

Mystical 41

Chapter 41: Entanglement (1)

The carriage slowly came to a stop in front of the Dolphin Antique Store.

Garen jumped out of the carriage and paid for the ride. He stepped in front of the antique store only to notice that the door was completely closed and that it was surprisingly quiet inside.

He raised his head to look at the store name and knocked on the door.

"Open the door Old man!"

"Coming! I'm coming!"

A seam appeared in the doorway as it cracked open. Old Man Gregor grabbed Garen as he forcefully dragged him in and immediately shut the door.

The store was oddly dark. Only a single oil lamp was lit on the table in front of the bookshelves. Under the dim yellow light, there was a brown and red colored miniature hourglass. The fine black sand slowly slid down through the slim aperture and its sound echoed.

Garen adjusted to the darkness within the room and glanced at the hourglass on the table.

"What's this? Your new toy?"

The old man didn't respond. He slowly strolled to the table and sat down. The dim light cast on his face highlighted his fatigued and aged expression.

"A friend gave me this black hourglass. It is used for tracking time and can measure a long period of time with every reset." He shook the hourglass with his hand. "I have already had this for two weeks and only one-fifth of the sand slid down. Don't you think it is slow?"

"Indeed." Garen raised his eyebrows as he gazed at the old man's aged appearance. "Are you alright, old man? You haven't looked so well recently."

Garen took a chair and sat beside the table as he adjusted the light for the oil lamp. The room brightened up. "Maybe I am sick." Old Man Gregor smiled, and his perverse nature seemed to have faded. "Speak your mind, why did you make a trip down here? You usually don't visit me when you are free."

"I am here to take care of the elderly. I am afraid that no one will take care of a lonely 80-year-old man." Garen laughed, "Oh, where are your children? Relatives? How come I've never seen them before?"

"Who knows?" The old man complained as a glimpse of despair flashed across his face. "Okay let's talk about something else. What's happening with you? You wouldn't visit me if you didn't have something on your mind."

"You know me too well." Garen saw the old man's expression and knew the topic of children probably touched on the old man's past sorrow. He changed the subject. "I am here to ask for advice on how to appraise antiques and jewelry. Since you have an antique store, you must be knowledgeable in the area?"

"This is simple!" The old man sat up straight and glanced at Garen. "But..." He extended his palm in front of Garen.

Pa!

Garen slapped a stack of cash into the old man's hand.

The hand was still extended.

His face solemn, Garen added \$1,000 more to the pile.

"Old man open your eyes, that's \$1,000 per stack!"

"I know it is \$1,000 per stack, but it takes years of knowledge and experience to build a career in appraisal. My long history in this business would warrant a small cost." Old Man Gregor pocketed the \$2,000 dollars with a pleased face.

"It's only \$2,000. I am going easy on you."

"Let me teach you about the basics about the appraisal." The old man cleared his throat. "Appraisal includes techniques in a few areas, the first being authenticity identification. The second is determining the age of the antique, the third is tracing the origin, and the fourth is understanding the value of the craftsmanship. All four areas would require an extensive amount of time to learn and practice. Which one do you want to learn first?"

"Can I learn all of them at the same time? I am confident in myself."

"Learn at the same time?" The old man looked at Garen under the light. He gazed blankly as his vision seemed to have blurred. "Learn all of them at the same time? Confident? It's unfortunate, but you don't have the talent," the old man said, murmuring the last sentence under his breath.

After Garen improved his physical status, his hearing was also augmented. He overheard the old man's murmur, but didn't seem to mind. Everyone had their own secrets and some chose to keep them private.

"Can I learn about authenticity identification first?"

"No problem." The old man suddenly seemed interested. He touched his lips as he opened the drawer below the table. He took out a stack of white paper and two quills and then wetted the tips with ink from a jar.

"Authenticity identification is the most difficult area to master in appraisal. It is dependent on the experience and time spent with antiques." He drew a circle on the white paper and marked the circle with a cross.

"Do you know what this is?" He pointed at the shape.

"No. A circle shaped window?" Garen attempted to guess the shape on the figure.

"It's a unique symbol that belonged to a master jeweler from the Voyager Era. If you understand this symbol, then it would be possible to deduce the year, level, and category related to this crucial detail. If you don't know, it would be impossible to identify anything meaningful."

Garen nodded his head deep in thought. "You are trying to tell me that for authenticity identification, it is not only about the craftsmanship details related to the antique. It is also necessary to use history and special background knowledge to be able to determine whether the antique is authentic or not."

"Hmm? You are pretty bright and quick to understand." The old man was about to state the key point, but Garen managed to guess it. He looked slightly surprised. "I was about to give you a counterfeit. It would be impossible to determine the authenticity without the unique symbol. But you are quick to realize the critical insight."

He paused. "Since you already understand, then you know that to identify authentic antiques you must be knowledgeable in history, craftsmanship from different eras, famous master craftsmen, genres, classifications, renowned case studies, manufacturing specifics, and production origins. A lot of times you must combine everything together to reach an accurate conclusion when appraising antiques and jewelry.

"So the first thing I need to do is to learn the background knowledge?" Garen nodded. "Are there any books?"

"There are, but books alone won't help you that much. Take a look at them first, then I'll teach you about my appraisal experiences and special techniques. Let's do this step by step. A lot of things are not covered in the books. Other than by sight, you must also use smell, hear, touch and taste in appraisal. Only understanding the theories would be pointless without practical experience, but read the books first."

The old man dug through the bookshelf and found a white book. "This is ."

He then grabbed a thicker black book, "This is ."

He stacked the books together and pushed them in front of Garen.

"Take these home with you, then find me after you are done."

Garen stared at the two giant books speechlessly. "How long would it take for me to finish these two? It's at least 1000 pages per book."

"No rush, take it slow, as long as you finish it within a month." The old man shook his hand. "Now get out of here. I need to clean up and sleep now."

Garen grabbed the two books. "Okay I'll come and find you after I finish."

"Oh, hold on." The old man smacked his head. "You were asking about the other book last time, right? Since you seem to have fancied that book, I'll give it to you as a small souvenir."

He dug in his pants and grabbed a small pendant. It was shaped like an open book.

"Here you go." He threw the pendant over.

Garen caught the pendant and began examining it. It was only the size of a fingernail. The pendant was delicately crafted with a pitch-black color. The opened book had a peculiar dark red symbol inside.

"What's this?"

"It was a gift from when I bought the book. Just keep it for now." The old man scratched in his pants again as if he were itchy.

Garen quivered and stuffed the pendant into his pocket "Where did you find this? That's disgusting. Ok, I'll go now."

"Go on." The old man waved his hand with an irritated look.

Garen came out of the antique shop and waited for a carriage. After none were seen for 10 minutes due to the isolated location of the store, he had to walk toward Pennington street with his books.

When he passed by his uncle's place, he looked up at his uncle's window. He caught a glimpse of Lombarth hastily walking away from the window, leaving the window shaking. It felt like he was avoiding Garen.

Garen originally intended to visit his uncle, but he lost his interest when he saw that Lombarth was at home. After the conflict with Lombarth last time, Garen felt annoyed every time he saw his cousin's face.

"This guy has been quiet lately." Garen had walked a few steps before he heard hasty footsteps behind him.

"Brother Garen!" A girl's youthful voice echoed behind him.

Garen turned around and saw a young girl blushing as she ran towards him.

The girl wore a white cotton shirt along with a pair of white jeans. The jeans flawlessly traced her graceful and energetic figure. At the age of 14, she didn't seem to have hit puberty.

The girl carried a light fragrance that only belonged to a teenage girl. Her short light red hair set an energetic vibe in the air.

"Brother Garen, you are already here. Why don't you come up?" The girl was his uncle's other child, Phelia. In contrast to Lombarth, Phelia always acted energetic around Garen. Because of this, Garen always enjoyed playing with younger kids.

"I didn't see you, Phelia." Garen smiled as he gently pinched the girl's nose. "Why did you cut your hair?"

"I am learning martial arts right now." The girl performed a rudimentary move.

"Where's uncle?"

"He is hosting some visitors right now. They only talk about complicated subjects. It's boring there. Can you come up and play with me?" Phelia shook Garen's arm. "Next time, since Uncle is busy right now. It would be rude of me to interrupt."

"Also, my father was unhappy when he heard the news about the acceptance ceremony." Phelia lowered her voice. "My father said that he doesn't want you to waste your time studying martial arts as long you learn enough to protect yourself. It would be a waste of time to put all your energy in it."

Garen raised his eyebrows. "I thought Uncle would be happy."

Chapter 42: Entanglement (2)

"My father said he wanted you to take care of the family business. He was always fond of you, even when you were young. As for Lombarth and I, we are not talented enough to manage the business. If you spend too much time in martial arts, you would fall behind in other areas. He would not object it if it was in the past, but now the times are different. Regardless of how skillful you are in martial arts, a couple of guns would be enough to take care of you," Phelia explained in her father's tone.

"Uncle wants me to take care of the business?" Surprised by the comment, Garen questioned back, "How is that possible?"

"How is that not possible? My dad had already decided on this a long time ago. I don't care. I'm bad at studying and not talented in martial arts. My teacher said I have no potential. If I can't feed myself, I'm going to count on you!" Phelia hugged Garen's arm as she acted pettishly toward him.

"My father said that among the children in the younger generation, only you could succeed his business to ensure that it remains prosperous. In the hands of Lombarth or me, we would ruin the business in a few years."

"My uncle has high expectations of me."

Garen was quite surprised. He had always felt that his uncle cared more for him than an uncle should--almost better than his own children. In his childhood memory, if Lombarth and Garen were ever in a conflict, Lombarth would, for sure, be punished. The favoritism shown was plain to see.

This caused Lombarth to hold a grudge against Garen. He was extremely unsatisfied by the preferential treatment Garen received.

"Let's go, let's go." Phelia dragged Garen by the arm.

He could not help but follow Phelia into the door. He had taken a few steps before a grim-looking, towering figure came out of the door along with a couple of strangers.

"Are you Garen?"

The teenage boy wore a tight, white shirt with a pair of black pants. The outfit proudly displayed his muscular appearance.

Garen stopped and glanced at the young boy. "You are?"

"I am Lombarth's cousin. I heard you've been bullying Lombarth with your martial arts? Is this true?" The young boy stared at Garen with a frown.

"What do you mean? I've been bullying Lombarth? Where have you heard this?" Garen wanted to step in the door, but the young boy intentionally stepped in to block him. Garen winced. "That's enough, I need to go in." "You are also part of the family. It would be inappropriate for a stranger to teach you a lesson. I'm here today to educate you for my cousin." The young boy forcefully blocked the entrance to the door.

Then, there was a conflict of interest. Due to their inability to manage the assets, the returns from his aunt's family had decreased over the years, and with that, the center of attention shifted onto his uncle's new business.

When his uncle first ventured out, he received an extensive amount of support from his wife's family to grow the business. Her family was a critical factor in the success and expansion of the business.

However, his uncle, as the owner, now stated that he would pass the business to his sister's son, what did this mean?

Garen quickly realized: It implied that his uncle thought all the youths from his wife's family were incompetent when compared to Garen. Only Garen could ensure his business to thrive in the future.

Since the wife's family invested a lot into the business when it was still in its initial stages, they already considered the business to be a part of their own. The unexpected statement about his sister's son inheriting the business would displease her family with the decision.

Garen looked at the young boy in front of him and had an idea.

"It's Lombarth's idea to come and find me right? Ok, enough of this game, don't block the way. We can chat when we are inside."

The young boy laughed grimly and twisted his body as he blocked the way again. He put his arms in front of his chest and stared fiercely at Garen.

Garen frowned. "This is not what you guys think it is. We can chat about it when we are inside. Don't get used by Lombarth. Don't believe everything he says."

He didn't want to start a conflict with the young boy and the group of strangers, for the size of his family was not to be underestimated. They were not saints and were intertwined with gang-related business. If he received a bad name from this conflict, it would become problematic later on.

"That's not what Lombarth said." The young boy with a vicious look slid his body across the door as he obstructed Garen's way.

"Are you going to get out or not?" Garen was losing his patience. He didn't want to play fighting games with a young boy.

"What if I don't get out?" The young boy didn't back away.

Garen's eyes turned icy as he extended his right arm out, aiming for the young boy's neck.

Pa!

The young boy launched a side kick into Garen's palm, generating a loud sound from the impact. Fine dust fell off where they collided. He immediately retreated his leg and performed a roundhouse kick, forming a circle. His foot targeted Garen's wrist.

Pa!

His pants created a draft as it viciously skidded through the air from the kick. The young boy's move was executed elegantly and smoothly. Both of the two kicks landed in the same location on Garen's body. It was only after taking two steps back that he was able to stabilize himself.

"That's all?" Garen stared at him, bewildered.

"You!"

The young boy's face turned pale as a bead of sweat emerged from his forehead. It was clear that the last couple of moves were not easy to perform; however, when he saw that the opponent wasn't even forced to budge, he already knew the difference between them.

Garen glanced at him impassively without even budging. He patted the dust off his palm and entered the wide, open entrance. His palm and wrist didn't even turn red from colliding with the kicks.

"Don't you dare to leave before you explain yourself today!" The young boy burst out hysterically. He dashed as he kicked straight at Garen's chin.

Garen's face turned grim. He pushed his right hand forward as he redirected the young boy's right leg. After that, he turned around instantly and kicked out behind him.

Peng!

Kacha.

The adult male behind Garen took a side kick to his body and collided with the wall behind the door. He was the young boy's bodyguard. He had intended to attack from behind, but he didn't expect Garen to turn around and perform a side kick. A couple of bystanders gasped at the forceful side kick that had directly slammed into the bodyguard.

The bodyguard's entire body collided with the doorframe like a sandbag. The sound of bone fracturing was audibly clear. Just imagining the sound was painful. Everyone felt goosebumps shivering down their arms.

The bodyguard's arm couldn't feel a thing as the bones were shattered on collision. He couldn't even stand up straight. The opponent's power far exceeded his expectations! He leaned heavily against the door, trying to stand up without being able to do so. The way he looked at Garen changed drastically.

Garen, who stood across from him, glanced at him with an icy stare, his eyes displaying a boundless sea of emotionless cruelty.

The bodyguard suddenly felt frightened. He had seen a similar stare coming from his team leader before. He knew that if he made any movement...

"He will kill me." He froze in place and dared not to move.

The sudden change not only stunned the young boy motionlessly but also shocked Phelia, causing her to gape with her mouth wide open. No one moved.

Garen sneered. He knew that the conflict could not be resolved with just this. He walked in front of the young boy and pressed his finger against his forehead.

"Even your bodyguard is weak. No wonder uncle is passing the business to me. What's the purpose of your existence if you are so useless? Go die in a ditch."

Pa.

His finger lightly pushed forward. The young boy's head swayed backward as Garen left a red mark on his forehead.

In front of Garen's killing intent, his pupils immediately contracted. At the very moment when Garen touched him, he felt as he was about to die.

"Don't kill me!" He frighteningly burst out in a cry. He rolled and crawled backward to hide behind a large vase. His eyes were full of fear. Garen smiled and stood straight up; he knew that he had broke the young boy mentally. He would be the boy's worst nightmare. Even if someone provoked the young boy, he would not dare to bother Garen anymore.

That was also his intention. The boy had yet to develop a mature metal state of mind. This situation was solved by simply scaring him.

Since the conflict couldn't be resolved during the moment when the bodyguard tried launching a sneak attack, Garen was resolute and decisive in his actions; he went with the simplest solution that will solve it once and for all: destroying them mentally.

"Let's go, Phelia." He turned his head to look at the girl beside the door. The girl's lips trembled as she gazed at him. A glimpse of fear could be seen in her eyes.

When Garen pointed at the young boy's forehead, she thought he would be killed.

She had only seen such viciousness coming from her father's bodyguards.

When she heard Garen's voice, she opened her mouth with a slightly hesitant voice.

"Brother Garen, his name is Delai Xima. He is a professional martial arts practitioner who had passed the amateur stage. His..."

"Don't tell me that he is a godlike combat grandmaster?" Garen responded speechlessly.

"He is part of the gang?" Garen frowned.

Phelia nodded.

"He is the leader of the outer province gang."

"You know pretty well."

"I heard it from my elders during the holiday season. You have to be careful. This is not just a conflict between the younger generations," Phelia said worriedly.

"Don't worry."

Garen nodded. With the Black Jade Disk in his possession now, he is growing stronger by the minute. Even now, standard pistols at a far distance would not be able to damage him; it is only with accurate shooting at close range that pistols would be able to threaten him.

"The conflict within the family has rules as well. Don't worry too much, let's go up and see uncle."

Garen moved his neck around as it made a crisp sound. The internal conflict within the family permits neither the usage of gang forces nor dishonorable tactics. Most of the competition is based on timing in an honorable fashion. Otherwise, it would not receive the support from the elders of the family.

He was not interested in his uncle's business -- with his unique ability, he could easily develop his own business and it would only take time and energy; however, this was not his goal.

Only with his power would he be able to achieve what he desired.

"As long as they don't cross the line, anything is negotiable." Garen licked his lips.

Chapter 43: The Way (1)

Garen followed Phelia to the fifth floor and discovered that the steel door by the staircase was opened, with a man in black suit and crew cut hair standing by the side. The man eyed Garen before asking, "You're Garen, right? Your uncle is waiting for you at the study."

Garen nodded in return. He then changed his shoes, tidied his outfit and followed Phelia to the study after closing the door.

Fire crackled inside the chimney by the main hall, and the room was warm from the radiating heat. While passing the main hall, he spotted a girl with a red ponytail delicately sleeping on the couch in her white training robe.

Garen laid his eyes on her and paid special attention on her arms and thighs before continuing to the study.

There was a corridor between the study and the main hall, with sides filled with mirrors as clear as the sky. Garen stooped in front of the mirror and, from it, he saw his own reflection staring back at him.

Purplish-black short hair. Deep red eye sockets. Wearing a black t-shirt that barely covered his jam-packed body. With that slender figure of his, he couldn't help but give off a robust temperament.

From the look of things, it was obvious that Garen had been spending time training. It was of great timing that it was during his puberty, causing him to look taller and stronger than before.

Without wasting any time, Garen pushed open the study's redwood door. He saw two rows of bookshelves lying on each side of the wall, with a long blackwood table positioned in the center of the room.

An old man with white hair and his uncle were sitting beside the table enjoying their coffee, and the air was filled by the aroma of their drink.

Knock. Knock.

Garen stood still as he gently knocked on the door.

It couldn't be more obvious that his uncle had been gaining some weight. His thick black eyebrows wrinkled up, and he seemed to be piling up in his seat caught up in his thoughts. He only turned his head towards the door when he heard Garen knocking.

"Ah, Garen, I almost thought that you had forgotten me after not visiting for so long! What have you been up to lately? Even Ying Er said that she hasn't seen much of you recently. You're not still training at that dojo, are you?" Garen's uncle said while pointing at the seat across him. "Come take a seat, it's been so long since we had a conversation between uncle and nephew."

Garen nodded and spent no time taking his seat. He gave a glance at the white-haired old man while sitting down. From his appearance, the old man must be at least seventy to eighty years old— he had white beard and white hair, and he was wearing a white robe.

But what really captured Garen's attention was that, since the moment he set foot in this room, the old man had been eyeing him, seemingly troubled.

Turning his attention away from the old man, Garen sat up straight and looked at the direction of his uncle.

"Uncle, I heard that you wanted me to inherit your property. Is it true?" Garen asked, showing his concern.

"Of course it is true," Uncle Anjer answered as he arched his eyebrow. "This decision has been made since a long time ago."

He gently tapped his fingers on the table, letting out a rhythmic sound.

"How do I say this... How about this, I will tell you everything from the beginning. After all, I know that you are not the type of person that is interested in power or money. So, if I don't make things clear for you, I'm afraid you might not want to accept my inheritance."

Garen was taken aback, not knowing how to reply. However, it was indeed what his uncle had said, he did not care about having power or money. Perhaps it was because he had an ability that made him ignore these types of possession, or perhaps there was some other reason. but it was definitely what his uncle had said, if things were not discussed clearly, he would've prepared to convince his uncle to drop this decision.

Uncle Anjer muttered to himself before speaking again, "You know the situation of my two children. It is certain that they cannot inherit the property. Be it Lombarth or Phelia, they are playful and immature. They might change in the future, but the chances of it happening is too slim."

"As for the youngsters from my wife's line of family... They are too ambitious! Though I have to admit that they have some capability, but I am certain that if they inherit my property, there will be nothing left! What will happen to Phelia and Lombarth then? The efforts that I had put into building this business and network JUST to be handed to them freely? Impossible!"

Garen nodded.

Uncle Anjer took out a cigarette and lighted it before continuing, "I admit, this situation must have placed you in an awkward position. For this, I apologize. However, I really don't want my legacy to be in the hands of someone else! I still have two kids! Yes, Phelia and Lombarth. Though Lombarth always makes me worry, but he is still my child, Garen."

He stared into Garen's eyes intently.

"Since you were young, you showed an outstanding talent of handling a business, and only you can help me stabilize my inheritance. I know that you have never yearned for what I have in life, but think about Phelia. Even though Lombarth never managed to get along with you, but Phelia has always liked you, right? You liked her too, right? I can assure your engagement with her."

Garen was startled—he was almost speechless. He had never wanted to divert his attention on other paths, but, as of this moment, he didn't know how to reject his uncle.

Moreover, looking into the current situation, it seemed like Uncle Anjer was at the end of his road—only forty years of age, yet he was already arranging his inheritance.

Uncle Anjer took a deep puff from his cigar. Not long after, white clouds starts gushing out from his nose.

"I know it is sudden, but I hope that you can consider this seriously." This time, he spoke as if he was speaking to another adult.

Garen nodded.

"If this is your wish, Uncle." Garen narrowed his eyes before continuing, "It's just that would you mind telling me why are you in such a hurry in arranging this? You are still well in your middle age. Won't it be too soon for you to worry about this?"

Uncle Anjer seemed less tense having known that his nephew did not reject him immediately. He took out a small scissor and clipped the cigar before holding it in his mouth. Then, he pointed at the old man.

"Naturally, I have my own reasons. Come, let me introduce you. This is my old friend, Adonis. He has been the guest of my house lately, and the one sleeping on the couch outside is his disciple, Winnie. You both practice martial arts, so I suppose you guys must have tons of common topics."

Garen frowned. "Uncle, you still haven't told me the reason, maybe..." Before he could even finish his sentence, a loud thump echoed out as the study's door was flung wide open.

The three turned their attention toward the door, only to find Lombarth breathing heavily at the side, staring at Garen ferociously.

"Garen! It's you! It's you again!"

Garen frowned again. He wanted to speak, yet he was interrupted once again.

"Get out!" Uncle Anjer shouted. He stood up as he pointed a finger to outside the door. "Can't you see that we are having a conversation? Get out!"

Lombarth was about to speak, but after seeing the expression of his father, he unwillingly slammed the door and left.

While panting, Uncle Anjer sat down and angrily shoved the cigar into the ashtray.

"This Lombarth is getting out of hand! Please excuse me, I have to teach him a lesson. In the meantime, why don't you two have a talk? You two should have some common topics since the both of you are martial artists. I am sure Adonis won't mind giving you some advice, Garen."

He then stood up, coughed heavily, before going out from the study.

A click sound reverberated as the door was slowly closed.

Garen sat at his seat as he silently stared at the old man sitting opposite him. This old man had been eyeing him with a troubled expression since the moment he set foot in this room.

Their eyes met, yet not a single word was let out.

"Young man, your art has drifted from the right path." Finally, Adonis spoke.

"The right path?" Garen was dazed. Originally, he thought that this old man would tell him his relationship with his uncle, yet he actually decided to evaluate his art instead.

"To practice martial art is to practice mastering the heart. Your heart has been affected by your own strength," Adonis murmured. "When the convenience of the strength becomes more apparent, you will be more accustomed to it, to a point where you can never get rid of it. And, when you base your art with it, you will only find yourself being a puppet to it! Forever living only to practice martial arts to get stronger!"

The old man stood up, walked to the window and looked down.

"Did you think that you can get a sense of security just by increasing your strength?"

Garen shivered. He raised his head to the old man and asked, "What do you mean?"

"Don't let your mind be distracted by strength. The strong will always be strong, and the weak will always be weak." Adonis shook his head and turned his direction toward to door. The door opened and closed, yet no sound was produced.

Garen sat at his seat, his expression uncertain.

Hoo-la!

He abruptly stood up, with his hands gently touching his chest. His muscles were as strong and as hard as a rock, yet the strength he had never gave him a peace of mind.

Thump!

The blocker Garen held in his hand was being kicked hard. From where he stood, a cloud of dust spread out in all directions.

A series of blows were furiously struck on the same spot.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

In an instant, four sounds overlapped one another. Garen was slowly knocked back, and his hands were almost unable to keep the blocker stabilized.

Senior Sister Darcia slowly pulled in her fists, letting out a deep breath. Each side of her temples was blood red—a sign only a master in the White Cloud Dojo would show. Cooling down while pulling her fists, the color from her temples slowly faded.

"It's your turn, junior." Darcia took the blocker off Garen's hand. "It's now your turn to attack."

"Okay." Garen nodded.

Both of them wore black robes, sparring on the second floor of the White Cloud Martial Colosseum.

Thump! Thump! Puff!

Like two specks of dust, they stood on the middle of the newly retiled brown-red floor. Each blow they traded, wisps of white dust proliferated around them. The sound of their feet screeching against the floor was enough to have someone clench their teeth.

Garen repeatedly jabbed and swung his fists towards Darcia, but each of his blows were precisely blocked by the latter.

Darcia seemed to be at ease, and her steps were as light as feathers. The white tiger tattoo that occasionally appeared while sparring seemed as if it was alive during vigorous movements. Her blood red temple, with the sharp eyes that seemed to be smiling, gave off an unusually attractive vibe.

After continuously sparring for two hundred times, Garen was finally out of breath. He stopped what he was doing, took a few steps back, and breathed heavily.

"Huff... Senior Sister, can I ask you a question?"

"It seems that you have something troubling you?" Darcia smirked while walking towards Garen.

Thump!

She landed a hard kick on Garen's chest, sending him to stumble across the room.

"What you must do now is none other than sparring!" Darcia stood while looking at Garen in disdain.

"Confusion, hesitation, indecisiveness, cowardice... Get it out of your head! You're wasting your time if you still live in your past."

She raised her leg high off her chest—her posture was similar to a crazed elephant—and mercilessly landed it on Garen's head.

Chapter 44: Direction (2)

Crack!

The wooden board snapped without effort.

Garen was finally able to roll to the side at the critical moment. He stood back up and solemnly stared at Rosetta.

"How can one strengthen one's mental fortitude, so he can act and achieve his goals subconsciously?"

Rosetta was surprised, then she started laughing as she shrugged her shoulders. "Don't let the pursue of power blind your eyes and fool your heart. If you are strong, you are strong. If you are weak, then you are weak. Someone must have told you this theory, right?"

"How did you know?" Garen was stunned again.

"What kind of bullshit theory is that?" Rosetta sneered. "I can't even count how many people I killed who believed it! So ignorant and so rigid! People who train using this trash theory will be trash afterward!"

She stretched her neck and flexed her lower body.

"Power is power! The more power you have, the stronger you are, and your mind and heart will be in turn cultivated by it! Invincible confidence is always the byproduct of invincible power!

"The strong minds were all created by the repetitive self-confirmation."

Garen paused a little. "So in other words, if I don't doubt myself and believe that I'm always right, then my mind and heart shall behave the same way, right?"

"That's right." The smile disappeared on Rosetta's face. Her temples were getting so red that it looked like she was bleeding. "Next, I will add some more power so you can really understand the meaning of it."

"Damn!"

Garen felt a chill. He knew that his senior sister was about to lose it on him. If he countered her attack directly, he wouldn't feel good afterward. Last time, if it hadn't been for his second brother, he would have gotten his ass kicked so hard by her that he would have ended up in a hospital.

Without hesitation, Garen turned around and rushed away. It was his most practiced martial art style in the White Cloud Combat Arts, after all.

Bam!

He stomped his left foot and in two steps leaped toward the staircase. He then jumped down it without looking back.

He suddenly heard a subtle air-piercing sound. A hand slowly touched him on the left shoulder. Its movement didn't make any sound. The hand seemed like it belonged to his lover, the movement very soft and gentle.

Garen, on the other hand, was very anxious. He struck his elbow backward, and his arm shot out like an arrow, the elbow being the sharp arrowhead.

This Shot Form was the form in the Four Forms that caused the most damage to the body, and it was the form that had the fastest speed and the highest burst power. With the help of special strength utilization techniques, any part of the body could be trained to burst out with power akin to a released arrow.

At this point, Garen was only able to train one part of his body - his right elbow.

Pia!

His elbow strike was easily blocked.

Garen stomped his feet, and his body continued dropping toward the bottom of the staircase. His speed was a bit faster than usual. He was using his hidden strength, after all.

The White Cloud Secret Arts that he was mastering were slowly increasing his strength on a daily basis. Although he was at the peak of an adult's strength's threshold, his strength was still increasing at a steady pace. It had no sign of slowing down.

With this small differential in speed, Garen finally escaped the death chase by his senior sister. He firmly landed on the stairway on the first floor.

In the morning, there were quite a few disciples who were coming and going from the grand hall on the first floor. They all recognized Garen as the Dojo Master's new disciple, who just joined the Dojo not long ago, when they saw him jumping off the second floor.

"Senior sister goes by the rule of zero combat under the second floor. I'm lucky that I got down in time." Garen wiped the sweat from his forehead as he calmed himself down. "The senior sister is the most dangerous practice opponent, but she did train my reflexes and reaction time. If I don't stay cautious all the time, I will for sure be going to the hospital."

By now, he had realized the mysteriousness of White Cloud Dojo. His master Fei Baiyun wasn't around most of the time, and Garen had no idea what he was doing. Besides that, from the way his senior sister spoke and her self-told stories, he could tell that she was a horror figure who'd killed a lot of people.

His second brother was actually a senior member at the Confederation's Combat Association, and he was one of the examiners for the advancement in the Hobbyist Levels. Garen heard that he also ran some underground businesses. So he was definitely a successful man by all appearances.

In terms of his third brother, he was the very definition of a kid from a wealthy and politically influential family. His father was the Chief Inspector at Huaishan City. This position was created by the Confederation to inspect all the government officials of the municipal level. It was on the same level as the Mayor, which made his third brother's father one of the two most influential people at Huaishan City. On top of that, his mother was the daughter of a Count, who was very well off.

A few days ago, during practice, Garen's third brother somehow irritated senior sister and got beaten so hard that he had to go home to rest.

Garen thought his own defense was tough and agreed to practice with senior sister without doing any research. But unexpectedly, after only getting hit a few times by her palms, he noticed that the injured places on his body had already swollen up.

After fixing up his clothes, Garen called two people working at the Dojo. He asked them where his master and second brother had gone. But as expected, they didn't know at all.

Garen drank some hot water and cleaned the sweat off of his body. He decided to wander around the Dojo, wanting to rest a little bit since he had the time.

His body was getting stronger and stronger. The shape of his muscles was getting harder to cover up by his uniform.

When he was walking around the field and such, other disciples of the Dojo greeted and saluted him.

"Ha! He!"

In the middle of the field, there were three groups of disciples who were practicing White Cloud Combat Arts together. These were the core disciples who were picked from the individual branches. They were all in white uniforms and were very focused on the training.

Garen was relaxing his body wandering around as he checked his Potential Meter, 155%.

"It has been more than a week since I went to the uncle's place. Now I have another potential point that I can utilize. I have to decide carefully on where I want to allocate it."

He wasn't planning to use it on any technique. It would be a huge waste to squander it on an ordinary one. It would only make sense if the technique was very hard to master. But at the moment, he couldn't add the point to White Cloud Secret Arts nor the Explosive Fist Arts. Thus, the potential point was better spent on his own attributes.

Since White Cloud Combat Arts were the most essential foundation, Garen planned to completely understand and practice it form by form, and not use any potential points to jack the level up. He wanted to see if there were any differences between the techniques that he practiced to level and the techniques that he used the potential points to level up.

He quickly skimmed through his attribute pane.

Strength 2.12, Agility 1.10, Vitality 1.35, Intelligence 1.5

"Long term exercises have increased my vitality by 0.01. My strength has also increased under the effect of White Cloud Secret Arts. However, I feel like 2.2 is the absolute maximum amount of strength that I can reach."

Garen had a feeling. An intuition sent to his brain by his body.

It was reaching the ultimate strength threshold, and even White Cloud Secret Arts couldn't increase it anymore. This ultimate threshold was the congenital physical limit; everyone had their own.

"Looks like 2.2 strength is my limit. I'm a bit weaker compared to second brother. Second brother's strength is about 450 pounds, which is an equivalent of 2.25 in terms of attribute points. His congenital physical limit might be higher than mine, but I heard that his strength has not increased in a long time. Could it be that 450 pounds is the peak strength for all humans?"

Garen thought to himself.

"I should do some research on my own."

And he did exactly that. He turned around and went to the library in the Dojo.

The strong, bald elder was still sitting in front of it. His eyes were closed as he sat cross-legged.

Garen thought of something and walked up to the elder. "Big master Bai, can I ask you a question?"

After a solid four to five minutes, the elder opened his eyes. "Go ahead."

"What's the peak strength for humans?" Garen asked quietly.

"Peak strength?" The elder thought about it and said, "In terms of measuring we use here, it should be around 480 pounds. This is the best record in the industry. But since each person has a different potential, we all stop at our own limit despite how hard we train."

"Then, where do you think my limit lies?" Garen asked, pointing at himself.

"You?" Big Master Bai carefully observed Garen. "I think your peak strength is somewhere between 430 pounds and 450 pounds."

"So accurate!" Garen was surprised. It was fortunate that his body grew a lot since he mastered White Cloud Secret Arts, and he was able to hide some of his strength well. Otherwise, this elder might have seen through him.

After his body changed, his strength instantly reached the limit, and his skin's defense got a lot better as well. It was one time better than the elementary Explosive Fist Arts. Without hundreds of pounds of strength, no one would be able to pierce through his skin with a knife.

"Thank you for your time." Garen bowed and showed his respect. He turned around and left after he saw the elder close his eyes.

"Then looks like 2.40 is my absolute peak for strength. If I add the potential points to it, it should increase by 0.3, which is like 60 pounds of strength. But I'm not sure if my limit will be stretched after it is reached."

Garen was very unsure. If he wasn't able to stretch out his limits, then it will put a hard cap on his future potential.

But if his limit was stretched and topped, then his future potential would be limitless!

"Maybe I should try."

His eyes landed on the strength attribute.

The attribute slowly jumped up. It went from 2.12 directly to 2.20. Suddenly, Garen's whole body became numb. It was as if all the muscles in his body began beating in a rhythm, one identical to the rhythm of the beating of his heart.

He felt that his temples were beating the fastest, as if some things were about to jump out of them.

This condition only lasted for about a dozen seconds. Garen looked at his attribute pane after it stopped, and his strength had increased to 2.20. It didn't go above it, but a new symbol appeared behind it.

He knew what it was by just looking at it once.

"So my vitality couldn't handle too much strength? Looks like I have to increase my vitality at the same time."

The remaining 0.22 of the potential point that were left after the majority of it was used for increasing strength were allocated to vitality.

The attribute for vitality instantly jumped from 1.35 to 1.57.

After adding the potential points to vitality, Garen felt something warm inside his body, as if there was a furnace that continuously baked his internal organs. He could even vaguely hear the 'Ziz' sound that his flesh and blood made.

The flow of the blood, the beat of the heart—Garen felt an additional feeling on top of those feelings including the compressing of his lungs due to breathing. It was an unprecedented control over his own body.

Pia!

After a light noise, Garen was surprised to see the Explosive Fist Arts that were on the elementary level jump to the intermediate level in his technique pane. Another aggressive swelling started within his body.

Garen almost couldn't stand and walk normally. He could barely keep himself from falling by leaning against the wall. It was fortunate that no one was around to see him like this.

He felt that a layer of invisible liquid was slowly secreting within his body. It came from his internal organs, travelled through the bones, muscles, skin and covered the entire surface of his body.

Chapter 45: Encounter (1)

Garen fisted his hands as he leaned against the wall. He felt that his skin was getting thicker, as if a layer of hard substance was put over his body, just like when he first reached the elementary level on the Explosive Fist Arts.

"Such a strong change."

He stood up straight and felt that his body was much heavier. No, a better word for it would be firmer.

"The elementary level of Explosive Fist Arts only offered increased defense, but if I remember correctly, the intermediate level should offer the vibration effect. I have to carefully test it."

He didn't stop and went directly to the test rooms at the back of the field. He looked around and picked one without anyone inside. He carefully locked it from the inside just to be sure no one would be looking.

He walked up to the wooden weapon rack and picked up a curved knife.

Thud!

He stabbed the knife into his left arm. It didn't pierce through the skin, stopping at the surface as if it had hit a very hard wooden surface.

Garen slowly applied more and more force onto the knife. The strength applied to the knife instantly went over 50 pounds, then slowly 100, 150, 160, 170...

Psiii!

After a slight noise, the tip of the knife went through his skin, and Garen immediately stopped applying the force. He looked at the point on his skin that the knife had pierced.

There was a very little red dot on his skin, and a tiny bit of blood was slowly flowing out of it. However, it quickly solidified, as if it was an injury that a needle left behind.

After placing the knife back in the weapon rack, Garen pinched the part of his left arm that got stabbed.

"170 pounds of endurance and defense. That means that as long as my opponent's strike with a sharp weapon has less impact than this, I won't get injured. But if the weapon is dull, then it'll be much easier to defend against. I think even 200 pounds of strength with such a weapon won't injure me at all."

He rubbed his hands together, and they made a vague rustling noise, as if his hands were two rough metal plates.

"The martial arts at the White Cloud Dojo are very impressive. They must be on the same level as the Shaolin technique: Golden Bell Cover and Iron Shirt.

"I will specifically test my punches next."

Garen slowly walked up to a black sand punch bag that was hanging off of a rack. He lowered his back and swung his arm, throwing out a side punch.

Bam!

The punch bag swung around, not flying out too much. However, both the punch bag and the rack holding it up shook violently like there was an earthquake. For a time they vibrated aggressively, making buzzing noises.

Garen drew back his arm and punched straight this time. The fist shot out like an arrow and hit the punch bag right in the center.

Boom!

Bang!

The punch bag swung backward and fell to the ground with the rack. The dust on the floor was sent into the air, and Garen quickly covered his mouth and nose as he coughed.

After a while, the dust gradually calmed and settled back on the ground. Garen squatted down and made some careful observations.

The rack was made of metal. It was painted black and was nailed to the ground by long iron nails. Its bottom formed an shape to secure it against impacts from all angles.

Right now, all the hard iron nails were perfectly pulled out of the floor without any sign of damage on them.

Garen picked up an iron nail that was about the length of the index finger and looked at the others as well.

"Is it because of vibration? Apparently, it has this effect on nails, I wonder what kind of effect it would have on humans?"

He stood up as he thought about it and stretched out his arms and chest by swinging his arms horizontally backward. The jacked muscles on his back were compressed and bumped against each other as he moved his arms. It felt like there were strands of iron chains twisting and intervening with each other under his skin.

Si...

Hu...

He took a deep breath as he closed his eyes and recalled the moment when he punched out.

"It's a vibration... A strong vibration."

He threw out a punch into the air, using the Shot Form.

After he punched out, there was a vague whistling sound.

"The strength would cause vibrations after it's used, and transfer a huge vibration in the opponent. This type of attack would deal a great amount of damage to living creatures' internal organs. I have to find an opportunity to test it out since I'm still not sure where exactly I stand in terms of combat abilities."

Garen drew back his fist and stood up straight. He stretched his neck and looked at his well built upper body. It was at that moment that he realized that he had turned from a weak teenager to a tough, muscled man.

"This change is really significant when considering that only a few months have passed by." He pulled on the button of his shirt, trying to cover up his chest muscles.† However, it was impossible. He helplessly resigned the effort.

"I can't really use my full strength when I'm practicing with senior sister and brothers in the Dojo. It seems like I'll have to find other alternatives if I really want to test my real combat abilities. Now, that the situation at the Golden Hoop, Silversilk Castle, and with uncle are all mixed together, it's very chaotic.

"I don't have to worry too much about the situation with uncle. However, the Golden Hoop will soon find out that I had killed that Number 102, and they will certainly come for me again. It will be a great

time to see what I'm made of." Garen bumped his fists together as he thought, "Next, I will just have to keep a close eye on Grace."

Garen shook his head after looking at the sand punch bag on the floor again. He turned around and walked out.

Four days later...

Back at his home on Bluetree Street.

"Brother, I'm going with my classmates to Jaderipple Lake tomorrow. Do you want to come?" Ying Er's voice came from next door.

"Jaderipple Lake again? Who's going?"

Garen was thinking about the progression on Dale Quicksilver's case. He was surprised by his sister's sudden question.

"After doing so much and thinking about so much external work, I almost forgot that I'm only a high school student..." he thought to himself.

"Just my classmates, and a few of my best friends from junior high school. We are planning to have a grand barbecue at the lake," Ying Er answered as she combed her hair in the bathroom.

"What about dad and mom?"

"They said that they're going to a dinner party, a celebration party put on by their company. They told us to solve our own problems and eat by ourselves."

"Again..." Garen shook his head. He had nothing to say. It was something that was no surprise to him.

He sat in front of his desk and started to work on the math questions that he had from school for the break. Temporarily, he threw everything that wasn't related to his student career to the back of his mind and focused on solving the math problems.

"Brother, are you going or not?" Ying Er peeked her head into Garen's room.

"It's ok. You guys have fun, I'm not going to go," Garen answered casually. "I'm busy with stuff."

"Suit yourself then. Peel your own almonds that are on the table in the living room. I'm going out. I have to prepare all the stuff that I need." Ying Er humphed at Garen as she left his room. She also intentionally stomped heavily with her feet on the floor and made loud stepping noises.

Bam!

Soon, Garen heard the sound of the closing door. Ying Er had intentionally slammed the door, too.

Garen shook his head as he sat in front of his desk. "So childish at that kind of age. She is still like an elementary school kid," he thought. Then he immediately went back to doing his homework. After a full hour and a half, he sighed as he raised his head.

"Although math is easy, there are just way too many questions. Looks like I have to spend some more time on it if I want to finish everything in one sitting."

Garen closed his practice question booklet that he completed and stood up to rub his lower back. He looked at the clock on the wall, and it was 9:43 AM.

"It's about time to go."

After quickly changing into a T-shirt and a pair of jeans, he grabbed some money and a handful of almonds from the living room table, and walked out of his home.

He quickly went down the stairs. But as he was about to get to the end of the staircase, he saw a white-haired elder slowly walking down the stairs in front of him. Garen slowed down and didn't pass him.

The elder was wearing a delicate, clean black suit along with a black round hat, and held a reddish brown cane in his hand. He was walking down the stairs one stair at a time. He seemed to hear the noise coming from his back and turned around to look at Garen with an apologetic smile on his face.

"After you."

Garen recognized this elder as the one who lived in this building. He saw him on a regular basis when using the stairs.

He smiled back and politely said, "Please be careful, and watch your steps. Don't injure yourself."

"I'm in no hurry, just coming out to exercise a little." The elder smiled as he watched Garen walk past him. The smile on his face got brighter and brighter. "I've seen this little guy many times. He is polite every time I see him. This is rare to see nowadays."

Garen felt like the way the elder was looking at him was very strange. He paced himself as he felt a little uncomfortable. After he left the residential area, he walked down Bluetree Street toward the downtown.

He saw ox carts passing regularly on the road. All were carrying bricks and wood. He could see piles of black ox feces on the corner of the road, and they smelled really bad.

The human and car traffic on the streets was getting denser and denser as he got closer to downtown. Some of the perfume fragrance coming from off from passing girls and wealthy women who walked past Garen at the cross section covered up the smell of the oxes' feces.

When he walked past a street that was full of stores selling clothes and accessories for women, he saw two familiar figures walking out of a jewelry shop on his left. It was Kalidor and Ai Fei.

They were holding onto each other's hands, and Ai Fei leaned against Kalidor like a little bird resting on its owner. Both of them were wearing their school uniforms. Ai Fei's was a dark purple dress, the bottom of which barely covered up her thighs. She also had some makeup on and looked even prettier than usual.

Both of them saw Garen, who was walking by as well, and were surprised.

"Garen, it's you! Such a coincidence to meet on this street," Kalidor greeted with a smile. He subconsciously coiled his arm around Ai Fei's waist as he saw Garen who was stronger, bigger and more handsome than him.

Garen smiled back and nodded as he glanced at Ai Fei. "You guys are out shopping? Yeah, it is such coincidence. Did you guys just get here?"

"We've been here for a while already." Kalidor chatted with Garen casually, but his arm subconsciously tightened its grip on Ai Fei's waist.

Ai Fei looked at Garen who had changed a lot in the last couple of months. Although she had a slight smile on her face, she felt a little miserable. This great boy in front of her had shown interest in her, hinted that he did like her.

But after comparing Kalidor with Garen right now, Kalidor was no match with Garen in terms of appearance. In terms of height, Garen was literally looking down at Kalidor. There were also looks, figure, style, and temperament differences.

"Ai Fei, say hi to Garen."

She heard Kalidor's voice, and that brought her back to reality. She quickly nodded at Garen and said, "Long time no see, Garen. How are you doing?" Looking at the tall and handsome man in front of her, the scene of them being deskmates appeared in her head.

But as she finished asking the question, Kalidor, who was beside her, suddenly reached his hand under her dress and started rubbing.

Ai Fei kept on smiling innocently, but her body stiffened as she felt Kalidor's hand. She knew that Garen must have seen it. One of Kalidor's hands was recklessly rubbing her bottom, and the other one reached out for her chest. It was formed into different shapes under Kalidor's forceful fingers.

Ai Fei instantly felt like her body was getting hot, and her face burned. She saw Garen's slight frown. At that moment, she felt like she was degraded.

This was in public, on a street with a lot of foot traffic in downtown. Kalidor had recklessly reached into her dress and dared to make it obvious!

She didn't dare to resist. She knew what Kalidor was like. He was doing such a thing to directly tell Garen that she belonged to him. His temper wasn't that good if emotions were involved.

If she resisted, she knew that it would be over between Kalidor and her.

At that moment, she felt like a whore. She had been trying to maintain her image one second, but was completely exposed the next. She could feel Garen's stare, and the looks of other pedestrians on the street. She could feel them clearly! This unprecedented shame and embarrassment made her body shiver uncontrollably.

Chapter 46: Encounter (2)

Garen scrunched his eyebrows. Kalidor was not trying to hide anything from him, and Garen knew he put a lot of pressure on Kalidor. Ai Fei lowered her head, and she was scared to face Garen. Many thoughts ran through Garen's mind, but he knew their relationship had ended.

"I still have something to take care of. Have fun, " Garen said.

"Garen, you're alone, right? Why don't you join us?" Kalidor got what he wanted, and he stared at Garen with a slight smile on his face. He patted Ai Fei's butt with his hand, and it looked like he was trying to show his dominance.

"Sorry, I have to go. I will talk to you later." Garen was a bit annoyed, and he hurriedly left the place.

Leaving the two behind, he turned to a street, and a red car slowly stopped before Garen. From inside, Grace opened the door and got off the driving seat.

"Garen, sorry for being late," she said. Grace wore a black suit with a white shirt inside. Her skinny legs were covered with a pair of black stockings, and her long brown hair was silky smooth. She looked cool and pretty with her hair trailed over her shoulders. Grace stood beside Garen, and with both of them having red pupils, they looked unusually like a couple.

"No worries, I've also just arrived." Garen looked around, and he barely saw any pedestrians. There were several children playing at the side of the street, and it looked like they were playing hide-and-seek.

"How's the recent situation?" Garen asked.

"Nothing happened." Grace lowered her head and respectfully answered. She looked like a secretary standing beside her boss.

"They probably knew who I was working for. It's probably not a wise idea for us to meet in public like this. They will notice," she continued.

"It's fine. They will eventually know sooner or later. Actually, I wanted them to notice. I wanted to communicate with the Golden Hoop anyways," Garen said with a light tone as he rested his back on the car door.

"I am not alone," he added.

"Also, once they try to communicate with us, I can use 'Kelly' as a cover to get in touch with Quicksilver. If they are not trying to avenge their members, they are probably trying to cooperate with me. Don't worry, even if they come to us, we will not be in danger. The Golden Hoop has been around for a while, and they should know how to approach an unknown opponent. Just carry a gun in case you have to fight," Garen said.

"Got it."

Grace felt like the words he spoke were not from a 16 years old high school student. She thought she was talking to a 30 or 40 years old man, and she had mixed feeling about this.

"Am I talking to a genius?" Grace thought. She was an ordinary girl, and she trained very hard since she was young. Working for a gifted 16 years old teenager left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"What? Get on the car and drive me to the antique shop. Pick me up at 4 p.m. and take me to the dojo after. Don't screw around, okay?" Garen said.

"I know!" Grace was a bit speechless; she felt like she was the teenager, and Garen was the adult here.

"I have a gun!" she added.

"I know. I know." Garen brushed her off and got into the car. Grace did not know what else she could say, but she remembered how useless her pistol was when Garen jumped on her like a violent leopard, and she felt secured when she was with Garen.

"You should change your expression from time to time. You are young and cute, so why don't you at least try to smile?" Garen asked. He sat on the passenger seat and relaxed.

"Now try it, smile," Garen said.

Grace tried her best to smile, but she was not even sure if she was actually smiling.

"Never mind. My bad." Garen buried his face into one of his hands.

Grace took a deep breath and told herself not to get angry, but she really wanted to kick Garen in the face. She started the car, and they disappeared by the corner.

Kalidor and Ai Fei walked out of a fast food restaurant by the side, and he pouted his lips towards the direction where Garen disappeared.

"You saw that? Garen never shows anything off. No one knew he had such a pretty lady with him, and he also had a nice car. Damn... That's a million-dollar car," Kalidor said. He was a bit jealous; his parents would never give him money to buy such a car. He also saw how the cool beauty followed all of Garen's orders.

Kalidor turned back and looked at Ai Fei. She wasn't as pretty as the lady that was with Garen, causing anger to boil inside him.

PA!

Kalidor slapped Ai Fei's behind.

"Hurry up! Let's go home!" He was almost yelling.

Ai Fei did not say anything. She just followed Kalidor from behind. Kalidor's temper was getting worse and worse after he argued with his friends. Ai Fei thought she was attractive enough to Kalidor, but she was not sure about that anymore.

Ai Fei watched Garen and the lady leaving as she felt a lost. She was unsure whether she made the right choice, and she was also unsure whether all her efforts were worth it. She followed Kalidor down the street and disappeared by the corner.

It was night.

Garen sat in the car and Grace was driving. Silence filled the air, and the light from the streetlights brushed their faces in light. Their pace was slow, and even the carriages were faster than they.

As they drove into a relatively quiet street, someone suddenly appeared in the middle of the way and blocked their path.

"Someone is in front of us!" Grace said in a deep tone.

"It's one of them..." Garen opened his eyes and looked ahead through the window. There was a man standing in the middle of the road, and he looked thin. The man was wearing a grey-white coat, and his hair was short; he looked like a private detective. Grace stopped the car three meters before hitting him.

Garen opened the door and got off the car. After asking Grace to stay put inside the car, he walked straight towards the man. He noticed the golden earring on the man's right ear, and it looked the same as the one No.102 had, but the man covered the number with a piece of white cloth.

"Were you the one that killed No.102?" The man spoke first.

"I am here to represent the Golden Hoop, and I hope we can have a chat," he said. His voice was dry, and it sounded like he had not drunk water for a long time.

"What? I killed one of your members and you are just trying to have a chat with me?" Garen asked; he was surprised the man did not try to start a fight.

"Well, you can compensate us in a different way, I believe. We have no intention of making our relationship worse, and we already investigated the incident that happened in the Dolphin Antiques. It was our mistake." He raised his hand and apologized.

"Also, we believe that you and the detective are not good friends, since he left you behind at the Silversilk Castle," the man continued.

"True. There's no point in fighting each other," Garen said as he nodded.

"I come in peace. We don't really care about what happened before." The man straightened his back and clapped.

PAPA!

Several strong men walked out of the alley after hearing the signal. All of them had daggers or swords in their hands, and they were all laughing. Those men quickly surrounded Garen and his car.

"You can call me No.101. Although the organization asked me not to hurt you, No.102 was my best friend, and I decided to do a private test on you. I want to check if you are good enough for us to cooperate with you. Also, I want to know how you killed No.102." The man in coat smiled.

"Ah!" Garen heard Grace's scream from the car.

Garen saw that Grace was seized by two strong men, and they were moving towards the river. The other side of the river was apartment buildings, and the embankment was grey.

"What do you want?" Garen said in a cold tone as his eyes narrowed.

"I told you already. It's just a test," No.101 said while smiling.

"I don't like being tested like this," Garen turned around as he spoke in a light tone.

Grace screamed again as she reached the edge of the embankment; she was just one step away from falling to the river. Garen turned back and rushed towards Grace, but No.101 blocked his path.

"Move aside," Garen said.

"We will kill your girl if you fail the test, but you have to hurry. I am not sure how long they will keep her by the edge. A weak girl like her won't be able to handle the pressure for too long,"

No.101 smiled and said. He clapped again, and one of the men walked towards Grace with a dagger in his hand. He put down the dagger by a Sand Gull and slashed the air with his hand while laughing cruelly.

"Do what I say, otherwise, we will have to kill your beautiful girlfriend." No.101 laughed.

"I take it that the Golden Hoop doesn't really care about me," Garen said and laughed.

"I thought you guys were smarter than this. I guess I am too naive," he continued.

"Don't worry, Grace. I will avenge you if they decided to kill you," Garen said as he looked at Grace with eyes half-opened.

PONG!

Once these words were spoken, Garen suddenly attempted to seize No.101. His arm size doubled as he used the Strike Stance; it sounded like the air was slashed open. The veins on his hands were visible, and they seemed as big as an adult's head.

"Die!" The muscles on Garen's back moved towards his right arm like waves.

Chapter 47: White Eagle (1)

The ferocious force brought up a burst of wind. Before Garen's arm connected, the strong pressure from the move already squeezed the air out of No.101.

Garen's right arm seemingly grew a few inches as it swelled up. Like a mace, it crashed past.

Chi!

His claw slid past No.101's face.

No.101 snickered. He easily avoided this attack with a side movement.

"An attack with this speed, are you joking around with a kid?"

Garen withdrew his hand as his arm returned back to its original form. He stayed put and calmly stared past No.101.

On the edge of the embankment, the man who was holding a small blade slumped to the ground. Fresh blood slowly flowed out of his forehead, and a pendant in the shape of a book fell on top of his clothes.

"You bastard...!!" No.101's face darkened as he retracted his vision. "I guess I have no choice but to break the rules this time..."

He abruptly tore off his trench coat and threw it away, exposing the black vest underneath as well as his well-defined muscle lines.

With one hand vertically in front, and with the other hand's palm facing outwards, he slouched his back. He exhibited a strange style of combat pose.

"Oh? You practice martial arts too?" Garen expressed his surprise as he watched his opponent position himself. He noticed that his vertically erect right hand had an abnormal skin color—a faint copper red.

Bang! Bang!!

Suddenly, the sound of two gunshots came from the neighboring road. It was especially piercing to the ears on this quiet street at night.

No.101, after hearing the gunshot, peeked at his right. The expression on his face immediately changed, and he quickly relaxed his combat pose.

"Something's happening! Everyone, retreat!!"

The other strong men who surrounded Garen became nervous as well. One by one, they put back their knives and other weapons as they ran towards the neighboring road. They quickly disappeared in the little alleys.

No.101 coldly glared at Garen for one last time.

"I will come back for you."

He tipped his toes, picked up his trench coat, and swiftly disappeared into the alley like a shadowless grey bat.

Frowning, Garen watched the group of people depart before proceeding to relax his muscles.

"It's a shame that my speed is too slow. I could have gotten an opportunity to make a person stay this time."

He pulled up his collar and quickly walked to the edge of the embankment.

Clap.

He grabbed Grace's right hand, slowly lifted her up, then gently placed her onto the ground.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Thankfully, you scared off that group of people, or else we really would've gotten in big trouble." Grace was still shaken up. She glanced at the dead Golden Hoop member on the ground.

"I cannot believe that the Golden Hoop would try to make a move on me! I am my company's upper management! Master Garen, please excuse me for a minute. I have to go back and report this incident to the headquarters!" Grace's face turned cold.

"Even though Manuyllton Corporation is not as great as the Golden Hoop, but we are not pushovers either!"

"Alright, you should go." Garen nodded. "I have to go see what is actually going on. Just now, something lured them away. Be careful by yourself. It would be best if you arrange some people to protect you. What happened to your gun?"

Grace blushed. "Before I could get it out, I was attacked and grabbed from the back..."

"Be careful, I'll go find out what's going on." Garen couldn't help but laugh a little. "What happened to that aggressiveness from when we first met?" As if she was a child, Garen stroked her hair and pinched her cheeks. Then, he picked up the pendant and walked towards the dark alley.

Even without the transformation of his body, Garen was already more than 170 cm; his natural height made him taller than Grace by a little bit. The way he treated Grace seemed very natural, and both of them completely forgot about their actual ages.

Grace stood still and bit her lips as her cheeks turned even redder.

"I told you! Don't treat me like I'm a child!" She quickly squeezed into her car and took out her gun from her purse. She then turned on the engine and drove towards the company.

Garen walked along the sidewalk into the alley. Very soon, he heard sounds of fists pounding. Between each punch, someone whimpered and moaned.

"Catch him! Don't let him get away!"

"Carlo passed out! Goddammit, this guy's punches are strong!"

"Be careful of the gap! Don't give him any opportunity!"

A group of men shouted at each other; it seemed like they were trying to attack someone.

Garen stood in the shadows at end of the alley and looked in.

On the muddy road, a group of men from the Golden Hoop Organization surrounded two skinny youths. No.101 stood outside of the circle and watched the fight with a cold expression on his face. He remained alert of any noises around him.

On the ground were three to four adult men, all of whom seemed to have passed out from being punched in the head.

Garen gasped as he estimated the extent of the injuries these members received.

"This level of strength is similar to the amount I used when I first killed someone! Could it be that all these casualties were caused by these two children?"

He moved his gaze onto the two youths.

One was a boy, and the other was a girl. The boy was handsome, and the girl appeared innocent. They were only around 15 to 16 years old, similar to Garen. However, from the looks on their face, it was obvious that this was not the first dangerous situation they ran into.

The two of them wore white sportswear. Their backs were against each other, and their stances in proper boxing stance.

"My father will be here to save me soon!" The boy sneered out of his teeth. "He won't let you off easy!"

"Don't talk too much! Save some strength!" the girl said in a quiet tone. On her waist, a black gun was tucked away.

No.101 chuckled and speedily walked forward.

"Let me do the rest. You guys make sure he doesn't run away. This fella here is the White Eagle's son. We finally captured him after much work; we cannot let our effort go to waste."

He marched inside the circle and stood still. One hand vertically shot up as the other hand's palm faced outside. Then he slouched. He positioned himself in the same stance as before.

Faintly, Garen noticed that his right hand turned even redder than before. It was as if his blood was congested, and his veins would pop at any second.

"Kid, I cannot believe you dare to fight me. You're courting death! If any part of your body ends up paralyzed, don't blame me."

"Cut the crap! Make your move!"

The young boy's body remained straight as he interrupted his opponent.

Before he could finish talking, there was a snipping sound.

A red shadow dashed across his chest. and his white uniform was silently sliced open. A red slash ripped across his wheat-colored skin as blood started to spew.

After the red shadow faded, it reversed back as No.101's hand knife.

The boy's face whitened. When the red shadow dashed across just now, he sucked in air to tighten his chest. If he had reacted any slower, the knife would've cut open his stomach. However, because he inhaled too much oxygen too fast, he was having some difficulties breathing. His lungs felt like they were tearing apart.

"Silvica! Are you okay?" the girl asked in a panic. "Please be careful! He practices Red Hand Fist!"

"I'm okay. I dodged!" The boy, Silvica, coughed a few times as he intensely stared at No.101.

"I have dragged on long enough." No.101 positioned himself in the same stance again. "What I just did was a warning. Now, I will cripple your right arm!" His black pupils gradually turned cold as murderous intent flashed across his eyes.

Snip! Snip! Snip!

After three soft sounds, Silvica staggered backwards and quickly dodged two slashes from the hand knife. The third snip landed on his right arm, and red blood quickly dyed his white sportswear.

"Nice dodge. Let's try it again!" No.101 was getting angry. "Die!!"

His right hand violently shook, and, like a chopping knife, he aimed for the young boy's limbs. Within two seconds, he slashed four times.

With every slash, the speed increased, and only red shadows could be seen.

The two youths backed off even more.

Snip!

A street light made of stone was hit. With a bang, its concrete base was destroyed.

Another series of snips rang out. The boy's right leg could not dodge fast enough and was slashed open. He stumbled and could no longer stand up straight.

"Silvica!" the girl screamed out of worry.

Garen stood in the shadows; he was planning on stepping out, but he decided to draw his extended leg back.

"The White Eagle? Is that the guy with Dale Quicksilver?"

"If it's that guy, then it's a bit troublesome. I cannot let them see my real face."

He observed his surroundings and took a deep breath.

Bang!

Another punch landed on the right-side wall of the alley. A bowl-sized bulge instantly appeared as gigantic pieces of cement were shot off.

Garen grabbed a piece of cement and squeezed it, causing it turn into a handful of dust. He then slapped it on his face. Immediately after, his dusty face became unrecognizable.

"Who is it!" The party heard noises from the alley and questioned.

Garen slowly walked into the alley and observed the change in the situation.

During the one moment Garen did not pay attention, the young boy's left arm was hit. He was now supporting his entire body with just one unwounded leg. The young girl was trapped by another group of people, and the situation was unfavorable.

No.101 stood with his back against him.

Hearing the noise, No.101 turned his head and glanced at Garen.

"It's you. You want to involve yourself with this too?" Without waiting for Garen's answer, he suddenly laughed. "Since we're all here today, we might as well take care of all of you together. "

Bang!

The young girl on the side was kicked in her stomach. She wobbled a few steps back and was immediately hit from the back. She fell to the ground hard. Her face turned ashen as she struggled to breathe. The gun tucked in her pants had also shook loose in the process.

"Eve!" Silica screamed as he kneeled down on the ground with one knee.

No.101 turned around and marched towards Garen, completely ignoring the now weakened and defenseless young boy.

"You had such a good opportunity, yet you did not run away. Should I call you stupid, or should I call you an idiot? I have no idea why our boss sees you as valuable." He pointed at the young boy and girl who were still getting beaten up. "See this? This is what happens when you fight against the Golden Hoop. Even if they are the son and daughter of the White Eagle and Dale Quicksilver, they have to obediently be tortured by us."

Garen loosened his shoulders. Crisp bone cracking noises were emitted out of his body.

"You talk so much useless crap. Just fight me. As a gift for what happened before, I'll make sure you have a relatively comfortable death."

"That is exactly what I wanted to say." Before No.101's voice faded, he dashed towards Garen at an incredibly fast pace. The moment he was about to reach Garen, he twirled his foot and turned left for an upper cut.

Snip!

Garen felt a pinch of pain in his left arm, and the sound of his clothes being ripped open echoed out. He looked at the wound in disbelief. There was a red imprint on his skin.

Chapter 48: White Eagle (2)

"Such a sharp hand knife! My body has already reached the second stage of Explosive Fist Arts. From head to toe, my skin is rougher than a bull and is hard to pierce even with a dagger knife, but one move from his hand knife could leave a red imprint on my skin! This means, if he pierced at the same spot again, he could penetrate my defense!"

Garen was in shock. This attack was too fast, he could not react swiftly enough. He was blinded for one second, and the next thing he knew his left arm was hit.

When Garen looked at No.101 again, he already stepped back three meters and was staring at Garen coldly.

"Another speed type?" Garen's expression fell.

No.101 was actually the one who was really in awe. Unbelievably, his hand knife failed to cut through the opponent's skin.

"This level of defense! This level of Body-Hardening Technique! I have not encountered this for years! This person has a strong physique! I need to attack his vitals, or else he will not even feel an itch let alone feel pain."

"His speed is definitely not as fast as me. I could run around and test to see which area is his weak spot!"

After making a decision, No.101 again stood in his attack stance. He pushed himself forward with one foot and dashed toward Garen. His right hand, hand knife, instantly turned into a red shadow and disappeared before him.

Snip!

Garen's right arm was also hit. He extended his arm to grab the opponent, but he only grasped onto air.

A pinch on his back immediately followed. He was deeply stabbed.

"Die!" he bellowed. Both of his arms roused as his muscles expanded.

"Swing form!"

His two arms, like two elephant trunks, flung to the right side and formed into a rotation posture.

Hiss!

Garen circled on the same spot, but the two arms he was swinging failed to land. Below his feet, his boots scratched out a clear black circle.

The agitated air around them from the fight blew in all directions, forming a gentle breeze.

No.101 backed up another two meters. He had taken a short break before he threw himself forward again. The red shadow flashed and ruthlessly stabbed Garen's lower belly.

"I will find your weakness!!"

The hand knife slashed upward and ripped open Garen's clothes.

,

Bang!

Garen's two arms again failed to grasp onto anything. His vision blurred as the red shadow flickered. His lower belly was again pierced by the hand knife, and a wave of dull pain started to emerge.

"I'm hurt!" He could picture the damage on his lower belly. Even though it was not deep, his skin definitely tore.

"I must find a way to stop his speed! Or else it will be hard for me to win no matter how good I am at defense."

His thoughts were interrupted suddenly. His lower left arm felt a pinch of pain. He was hit again.

"F*ck!" Garen was getting angry, "If only I had practiced my Shot Form to a point where I could utilize it however I wish... you bastard, kill yourself!!!"

He viciously threw a punch.

Crack!

No.101 dodged. His fist hit a wooden board instead.

The wooden door from a closed shop on the side of the road was punched through. Yellow wooden dust spattered

everything.

Bam!!

Another loud noise, Garen missed again and instead smashed a rock wall. A bowl sized crack bulged in.

"Is running away like a bug the only thing you can do!! You goddamn monkey!" Garen yelled angry as he threw another punch at No. 101. He dodged easily by lowering his head.

Pain shot up his right wrist, Garen was getting even angrier.

"You goddamn gray fur monkey!"

Boom!

He missed a step and landed on the concrete, and instantly, a little hole formed. He swung both of his arms and hit the lamp post No. 101 was hiding behind.

Crack!

The thigh-ticked concrete lamp post shook after the Swing Form punch. From its center, thin cracks began to form and spread. Small chunks of concrete flung off the post.

Everyone around them was silenced. More than 10 of the Golden Hoop members were shivering like cicadas. Looking at Garen's bear like destructive behaviors, their legs felt weak.

A few of them were already hidden in obscure spots, ready to run away from this place.

The two youths who were still circled watched the fight between Garen and No.101 in awe.

"This person's physical abilities are too strong..." Silvica mumbled, "His muscle defense is horrifying. His body is completely fine after hitting a concrete post! This is terrifying!"

The girl Eve had secretly sat down beside the boy when the others were too busy being shocked.

"This person seems to be the rival of the Golden hoop. His strength and defense attributes are way too strong. He probably practiced some sort of Body Hardening Technique or other forms of Arts. Too bad his speed is slow, he cannot move fast enough to catch up with his opponent. We better hide for a while then run away when we see a chance."

Boom!

Another shop's metal iron door was hit and bulged in a round shape.

No.101 stepped back at lightning speed and distanced himself by two meters. His face was full of sweat, and blood was seeping out of the tip of his nose. It was scratched by a splattered cement piece.

His chest was violently moving up and down, and his lung was gasping for oxygen. His sweat was rolling into his eyes, but he was too afraid to wipe it off. He gazed at Garen in a deadly stare, terrified that the opponent would find a chance to attack.

"One punch!" His heart was pumping intensely, a reaction to his need of blood, "If he hits me with one punch!"

"I will die!"

No.101 concluded.

"What's wrong? Gray-furred monkey?"

Garen inhaled deeply and walked forward with a cold smile.

"Are you done already? But I haven't used up all my strength!"

His two fists bumped each other, creating a clashing sound similar to two pieces of wood hitting each other. It was as if his fists weren't made out of skin and bones.

Bang!

Suddenly, a gunshot reverberated through the night sky.

Everyone fell silent.

The boy and the girl covered their own mouths as they watched the situation unfold before them.

Members of the Golden Hoop were also observing the scene with a dumbfounded face.

No.101 had a cold expression on his face. He slowly let go of the silver gun in his hand. White smoke was still dancing around the muzzle.

"Sorry, I'm not merely a Martial Adept."

Garen lowered his head and stared at his chest. There, a clear and charred bullet was stuck in the left side of his chest where his heart was.

Snap!

He covered his wound with his hand, and his fingers buckled around the bullet.

A yellow bronze bullet fell to the ground, creating a soft noise.

Hiss...

Everyone held their breath one by one in astonishment.

"He... He blocked a bullet!" Silvica watched with his eyes and mouth wide open, "Did I see it wrong?!"

"No... No..." The girl Eve was also in shock, she had no idea how to react, "I have heard that Martial Adepts who have reached the peak stage of martial arts were not scared of guns. But..."

"You mean his martial arts skills have reached the peak!?"

"No, that's not it. This person's Body Hardening Technique is too horrifyingly strong!" Eve swallowed her saliva. Her voice was shaking because of how surprised she was.

"You... you bastard!!!" No.101's whole body was shuddering. His expression became twisted as he staggered back even more.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

Then it was just the clicks of an empty gun. There were no more bullets.

No. 101's face was pale. He still crazily pulled the trigger.

Garen looked down at the five holes in his chest. He flexed his muscles, and the four other bullets were squeezed out and fell to the ground.

"This is it."

He fiercely marched forward. After a dull sound, he flung forward, and with one punch, his fist landed on No.101, who was still pulling the trigger continuously.

Bam!

No.101's head exploded like a watermelon. His brains splattered out and formed a perfect fan shape behind him.

Because of that one second of distraction, No.101 wasn't able to utilize his speed. On top of that, he was already exhausted from the fight before, he did not have enough explosiveness and was therefore knocked out with one punch.

"He... he exploded!"

A member of the Golden Hoop was shaking from head to toe. He stepped backward.

"Ah!!!" everyone screamed.

Every member of the Golden Hoop scattered and ran away.

The girl and boy watched every moment of the fight. They were in complete disturbance from the bloody scene before them.

"Don't look."

A giant hand gently covered their eyes.

Garen withdrew his fist and calmly looked at No.101 who was on the ground.

"I killed someone again."

This was not his first time killing someone.

After his first accidental kill, he felt like his view on life became foggier and foggier.

"Every time I see those around me with soft necks and other weak body parts, I realized that if I'm not careful, I can gently squeeze, and a life will fade away. Humans have been living so peacefully in such weak shells. Just like ants, even though they are weak, they still have a division of labor."

He could feel that there was something strange happening to him.

"Young man, that was not true martial arts!"

A deep voice appeared from the side.

Garen turned his face and saw a pair of clear black eyes.

"Your fist techniques, they have entered the demonic path ."

It was a healthy looking young man with golden locks. His short hair was like a burning gold flame, prancing in the night wind.

The young man was wearing all white. His two hands covered the children's eyes, and he was staring at Garen intensely and calmly.

"Demonic path?" Garen froze.

He looked at No.101's headless corpse.

"Someone did once say to me that my martial arts have diverged from the righteous path. But what is the righteous path? What is the demonic path? Who draws the line between them?"

"To pursue strength unscrupulously is the representation of demonic." The blonde man turned the children around and stood up, "Martial arts were a terrifying murder technique created so humans could fight against creatures that were stronger!"

"It was not meant to be used between the same species! It was not meant to hurt and kill species of your own!"

"I was defending myself," Garen composed himself and said softly.

"But you had no need to kill him! You could've just wounded him so you could control him!" The girl Eve suddenly turned around and screamed.

"Eve! Don't anger him!" Silvica shakily grabbed the girl's arm out of fear.

"The martial art you used was created purely with the intention of murdering others. Who is your teacher?" the blonde man asked.

Garen did not answer. He simply stared at the three of them then walked into the alleyway he came from before disappearing into the darkness.

The blonde man observed the scene around him. Suddenly, his gaze froze when he saw the concrete lamp post that was almost broken into two.

"This fist art... Behemoth Gate!"

An image appeared in his mind. He suddenly remembered the silhouette of the devious and horrifying woman he encountered a couple years back. The woman's naked back had white tiger tattoos that seemed to be roaring. The tattoo was so vivid it was as if the white tiger was going to lunge in his face.

"In the future, don't provoke that person!" the young man returned to reality and whispered to the two children.

Dawn.

Garen was strolling alongside the street next to the river wearing his black coat.

On his left, sounds of river colliding against the bank could be heard. The midnight wind blended itself with the gloomy surroundings; one cannot help but to feel as if winter was just around the corner.

Garen had his hands inside the pockets of his pants while strolling; the coat masking the torn shirt that he was wearing inside. He unbuttoned his shirt and looked down on his chest, only to find the red mark on his exposed skin slowly fading away.

His hands reached to his stomach. Still can't shake off the pain.

At the corner in front of the street, an old lady appeared in her gray gown, gently pushing her cart. On her cart stood a cylinder-shaped black container, and on the container's surface were the words: 2 yuan milk.

A girl in a thick white fur coat rushed over to the cart. She took out some money and gave it to the old lady. In exchange, she left with warm milk in between her palms.

Garen tightened his shirt due to the decreasing temperature around him. He too hurried towards the old lady.

"Can I have one please?"

"Of course," The old lady answered. Her face wrinkled with age, so was her skirt, but she looked surprisingly neat. She took a small yellow cup from under her cart and put it under the container. She poured the milk into the cup and passed it to Garen.

He gave the old lady two yuan, carefully holding the cup in his hands, and headed off to the arc just by the corner. The billboards at the each side of the closed shop had coincidentally formed an enclosure that prevented the wind from blowing onto Garen.

Garen laid his back against the wall, looking at the milk cart that was going further away from him. Every now and then, residents came out of their houses to buy milk from the old lady. She handed them their drinks, they handed her the money, and she continued her journey.

The scene of him bursting No. 101 with one blow recurred in his mind.

"I've murdered again..." Garen closed his eyes, seemingly stuck in recollecting his thoughts. "I was born with a talent that none others have: the ability to swiftly cross the gap others spent years to build. But is it a blessing or a curse? Because of this, I have no progress in sculpting my heart and soul."

"Abruptly increasing strength, causing my desires to be set loose and spiral out of control... Is this what I'm facing? Am I going down the righteous path or the demonic path?"

Coming back from his senses, he immediately discontinued his thoughts. He took a sip of the warm milk, the vapor from the drink steamed onto his face. The rich aroma of the milk seeped itself into his nostrils and left him feeling oddly satisfied.

"The fight with Golden Hoop 101... It was obvious that my speed could not match him, but my strength and defenses were enough to endure his hits. It didn't matter how many blows he laid on me, one blow from me was enough to seal the deal... Which was also one of the perks of strength-based fighters. Even then, my combat techniques are still not up to class. If my techniques were at a certain level, I'm confident that I'm able to strike first no matter how swiftly he moves. Until I'm certain I'm able to face these types of opponents with ease.. " Garen concluded while taking another sip from his milk.

"It seems as though the choice I made to strengthen my body first was right. No matter how fast a person is, a bullet is all that's needed to end a battle. This type of approach is safer, to say the least. Too bad I'm still fighting at the basic level. I still need to focus on solidifying a general move set before moving on."

He crumpled the cup and threw it into a nearby trash bin after finishing his milk.

"Now, I'm simply strengthening my body and throwing it onto my opponent to see what happens. Things will be different, though, when my combat skills mature."

Garen walked out from his hiding spot and headed towards the stone bridge. After crossing it, it took another ten minutes for Garen to reach his house at Bluetree Street.

From this point on towards the whole area within Bluetree Street was considered as the suburbs.

Ding-a-ling...

A bell rang from afar, signaling that the clock had struck ten.

"It's ten already?" Knowing this, Garen hastened his pace. The hills were especially empty during the night, except for the occasional carriage and cars along the road. It looked as though no one had ever set foot around here during the night.

After coming out from an intense battle, Garen was exceptionally relaxed, having this silent night to accompany him.

He walked without a worry along the main street, knowing that no one knew who he was and, naturally, will not have any intentions towards him. If it weren't a scheme specifically set against him, normal people would be just like chicks on his palm if they went up against him.

Over at the stone bridge, a few drunkards sat on the floor boasting about their stories. A sharp smell of alcohol ran up to Garen's nostrils as he passed by.

Garen had one of his hands on the stone bridge's rail. The cool rough surface of the cement that he felt from his touch transmitted into an image that was projected in his mind. Suddenly, he felt some pain surging from his chest to his abs.

Garen was surprisingly calm because he knew it was the impact from the bullet that caused the internal pain.

He tore off his tattered shirt effortlessly and threw it into the trash bin at the side. He only wore his coat cover his body as he made haste towards the direction of his house.

Garen didn't even get far before a white carriage appeared coming towards his direction. The carriage made a sharp U-turn on the main street and followed him slowly. The carriage window slowly wound down, exposing Grace with her tired, yet emotionless face.

"I have gotten the permission for the application. Now, regardless if it's the Golden Hoop, if they set foot in our territory, they must follow the rules. They must give a clear explanation on why they ambushed us now," she whispered.

Garen jogged along beside the carriage. "101 died," he said calmly.

"Died?" Grace glanced Garen for a second and notice that he was showing no emotion. She immediately understood when she saw the cement powder on his face. "I understand. I will handle it."

"I received some intelligence this time when I went back to the company. The Golden Hoop dared to order some of their henchmen to kidnap the son and daughter of Dale Quicksilver and the White Eagle. The current status of their children is still unknown. It is obvious there are some motives behind this action."

Garen regained his breath before speaking, "I've already saved the two children. Too bad they weren't grateful."

Grace was stunned by his reply. She did not expect so much to have happened when she was not around.

"Is it... Did they see your face?" Her eyes fixated on the cement powder on Garen's face.

"Supposedly no... But still, she is the daughter of Dale Quicksilver. She can easily see through the disguise. She is indeed a tough one." Garen recalled the moment the little girl stood up out of nowhere and questioned his expression.

"Right, do you know how the factions divide themselves in the martial arts community?" he added.

"The division of the sects?" Grace was puzzled. "I'm not particularly sure about that, but from what I've heard it is separated into two groups: the official ones that train accordingly to build their physique and mentality; and the unofficial ones who train people to morph themselves into a human weapon to take lives."

"Is that true?" Garen's eyes light up suddenly. "Then, do you know anyone well-known sects that train using the unofficial way?"

"Give me a sec..." Grace frowned. She went silent for a moment before continuing, "Your master is one of them. There are a few martial artists inside the province that follows this philosophy. It has quite an impact on the underground community there."

"It seems that they are quite accepted. What about the martial artists that trained formally?" Garen asked.

"Almost similar, besides the fact that they don't dwell in the underground community, they are quite in common with the unofficial ones. Didn't your master or senior mention anything about this?"

"I'm heading back first. Be careful when going back, Grace."

"Relax, I've gathered enough human resources to deal with this situation." A killing intent could be seen in Grace's eyes as she continued, "I even have the police department on my side. This time I will give the Golden Hoops an unforgettable lesson!"

Garen saw the determination from Grace's eyes so he didn't bother to continue. Garen passed by the village's main gate and saw the old guard watching him. The guard then scribbled on a piece of paper, faced down.

Before going up the stairway, he heard sounds of children crying coming from above, as well as a hoarse male voice coming from the record player.

Garen skipped a few stairs and got to his floor in no time. The hallway was dark and almost pitch black, so Garen had to move slowly to avoid bumping into anything or anyone. He reached the door, took out the key, and inserted it into the keyhole.

Ka-chak

The doorknob unlocked. The inside was dark and silent.

Garen closed the door softly and changed his shoes before entering the living room. From the corner of his eyes, he spotted a shadow sitting on the couch. He could barely make out the shape of a human under the low lighting

Garen paused, before slowly realizing the shadow was of his sister.

"Ying Er? What are you doing sitting here?"

Ying Er sat silently on the couch facing down; her expression shrouded in the dark. The only light source was the faint light coming from the opposite building, shining through the window onto her.

Garen noticed that her sister wore a black high-waist skirt with a dark colored bow on her head. She even wore a pair of thick stockings underneath her skirt. She sat unmoved on the couch, without replying.

Ever since he came to this world, Garen has always cared for his sister. Judging from his sister's personality, he knew something was up.

He then shifted himself and sat beside his sister on the couch.

"What's up? What happened today? Aren't you going to the Jaderipple Lake with your friends tomorrow?"

Grace only replied after what looks like an eternity.

"I'm not going tomorrow."

"What happened?" Garen frowned. For Garen, he always thought that the world was different inside and outside the house. To him, home was a place where he could free himself from all his worries. He could only be himself when he was with his innocent sister who only knew how to treat him well.

Plus, Ying Er was the last one he wished to hurt.

"It's nothing, stay out of it!" Ying Er turned her head away. "I'm just a little bit tired that's all."

Garen grinned, stretched his hands out to both sides of his sister's cheek, and pulled.

"Ah... Owh. What are you doing!?" Ying Er erupted. She tried to pull Garen's hands away from her cheeks but despite her best efforts, her struggles were ineffective.

"Don't worry so much when you're inside the house. Take some rest. I'm sure after a good night's rest you'll be fine." Garen let go of his hands. "Don't forget you still have me, Pa, and Ma in the house."

"Do you want me to kill you!?" Ying Er stood, punching and kicking Garen in a completely arbitrary manner. Nonetheless, she didn't exert too much force to prevent hurting Garen by accident.

"You shouldn't look down on your brother," Garen smirked, steadying his body to let Ying Er hit him. "Are you tickling me by any chance?"

"Gahhhh!!!" Ying Er was truly angered now. "It seems as though you won't know wrath if I don't use my true power!"

Thump

She threw a heavy punch at Garen's face.

"Hey! Not the face!" Garen was caught off guard by his sister. He quickly avoided his sister's incoming punches, dug his head in between his arm, and hid somewhere in the living room.

Ying Er followed closely behind him, chasing and trying to beat him. Both of them made a fuss in the living room.

After quarreling for a while, Ying Er was finally exhausted. She then dropped bum first onto the couch.

"Huff... It has only been months and already your body has grown bigger. What do you eat every day? It's absurd!" She caressed her fists. Garen felt nothing, yet her fists were red with bruises

"I told you I'm practicing martial arts. I'm even a formal disciple of a master. I'm different from amateurs like you." Garen purposely showed off his proud face to his sister.

"You... are really getting on my nerves!" Ying Er felt a sudden urge to give her brother more beatings. She inhaled deeply, suppressing her urges. "Speaking of which, you had been gone all day for weeks now. What have you been doing outside? Did you found a job outside because it's the holidays now?"

Garen scooted over to his sister's side. "Nothing much, I usually jog around evening, right? Plus, I need to train some of my basic techniques at the dojo. It's normal if I came home late."

"It's not good if you come home too late." Ying Er said, pouting her lips, "And I heard a rumor about you and Ai Fei in school..."

"I swear I'm innocent..." Garen was obviously in a predicament. He then started giving a detailed explanation to his sister about what had happened.

Both of them cuddled up on the couch, chatting away. By the time they came to their senses, it had been two hours past midnight.

Ying Er sat still on the couch, without any intention of going into her room. It could be seen from her face that she was tired. She sneaked a yawn when Garen wasn't paying attention.

Chapter 50: The Fundamentals (2)

"Are you sleepy? You can go to bed if you want," Garen said. He wanted to go sleep, but his sister was not tired at all. Garen rarely saw Ying Er under the weather, so he decided to stay with her.

"I am not sleepy at all, I will go to bed later. Are you sleepy?" Ying Er said. She sat beside Garen and put her head on Garen's shoulder. She could feel Garen's muscles against her arm, and she felt safe staying beside him.

"Do you have other plans if you are not going tomorrow?" Garen asked. It was rare for them to sit beside each other and talk for so long.

"Can't I just stay at home?" Ying Er said. After thinking for a moment, she then asked, "Or take me to your dojo, I want to watch you guys practicing the skills! Am I welcome there?"

"Nope." Garen answered without thinking.

"You...!" Ying Er looked irritated again.

"Don't! It's not my rule, and you know I can't show you the Secret Arts." Garen explained quickly, and he did not want Ying Er to get angry again.

"That's true, but how about after the practice? I went to the dojo once and I heard there was a pretty lady driving you there every day. Is that true?" Ying Er asked, and she had a forced smile on her face.

"Well..." Garen did not expect to go to the White Cloud Dojo alone, and she even asked someone there about him. It looked like she already knew about Grace, and it gave him a bit of headache. He knew Ying Er liked him, but it wasn't due to them being siblings; it was because of something else.

"Fine. I am tired now. I'm going to sleep." Ying Er stood up and walked towards her bedroom.

Garen was not sure how to best explain this, because his relationship with Grace was all about underground business. He did not want Ying Er to get involved and wanted his sister to live a normal life.

Ying Er stood by the door of her bedroom, turned back around, and said, "You are old enough to make decisions by yourself. I think I put too many restrictions on you."

She did not wait for Garen to respond and just slammed the door shut. Garen shook his head and felt a bit speechless. He decided he would go to bed after brushing his teeth.

PA

"Straighten your fists! If your stance is wrong, you will lose your balance. If you keep going without correcting your stance, your knees won't be able to handle all the pressure, and they could be damaged permanently," Farak said.

Senior Brother Farak was standing beside Garen in the Martial Colosseum, and he was correcting Garen's basic stances. The two looked like an adult and a kid standing beside each other.

Garen grew taller and stronger recently, but he still looked small comparing to Farak.

Farak was half-naked, his skin was tanned by the sun, and his muscles were hard like rock. Garen could see the veins on Farak's skin, with a white tiger tattoo just like the one Senior Sister had, but around his chest where Senior Sister's was around her back and arms.

"Besides all the basic attack and defense techniques in Martial Arts, there are also basic training techniques. I've told you that these training techniques were developed by the masters, and with these training techniques, you will learn how to use your force without hurting your muscles or bones, how to maximize the potential of your skills, and how to minimize the damage you take. Countless senior

members improved the training techniques based on their own experiences, and those techniques are the secret of building your body." Farak's gray hair was all over his shoulders, and he looked wild but gentle with his white pants.

"Garen, remember, you must perfect this form. You should make sure your center and your stance are stable. Don't make any mistakes. You need to be steady, and solid, like a mountain!" Farak patted Garen's back as Garen was practicing the forms of White Cloud Combat Arts.

"If your form is not perfect, your knees and shoulders will be damaged by the stress." Farak added.

"Yes! Senior Brother!" Garen nodded.

"Some beginners focus too much on the core theories thought they would be able to create their own skills. They thought that their own creations were much better than the traditional techniques, some even said the skills the beginners created were not effective at all without the fundamentals, but that's only half-correct." Farak watched Garen practicing the form, and Garen looked like an elephant that had lifted its feet.

"In a real fight, the free-style combat is actually very effective, but using those skills will damage their bodies. If you want to hurt others with those skills, you will have to hurt yourself first. Martial Artists like these won't live long, though they are good at fighting others," Farak said, and he started to practice the Elephant Form as well.

"Forms will change with the development of Martial Arts. The forms from the Mammoth Secret Technique and Behemoth Gate you are practicing are new. The Master already improved them, and you need to find the most comfortable stance by yourself while not making any mistakes. You should not let others break your stance easily."

Farak crossed his arms, and raised them in front of his chest. He leaned forward a bit and bent his knees a little. One of his feet was out in front, and the other was placed behind. Farak's stance looked unbreakable.

"Human bodies are different from one another, and you need to figure out what suits you the most, then you will have your own perfect stance," Farak said. Garen nodded, and his eyes were half closed.

He imagined himself as a mammoth lifting its forefeet in the air, but he realized he was still not steady enough.

"Keep making minor corrections. Don't just imitate others. Their stances are developed for themselves, and you still need to find the stance that suits your own body." Garen heard Farak's voice again.

"Understood!" Garen started to adjust his stance again.

"Gates with long histories all have their own stances," Farak said, and he moved to the front of Garen.

"Besides building your body and helping you reach your optimum state, the stances also have another central role: to fight and to kill." Farak said.

"Fight and kill?" Garen asked.

"Yes. All the stances were created for the same purpose. To help you use your combat techniques faster and easier."

"Every Gate has their own combat techniques, and that's the reason why the stances are different from one Gate to another. With proper stancing, you will be able to use your skills easier, and your opponent will have a harder time trying to figure out your combos, so you need a stance that can help you unleash skill combos that will fit into any combat situation.

"Alright," Farak said as he patted Garen's shoulders, "let's give the stance a test."

"Your Four Forms are pretty good already, and you should be able to use them well. Come here," Farak said. Garen nodded and opened his eyes. He then followed Farak to a wider space.

Using his Mammoth Stance, he said with a light tone, "Attack me. Use any skill you want."

"Sure." Garen did some preparation and stared at Farak calmly.

"Ha!" Garen yelled, and he used an overhand punch.

PA

Farak waved his left hand, and redirected Garen's attack towards the side. Garen was going for Farak's waist, but missed his punch after it was deflected.

Garen did not give up. He kicked out towards the front and used a third of his strength, aiming at the gap between Farak's arms. He suddenly felt his ankle ache, and his right leg was caught by Farak's arms.

"Yoink!" Farak imitated the sound of bone breaking, and he moved his arms a bit. He sounded a little cruel.

"There goes your right foot. It will be broken in half," Farak said and released Garen's leg. He returned to the Mammoth Stance again.

"With this stance, I will be able to defend attacks from most of the angles, the only problem is attacks from the rear, but most Martial Artists have this problem. Remember, never show your enemies your back!

"A good Martial Artist will never show his back to the enemy no matter what happens!" he added.

"Understood." Garen nodded. He knew Farak was speaking from his own experience.

Farak stood straight, smiled, and said, "Most of the time, you have to try it yourself after you know the theory. If you don't try it yourself, you won't be able to understand it well, and you won't be able to use in real fights. I suggest you try it when it's safe, and help your body memorize it."

"Senior Brother, what do you mean 'try it'?" Garen asked.

"Go to the Stage Exam. You will see many different styles in the Amateur Stage Exam, and you can practice what you learned there." Farak blinked his eyes and asked, "Your Explosive Fist Arts is good enough for defending, right?"

"You... know about that?" Garen was surprised and asked.

"Yeah. You don't need to hide it. We all know, otherwise the Master wouldn't have let you do whatever you want. Your talent is the best among us, and we wonder how strong you will become in the future." Farak smiled and patted Garen's shoulders.

Farak, Senior Sister, and Junior Brother all knew Garen was extremely talented, and they were willing to see him improve. They never hid anything from him, and they tried to teach all the things they knew to Garen.

The stronger Garen was, the stronger the Mammoth Gate would be. Though Farak did not really like Senior Sister, they were in a competing relationship and they sometimes argued. However, they would never engage in a real fight. They learned from the same Master so there was no point in them fighting each other. They all wanted the Mammoth Gate to be better, and they would never show weaknesses to the true enemies.