I'm surprised you remembered." He approached Raiden and shook his hand. "Welcome aboard, Raven."

While Raiden and Ekko stood there, Snow turned to Noelle. "If this duel is that important to you, then I will give it to you."

Noelle's anger worsened from her words alone as her golden aura began to fluctuate. "But not now. You need to get a little bit stronger to make this a fair fight."

Noelle growled with irritation. "Are you saying I'm weak?" Snow simply shook her head in disapproval.

"Don't pity me!" Noelle's voice cracked with frustration.

"Would you calm down and listen!" Ekko said, crossing his arms over his chest. "You and Captain Snow are literally the worst match."

"Have you forgotten what happened last time?"

Snow gestured for him to stop speaking.

Noelle's expression fell. "Third captain? I'm the vice captain, for fuck's sake."

Raiden stood watching in confusion, not knowing what caused all this commotion as he saw Ekko shake his head in disbelief.

"Rule Domain," Noelle muttered as her golden aura formed a sphere around them all, even trapping bystanders. They found themselves unable to escape the barrier, but Noelle was too consumed by rage to notice their presence.

"You are mine now!" Noelle's voice cracked with both excitement and anger.

Ekko sighed as he and Snow turned to Raiden. Snow tapped Raiden on the shoulder. "Just in case you meet my master, his name is Ling, the Deathstalker." She and Ekko began casually walking out of the domain. "Tell him I'm waiting for him, Raven."

Raiden stared at them with obvious confusion. How were Snow and Ekko able to walk out of the domain so effortlessly? Normally, once Noelle's targets were trapped in her domain, they couldn't walk or speak. So, how was this possible?

Raiden turned to Noelle as her eyes flickered in disbelief and her feet trembled.

"Why?" she muttered as her domain deactivated, leaving the people around them even more confused.

Raiden stared at Noelle, understanding her frustration. He would have felt the same if he had worked so hard only to have his efforts dismissed.

Ash slipped away from Raiden and walked toward Noelle, taking hold of her black shirt and pulling it to get her attention.

"You can win against her, Noelle, just not today." Noelle crouched down beside her and pulled her into a tight hug.

Raiden stood there, his expression weary, wondering how Ash could speak such wise words. But what really weighed on him was Snow.

He never knew she was this strong—he'd suspected it after seeing the strength gap between her and Anya multiple times, but he never knew she could break Noelle's rules. So why was she only a third captain?

This made him wonder: how strong were the vice captain, Ling, and Captain Kimberly?

He tilted his head back to look at the sky. *"If I cross paths with her master, Ling the Deathsight, can I win?"* He muttered to himself.