

The Bookkeeper

Chapter 181: We Leave for Tragical

Raiden raced through the Gambit Absolute Domain at a relentless pace. Uneasiness mounted within him with every drifting moment.

Together with Noelle, they rushed along the snake-like pavement, through groves of lightning-white aether trees and gnarled green branches toward the cascading mountain's edge.

His hands clutched his knees, panting as breath fled from him. His thoughts splintered, each inhalation feeling like it might rip him in two. Yet the crisis confronting them remained clear: the final ten pages of Aaron were gone.

This represented everything Raiden had strived for, the sole reason for their presence on Gambit Island. He needed those pages desperately—they had become the source of his very survival. This wasn't something he could simply let go.

Each second felt like torture he fought to bear. How could someone steal the pages from right under their very noses?

It defied logic, considering they had maintained their vigil all night. The presence of an intruder should have been impossible to miss.

"Those bastards..." Noelle muttered, clenching her fist with her face twitching in annoyance. "This was their plan all along."

"And her..." she grew more enraged from her thoughts alone. "... that bitch. I will kill her myself."

Rage coursed through Raiden, but he wasn't entirely shocked. He had suspected Aeris's betrayal, knowing his comrade had turned against them.

Now it appeared that Chrono, who had been their ally mere moments ago, was working toward this moment. Yet he couldn't express his anger freely—he felt like nothing more than a fool.

He rose to his full height, eyes drifting toward the blue ocean that stretched below the mountain, perspiration forming on his face despite the cool morning wind.

As he stood there, his fingers traced the black skeletal mask at his neck, and Speed came to mind. Though Speed was gone now, his warnings had been accurate; Aeris was a traitor.

A moment of silence stretched between them, and Raiden found himself deep in contemplation, staring at the dark thorn tattoo etched on his wrist. It stood as evidence of his alliance with Chrono, but could it offer him anything now? THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY [NovelFire.net](#)

But at that moment, Noelle's deep violet eyes went wide, sparkling with realization as if something vital had just come back to her.

"Dainty..." her tone cracked with confusion, stealing Raiden's attention. "Why did she allow this?"

Her words awakened something within Raiden, leading him to the same conclusion. Dainty, the Laughing Princess, possessed dominion over their current realm.

The entire island was hers to command, and she obviously guarded the ten pages, considering she'd sent Iron, her guardian, to hunt them down.

Therefore, it was undeniable that the Princess was aware of Chrono and the others' theft of the pages. None of it made sense.

Raiden's rapid thoughts spun beyond his control. Had there been truth in her words when she said the pages weren't intended for her or them? Was this deception her intention all along?

"That rotting bitch..." he grimaced as he muttered, his clenched fist trembling.

However, at that instant, Dainty's succulent voice echoed from behind, catching Raiden and Noelle off guard.

"Now, that's not very polite of you, Bookkeeper." She said casually, maintaining her usual cheerful presence.

"I may be two centuries old..." she glanced at her majestic figure, her hand brushing against her aluminum armor. "...but see, I'm not rotting."

Her words irritated Noelle even further as she attempted to attack, but Raiden stopped her instantly by grabbing her from behind.

Though Noelle writhed violently in Raiden's hold, he remained strangely calm. Actually, after listening to the Man God's casual tone, his confusion seemed to ebb away mysteriously. Yet he couldn't understand the reason.

"Calm down, Rulekeeper..." Dainty said as she approached them, her calm expression shifting.

"Have a little faith in me, would you?"

She joined them at the edge of the mountain. She gestured toward Raiden, to his thorn mark, to be precise.

"If you've allied with them, then this ends one way or another... at Solace or in the Tragical Isle." Her eyes stared directly at the ocean below.

As Noelle's fury ebbed and Raiden released her, realization dawned on him. The end of their alliance had been established in Tragical Isle, an absolute domain under the rule of the elusive Luci—a realm where only war and death held dominion.

The path forward was clear: he needed to go to Tragical and invoke Chrono's presence. Was this understanding what had brought him that strange calm earlier?

"I'd suggest you don't go after the pages. It won't end well."

As soon as Dainty spoke, Raiden's heart sank like a stone, uneasiness consuming every part of him as though her words were a violation of his soul itself.

"Go to Solace with Chrono. End this in peace." She added, each word crushing Raiden even more.

"What the heck... all that fighting, all that blood, and for what? Three of our comrades died for this!" Noelle's words cut the distance with sheer rage.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Dainty gently turned in her direction, her presence calm and collected. "I'm saying..."

"You're the only guardians of the Book of the Devourer left. And I doubt your fallen comrades would want you dead too."

She paused briefly, her eyes finding Raiden. He stood with his head lowered, his whole body seething with disgust. His world, his return home—that was his honor and his pride. Who gave a fuck about those cursed books of the devourer?

"I can't help it... you can't chase the pages anymore. Please. It's suicide." Dainty added.

At that moment, Noelle's golden aura flared more violently than Raiden's blue aura. Her eyes swept the rocky ground frantically, as though she was struggling against the compulsion to voice something horrible.

"You know nothing about our friends... nothing." she blurted, clenching her fists, her face twisting as a heavy silence followed.

But then, for some reason, her aura grew gentle, and she let out a sigh.

"I made a promise... and I intend to keep it." She turned to Raiden, who fought the urge to attack Dainty because he knew he wouldn't win.

"That's Raid's call. I go where he goes."

Through the heavy stupor that had settled over him,

an impenetrable wall that even his attempts at calm couldn't break, Noelle's voice somehow found its way to Raiden.

He turned sharply toward her. There were promises he had to keep: his brother's revenge, claiming Death'sight's eyes, and the string of smaller vows that bound him. He needed those pages to see it all through.

"We leave for the Tragical. Now." He said coldly, leaving no room for suggestions.

Dainty resumed her tranquil demeanor, offering a casual shrug accompanied by a subtle smirk.

Chapter 182: There's a Dragon

"If this is what you want, then so be it. But if you survive... remember, the Gambit will always welcome you."

Raiden's mind drifted back to Dainty's parting words before she invoked the Southern Leviathan for their cause. Its colossal form and ethereal power echoed the Eastern Leviathan's dominating presence.

Yet Raiden felt a chill down to his bones, his thoughts racing wildly as his hands shook. Dainty clearly knew something about Luci, who ruled the absolute domain called Tragical, and despite Raiden's reluctance to believe her warnings, he found himself wondering what terrors awaited him in that realm.

He needed the pages. This wasn't a quest he would abandon. But Dainty's measured words awakened something in him, a detail he may have overlooked.

"Hope you haven't forgotten... the promise we made." Levi's words cut through Raiden's daze, prompting him to turn in his direction. "Chrono dies by my hand. No one else."

Raiden regarded him silently. His yellow aura blazed with fierce intensity, betraying the satisfaction he felt in his words. But Raiden was indifferent to Chrono's killer at that moment; his

sole focus was on the pages. Those ten pages must belong to him, and afterward, he would hunt down the other eighteen.

After minutes of silence stretched between them, Raiden offered a nod of consent.

His eyes found Noelle next, standing with her arms folded, violet gaze fixed on some far-off point as she remained trapped in her thoughts.

Finally, he looked to MK, their designated amplifier, feeding his mana into the creature's horn-like extensions that drove them forward.

As he pondered further, he realized they all harbored reasons to eliminate Chrono. Actually, his pact with Chrono was the only thing that had preserved his life. But his bewilderment remained.

What was Chrono's purpose in bringing up both Tragical Isle and Solace Isle? The deeper he considered it, the more violently his anxiety grew.

Chrono kept the names of all their visited absolute domains hidden from him, which made sense. But then he recklessly mentioned Tragical and described exactly what had occurred there. He could have stayed silent about it completely and could have just vanished with the pages. What was his motive?

"Why?" He grumbled quietly, frustrated at how naive he'd been.

"Why did Chrono bring up Luci's absolute domain?"

Levi spoke up, and Raiden faced him once more, puzzled by how he seemed to read his thoughts before his gaze swept over the rest of the group.

His throat tightened as it dawned on him that they might all be experiencing similar turmoil. The same questions plagued them all.

"I told you before... he was using us." Levi wore a cocky smile. "But you really thought you stood a chance against him? Naive."

Raiden's eyes focused with sudden insight, weighing Levi's observation. Levi's crude honesty didn't wound him; if anything, it helped him see their predicament more clearly.

Their respective motivations to kill each other had been evident from the start of their journey. While Raiden bore the responsibility of honoring his dead comrades and their sacrifices, Chrono seemed unburdened by any comparable duty.

The way this matched Dainty's implications disturbed him, if he'd interpreted her correctly.

"We have to be ready." Raiden's voice rang out within the leviathan's mouth, capturing everyone's attention.

"I've got a bad feeling Chrono has an army waiting for us."

"Wait... what? Where did that even come from?" Levi asked with his tone etched with confusion. New novel chapters are published on novelfire.net

"I think so..." Noelle's words came after the bioluminescent mucus lining the leviathan's mouth bathed her left cheek in an eerie glow.

"Truth is, I suspected it the moment Freya died."

Raiden frowned. Has it been obvious for that long?

Noelle looked down at the creature's tongue beneath their feet, her tone becoming grave. "No wonder you didn't realize... with everything happening around us."

"We need the pages. End of story."

Raiden's features relaxed in response to what she'd said. Only yesterday, he'd been convinced that Noelle harbored some resentment toward him, even doubting the bond they shared. Could it be that she didn't hate him?

"My lady isn't a monster. Get that thought out of your head." MK spoke sharply with a grimace, responding to the emotions he saw written across Raiden's features.

Raiden offered a wry smile before sighing deeply. The weight of confusion still burdened his shoulders, making every word from his companions significant.

Whether it was MK, who undoubtedly hated his guts for causing Noelle's tears, or Levi, who wished him dead for his own dark motivations—they were bound together in this mess.

"We should be ready for the worst..."

No sooner had he spoken than tremors ran through the leviathan's interior, compelling them to seize its dagger-like teeth to maintain their footing. They had finally arrived.

Yet in that moment, Raiden's pulse faltered. His chest tightened as his body reflexively moved backward. Every instinct within him howled with dread and anger as he witnessed the creature's maw slowly opening.

It was a sensation he recognized, one he couldn't simply fight against.

Nauseating air heavy with blood and the reek of death seeped through the widening gaps in the creature's teeth. The vile atmosphere flooded Raiden with boundless wrath, his heart racing between dread and savage anticipation, his mind reduced to one driving imperative: KILL.

The others stared in confusion as violent tremors wracked his body, the force of his shaking making the creature's tongue quiver below them. His gaze was fixed on the expansive wasteland before them, cloaked in shadow beneath a low-hanging moon, its terrain painted red and carpeted with bones.

As the creature's tongue set them down in the death arena, the sensation clicked into perfect clarity for Raiden. He could detect every fragment of that dark presence, and he was sure it was

equally aware of him. That savage thirst, that corrupting influence, that searing vanity and desire, he was absolutely certain. It was Death sight.

Pure elation surged through him, his features slowly twisting into something sinister as the leviathan's tongue deposited them onto the cursed terrain below.

"There's a dragon..." he muttered through his shaking throat. "Chrono blessed us with the FIRMO... or cursed us with it."

He barely had to explain before Noelle's golden aura flared with fury. Her mother could have been saved, after all.

Chapter 183: Corpse Zone

Chrono's sinister schemes could have been more far-reaching than expected. But Raiden and Noelle were driven by more pressing desires that dominated their thoughts—nothing else mattered.

Raiden sensed Death sight's presence completely and would fulfill his vow to kill him. Noelle shared the same single-minded focus—the FIRMO was within reach, and finally, she could rescue her mother.

Despite the dense shadows cast by the moon, Raiden's gaze swept the distance with crystal-clear vision, hunting for them.

The instant he found them, excitement coursed through his body. There, in the center of the death field, stood six figures with Deathstight at their head, glancing around in search of him.

Those eyes... brown, cold, yet strangely gentle eyes that Ling the Deathstight had no right to possess. He stared straight at him, each passing moment stoking his fury. He would rip them from their sockets, and it didn't matter if he was number five. He would still do it if he was zero.

"There... there they are." He pointed in their direction, and the others instantly fell in behind him as he launched into a charge.

Soon enough, they saw Raiden and his group closing in. Chrono wasn't with them, but Odard was, restraining a black-clad man who radiated a blue aura. Raiden paid no attention to such details; his gaze was fixed entirely on Ling.

But when they came within range, Levi suddenly stopped dead, making the others pause in bewilderment. All except Raiden.

"What?!" Levi exclaimed, eyes wide with bewilderment, pointing at the red-haired man in glasses and a black cloak.

"That's him, Vance... Freya's mentor."

Raiden paid no attention to his words, continuing his charge toward Deathstight. Soon enough, Ling mirrored his expression with a knowing smile and rushed forward to meet him, white hair streaming through the crimson-thick atmosphere.

Each step forward sent thrills coursing through Raiden's veins. He would finish this with one decisive blow. Mana flowed into his fists as he focused his power. From Death'sight's ominous blue aura, Raiden could tell his enemy had the same plan.

But when they were mere meters apart, Raiden's eyes went wide with shock. His instincts flared, bloodlust evaporating instantly as he skidded to a stop and jumped back. Ling mirrored his retreat.

Instantly, a colossal gazebo erupted from the ground, drawing the skulls from the blood-soaked battlefield toward itself and compelling them to move faster as the structure spanned most of the gap between Raiden and Ling.

Raiden gulped in confusion. "What was that?" He muttered and took a better look.

Inside the gazebo sat a horned creature, swaying gently in its chair as it wore flowing white robes. Though it seemed around fifteen years old, its features were more goat-like than human.

"That's Luci. I'm certain," Noelle muttered from behind as they approached.

Raiden's mind cleared instantly, his rage dissolving at the unexpected sight. Luci was the domain's ruler, but his emergence from the ground caught him completely off guard. Even worse, Raiden couldn't feel his presence at all.

"...Vance is here, Raiden," Levi said, his eyes still fixated on the red-haired man. "Odard gave him the pages."

Levi let his head fall, the gesture catching Raiden's eye and making him turn toward his companion.

Levi clenched his fist in irritation. "Freya only wanted one thing—to kill that bastard. She said he was alive and that if she didn't stop him, the world would end. But I didn't believe her... I never believed her." His voice cracked on each word as though he was fighting the urge to cry.

Raiden shifted his gaze to the FIRMO, taking them in. Freya had been unique, hotheaded and battle-hungry, yes, but she'd given her life so they could survive. If her mentor was really that twisted, then after dealing with Deathstight, Raiden would kill him too. Slowly.

Yet as Raiden studied the six distant figures, something caught his eye that froze him to the bone. Those unmistakable gray eyes, the black cloth over his mouth; he could never forget them.

"Noelle... I think Stanley's here."

Noelle's eyes traced Raiden's line of sight, searching for what had caught his attention, but MK spotted it first.

"My lady... I see him. He's with your mother... the Walking Myth." MK's words hurried out of his mouth.

At that moment, Noelle seemed to snap. She grabbed her head and released a tortured scream. MK attempted to comfort her, but she struck his hand aside.

"You mean to say... Stanley is the damn Walking Myth?!" She yelled out.

Raiden observed her breakdown with complete comprehension. They had traveled with Stanley for an entire week on the Drake's Shell survival route. They had actually helped Stanley learn desert survival techniques during their escape. And he was working against them the whole time?

But then a startling realization hit Raiden, causing his head to whip around toward Stanley. A soft breeze stirred as his mind worked.

Stanley had always shown a white aura, marking him as a simple supporter, yet this figure—despite looking exactly like Stanley—emanated a gray aura that Raiden could clearly see through the shadows.

"No... it can't be Stanley. This one bears a Chaotic Crest." Follow current NOVELS on novelfire.net

Noelle's gaze jerked back to them, and while it didn't completely calm her fury, Raiden watched as a burden seemed to lift from her when she understood his revelation.

"I want to kill Vance... you, Odard, everyone." Levi muttered, his gaze fixated on the floor.

But before anyone could confront his threatening presence, a sharp clap rang out across the battlefield, compelling everyone to look toward the sound. It was Luci, standing tall with his palms pressed together.

Suddenly, a powerful gust swept through, its force compelling everyone to cover their eyes. When the tempest finally subsided, an eerie quiet settled over the battlefield as Raiden's gaze searched frantically.

Everyone from behind had vanished. His head snapped left to find Luci back in his seat, one leg crossed over the other as he regarded him directly. But Death'sight's menacing aura weighed on him, forcing him to pivot toward the threat.

There before him was Ling, apparently as disoriented as Raiden himself. Yet the instant Raiden laid eyes on him, he had no time for rational thought.

His dragon hatred and pride as the brother of Jobe ran deep. Without conscious thought, he found himself charging toward Death'sight once more.

"I will kill you..." he muttered through his twisted smile.

Chapter 184: Bloodless

Raiden's thoughts arrived in heavy, dense chunks, difficult to process initially. But as he looked into those brown eyes before him, cold yet gentle, his blood boiled with fury. No one should covet the eyes of Jobe. No one.

Worse, his hatred for the poison dragon ran deep. Those menacing eyes it had fixed on Sullivan as it struck him from the cliff, that envious, greedy look as it watched him fall to his death.

This wasn't something he could forgive. Even if he could let this go, the dragon would still have to die. No one could be his twin brother. Not something he could ever forgive.

Even so, he found himself in a situation where only fury kept him standing. Death'sight's strikes tore through the malicious air, coming at Raiden from all directions. Too fast, too powerful; leaving him no room to think, only to defend.

His teeth were gritted, his hands going numb as his regeneration struggled to keep pace—barely healing from one strike before another landed. His golden eyes darted frantically, searching the bastard for something, any small opening to exploit. But he could barely track the strikes, much less predict his movements.

He was the moon dragon, but even so, mere minutes into the fight, he wished he had schemed up some kind of strategy. His enhanced sight began failing him as the mana he concentrated in his eyes faltered with every strike.

He didn't need much to tell that Ling's abilities went far beyond just his dragon lineage. His smooth maneuvers and relentless yet precise movements told Raiden that he had spent years honing his skills. He was vice captain for a reason.

Death'sight moved as if he had eyes on all sides. He left no opening whatsoever, and even when Raiden caught the slightest glimpse of what might be an opportunity, his enemy's stamina and reflexes rendered it futile.

But through the stretching chaos, Raiden still searched for a way to tip the balance. He wasn't losing this battle. Read full story at Nove1Fire.net

Acting on pure instinct, his body moved on its own, meeting Ling's powerful attacks mid-strike. In the heat of the moment, his first coherent thought finally emerged as he watched himself repeatedly intercept each blow, absorbing the impact before it could hit with full force.

For a brief moment, as Death'sight's strikes met his body, an opening emerged around his striking arm. Too fast and narrow to deliver anything bone-cracking, but he knew it was his best shot—something, anything to help him regroup.

At the end of his thoughts, Ling struck at him, aiming directly for his chest. Raiden concentrated mana into his legs and chest, then exploded the force within his legs to close the distance. When Death'sight's swing connected with his chest, his opponent's eyes widened in terror.

Raiden's chest sank inward, Ling's strike driving deep into his soul, its power intensifying as it burrowed into his skin. He was sent crashing down into the skulls and bones below.

He clutched his chest as he lay among the bones, gasping as air escaped him while he struggled for breath. His mind jumped from one thought to another. He would have died if he hadn't hardened his chest.

Had Death'sight given him that opening just to set up his attack? Or had he seen through his plan from the beginning?

His chest burned like fire, but his situation gave him no time to recover. Pushing through the agony, he forced himself upright on trembling legs, his heart hammering like never before as even Euphoria failed to steady him. He was truly fighting a monster.

Still, through all his struggles, he knew he was going to kill Death'sight and rip out those stolen eyes. His head tilted slightly toward Ling. There the dragon stood, hands tucked in his pockets, white and black hair flickering in the wind as he wore that confident smile.

"You wanted time to rethink, so I gave it to you. Use it wisely." His voice was etched with disappointment but stern, as though he knew he had already won.

Raiden clenched his hands into tight fists. Though he could barely feel his fingers against his palms, he sensed his regeneration kicking in, the fire in his chest already starting to fade.

Breathing like a wounded horse, he leaned to one side and spat blood onto the ground.

"You're the one they assigned as my underlink? Under Snow, the third vice-captain?" Ling said and began approaching Raiden. "Doesn't matter. You're my enemy now."

Finally, Raiden smirked. The gap in power between him and Deathstalker was undeniably vast. Even as the moon dragon, he obviously had a long way to go. And yet, Ling still chose to treat him as an equal.

Such elegant morals. Under different circumstances, this was someone he would have loved working alongside. But unfortunately, not only did he bear the eyes that Raiden couldn't let him keep, but he was also bound to be his enemy through their dragon heritage.

His smirk widened as he watched Ling charging toward him. With his mind finally clear, he wanted desperately to end this before it could escalate any further.

In one swift movement, Ling appeared before him, a strike aimed directly at Raiden's head. Faster than a heartbeat, Raiden blocked.

The force still sent him skidding sideways. Deathstight followed with a flip, delivering a lightning-quick kick, but this time Raiden was faster—he leaped back, avoiding it entirely.

Then, finally, euphoria kicked in. His body began shaking with excitement as a twisted smile etched across his face.

He closed the distance to Ling in a flash. Deathstight frowned, eyes locked on Raiden's hostile expression, confused by his swift change in temperament.

But Raiden had no interest in words. His strike cut through the air at Ling, who slipped past it by mere inches, but Raiden's follow-up came lightning-fast, crushing Ling into the ground.

Still, Raiden gave him no moment to recover, closing the gap. He channeled mana through his knuckles and attacked. Deathstight caught the blow, though the force buckled his stance.

Yet before Raiden could follow up, his dragon instincts triggered, and he vaulted backwards in a flash, opening up the space between them.

His cruel smile shifted to something forced and tense, perspiration gathering on his brow as the truth hit him: without that retreat, Ling's knee would have demolished his ribcage.

But even so, within the gentle breeze, with Luci seated under his skull-structured gazebo, his eyes were fixated on them with what felt like a creepy smile as his seat leaped back and forth. It was as though Raiden and Deathstight shared the same mind.

They both lunged forward and unleashed a flurry of strikes. Their attacks left afterimages in the air, the exchange escalating beyond what mortal eyes could follow as they evaded each blow by razor-thin margins.

Dusty mists swallowed their battlefield instantly, shrouding both fighters from view. Though his attacks grew fiercer by the moment, fueled by the imagined satisfaction of tearing Ling's eyes from their sockets, Raiden still felt an underlying wrongness.

Deathsight's attacks came lightning-fast, and those that missed still carved freezing air currents that made Raiden's flesh crawl, dread rising within him for no clear reason.

But his momentary lapse in focus proved costly. Ling delivered a deceptive blow, throwing Raiden into confusion as he raised his guard against the fake attack.

His eyes dilated instantly. At the edge of his vision, a strike sailed toward his temple; he understood immediately that one hit would end him. His heart pounded past rational limits, fever flooding his system as he marshaled every muscle to intercept the attack.

By sheer luck, his left hand intercepted the blow, but he shrieked in pain as bones snapped audibly through the air before the force launched him into the ground at the base of Luci's gazebo.

Raiden couldn't suppress his agony, piercing screams filling the air with raw despair. His arm hung uselessly and shattered in his grip. He could sense the bone shards floating beneath his flesh, and for the first time, he desperately longed for someone to rescue him.

Cold seized his frame, air coming in broken gasps while his senses urged complete capitulation. But his thoughts betrayed him with graphic visions of his shattered skeleton, whispering that escape was his sole hope.

There was no shame in retreat; he could return to finish this once his arm mended and his strength returned. Or better yet, he could grovel for mercy and devise a plan to eliminate him later; after all, he was still his vice captain.

However, with a clenched jaw and his unbroken fist striking the ground over and over, he refused to back down. Standing there was the man who shared his brother's enchanting charisma, an unbearable sight, and the dragon who had killed Sullivan, who had destroyed his singular family, who embodied Ash's deepest fears.

When his screams finally faded, he began dragging himself through the torment, willing his body upright. He had shown cowardice once before, and that weakness had cost Jobe his life. Never again... he would not shrink away.

As he struggled to his shaking feet, cold sweat beading across his bloodless skin, he breathed:

"You keep giving me reasons... I'll kill you."

Chapter 185: Resignation

Bone-chilling noises erupted across the battlefield with frightening intensity. Raiden moved like a phantom through the blackness, his figure so elusive he seemed to exist nowhere and everywhere in the same breath.

Luci stayed seated in his skeletal throne, swaying rhythmically with a subtle grin spreading across his face while he watched the far-off action.

Raiden's black hair became soft, ethereal white that floated freely around his head. Shadows coiled from his fingertips, twisting into black serpents that slithered up his arms and bound his throat in darkness.

A shadowy dragon-wing symbol crowned his forehead in perfect symmetry, while razor-sharp tattoos slashed beneath his eyes in patterns reminiscent of electric strikes.

His once-blue radiant gradually shifted to obsidian black, pulsing intensely around his form as he wielded a blade forged from pure darkness, wreathed in smoky tendrils that flickered like shadowy flames.

Yet Deathstalker remained steadfast, teeth grinding as he tracked Raiden's lightning-fast movements.

He manifested an identical blue dragon-wing sigil on his forehead, mimicking Raiden's transformation, as his aura shifted to black and wrapped around his entire form except for his face, which radiated such murderous intent that Raiden could taste its venom.

The darkness coursed through Raiden, filling him with incredible strength as his dark markings intensified. His shattered arm was hastily wrapped in strips of his torn black shirt, sweat streaming down his ripped torso, while his skeletal mask hung heavy around his neck.

His bond with the darkness ran deeper than words. He commanded the shadows without speaking, and they obeyed before his thoughts had even fully formed.

Each step dissolved into shadow rather than touching earth, the darkness itself catching and propelling him forward. Only his white hair, glowing intensely under the moonlight, betrayed his presence.

Even so, his blade crashed against Deathstight's armor, scattering fragments of deadly, poisonous dust into the air. He held his breath, but with his lungs nearly at their limit, his remaining hand trembled in agony.

For the past few minutes, Ling hadn't launched a single attack. He kept his arms raised, shielding his face while his cursed gray eyes darted rapidly, tracking Raiden's every move. Yet somehow, the moon dragon was the one taking a beating.

With fatigue already coursing from his very soul, Raiden couldn't help but think of a way to end this before it was too late.

He studied Deathstight's concentrated features. Then, commanding the darkness, he closed the distance in a flash, appearing behind him. Breath held, he channeled all his remaining strength into a strike aimed directly at his neck.

The strike was blindingly fast. Raiden propelled himself with mana while the darkness amplified every aspect of his being. Yet somehow, it was as if Ling could see the future.

Before the strike could connect, he caught the shadowy blade with his bare hand in one swift motion. But his instincts screamed danger, and Raiden let go instantly and leaped backward, watching the sword dissolve into nothing.

Cold dread pooled in his chest as he tried to swallow his confusion. He couldn't tell why, but he knew that if he hadn't moved, that would have been the end of him.

He kept his distance, panting hard as he locked onto those very eyes he wanted to gouge out.

The poison dragon, Deathstare, was a mystery even among the primordial dragons and even to Sullivan, their queen. And so, despite possessing all of Sullivan's memories, the moon dragon could think of little except that Ling had an impenetrable defense.

As his exhaustion faded, he could sense his broken arm beginning to mend, but with the extent of his injuries, he knew it would take far too long. Time he couldn't afford.

"Damn it... I need to think of something!" he muttered and summoned another odachi sword.

But the instant he breathed, his throat erupted in agony, as if razors were tearing it apart. The air was toxic. He began coughing violently, and when he tried to hold his breath, it only intensified the torture—his lungs felt like they were collapsing.

He fell to one knee, palm clamped over his mouth as he hacked up blood. His mind reeled, jumping between panicked thoughts. What kind of toxin was this? Or was it something else entirely?

Through the pain, his head jerked toward Deathstare. White hair danced in the heavy wind as he advanced with casual indifference. Raiden's heart hammered against his ribs as he scrambled backward.

"For centuries I bowed to you, queen... no, king. And yet, you remain blind to the true power of the Poison Dragon." Deathstight paused for a moment, cruelly watching Raiden struggle on the ground.

His tone dropped colder and bitter. "I am Deathstight. As long as life remains in you, it will end before me."

Raiden hardly registered the words, his thoughts consumed by something he desperately wanted to forget.

He didn't need Ling's explanation to understand that his poisons operated on an entirely different level from any he'd encountered. If he could corrupt the very air into such venomous hatred, then there was only one path to survival.

The Grim family's secret technique.

He'd never expected his family's deadly technique to be his lifeline. It might kill Deathstight before he could tear out those stolen eyes, but that was better than dying here.

Before Deathstight could finally get a grip on him, Raiden swallowed hard, clenching his throat as his lungs collapsed within his chest with agonizing dread.

He clenched his eyes shut, subsiding the pain as his grip tightened on the hilt of his shadowy sword. He calmed his mind and, in a swift motion, faster than Deathstight could form a thought.

Raiden stood inches away from him. Letting the darkness guide him, he took a measured step to his right, now facing away from the Poison Dragon.

The Reaper—he muttered, and before the words could fade, he spun back to strike. His blade was already arcing through the air toward Ling's neck before his body had finished turning.

But before it could land, Deathstight's eyes widened in realization, sweat breaking across his forehead. He outstretched his arms, and his dark aura formed a shield, but Raiden's blade sliced clean through.

Forced to move faster than ever, he created multiple shield layers while retreating, finally stopping the attack and gaining distance.

The moment this happened, uneasiness shot through Raiden, causing his legs to buckle. Fear crept in as his bruised lungs began failing him. But the pain barely registered. How had Deathstight avoided that strike?

That couldn't be possible; it had to be sheer luck.

He opened his eyes and forced himself to turn in Deathstight's direction. He constricted his throat, forcing his breathing to match his racing heart as he felt its rhythm echo through his entire body.

Ling stood apart from them, caught in a daze as if he hadn't expected such a ferocious attack from the moon dragon.

But even through his confusion, Raiden knew it wasn't best to wait for the Poison Dragon to catch up to him before he ran out of air completely. Luck wouldn't strike twice.

Without hesitation, Raiden gripped his sword and closed the gap instantly. Ling's eyes bulged as he tried to back away, but Raiden's sword found him faster than he could move. Original content can be found at novel-fire.net

His dominant leg plunged into the shadows beneath him, waist dropping toward his knees as he felt each heartbeat, his sword arcing toward Deathstalker's waist with savage force.

And even at a disadvantage, it was as though the Poison Dragon could anticipate perfectly where the sword would strike next.

A shield materialized with more than a dozen layers as Raiden's blade connected, yet the force still launched him earthward.

Terror filled Raiden's eyes as he watched Ling slowly rise to his feet. He dropped to his knees, wondering how Deathstalker could still be alive.

Had he not executed the technique correctly? What kind of monster was he facing?

He'd never preferred his family's techniques—they killed instantly, and he enjoyed chatting with the fallen until they drew their last breath. But two of the three techniques, The Reaper and Pride, had been hammered into him since childhood. There was no way he could fail.

His morals began crumbling before him. His hand clenched his pants tightly as doubt in his own abilities crept in.

Ling had to die in honor of his twin brother, Jobe, and his lineage as the moon dragon. But if he could block a carefree strike like Reaper and a forceful attack like Pride, what else could Raiden do?

Deathsight rose to his feet and stared down at Raiden with a frown, the blue sigil on his forehead glowing as his condensed aura armor radiated in waves of fleeting shadow.

Raiden could see it clearly: he wasn't playing around anymore. His body began to fidget as he watched the Poison Dragon point a finger at him.

Instantly, his chest tightened, his expression cracking as every fiber of his being screamed for him to run as Ling's dark emotion gathered into a deadly orb on his fingertip.

Raiden sprang to his feet, pushing through his broken hand and giving in to his senses as he attempted to flee. But the moment he turned, he paused, his legs betraying his fear. He clenched his fist. He couldn't be a coward. Not again.

The moment he faced Deathsight, though, a lance of darkness tore through his chest, splintering his bone armor like glass. The skeletal mask around his neck was no exception.

His body ran cold as fear gave way to resignation, and he collapsed, finally surrendering to the piercing void.

Wait... how? Am I really dying here?!