

Mystical Journey

Chapter 9: Change

Garen calmed down and stood there listening to the conversation between the two. It was almost noon and was getting brighter outside.

Uncle Tyr finally stood up and saw the customer to the door.

“Uncle, I have to go now,” Garen said while taking his scarf off the clothing stand.

“It’s still very early. You can leave after lunch if you want,” Tyr said, turning back to Garen.

“You rarely come to visit and Lombarth will be back shortly. You could have a chat with him,” he continued.

“Maybe next time. Ying Er is waiting for me at home.” Garen smiled.

“I promised her that I will be back for lunch,” he added.

“Fine... Stay safe.” Tyr chuckled. He patted Garen’s head several times.

“I will,” Garen said.

Garen put on his shoes and was about to leave. Suddenly, some warm paper was shoved into his right palm. It was a stack of hundred dollar bills. Garen turned back and saw his smiling uncle.

“Take it. I haven’t seen you in a long time. It’s just some pocket money. Make sure you work hard in school,” Tyr said.

“I will. Thank you, Uncle. Goodbye.” Garen smiled and bowed in gratefulness.

“Come and visit me more often whenever you are free,” Tyr said.

“I will.”

Garen said goodbye and walked down the stairs. He went back to the first floor, where he saw a blond boy wearing a tight white suit standing in the middle of the hall as a torrent of people walked past him. The boy was by a sculpture of a white angel. He saw Garen coming down the stairs and raised his eyebrows.

“Garen, get over here.” The boy waved one of his hands while holding a white ball in the other. He dribbled it as he chatted with a black-haired girl who was next to him.

Garen knew the boy. It was his cousin, Lombarth, the son of Tyr. He never liked Lombarth and hated his cousin’s self-centered and arrogant personality. Garen scowled and walked toward Lombarth, stopping when he stood about two meters away.

“What did my dad say to you?” Lombarth leaned toward Garen and asked with a light tone.

“Nothing special. He asked me how I was doing recently. I have to go if you have nothing important to say,” Garen answered softly.

“Why are you nervous? I am your elder. Could it be that my words are annoying you?” Lombarth raised his eyebrows again and looked at the girl beside him. He felt like he was challenged by his younger cousin.

“I am leaving if you really have nothing else to say. It is lunchtime and Ying Er is waiting for me at home.” Garen did not want to waste his time on Lombarth, so he walked toward the exit. He felt a bit speechless.

“Hey! I am your elder! Stop right there!” Lombarth yelled angrily.

“Lombarth, do you really want to do this?! You don’t want to mess with me!” Garen turned back and frowned as he raised his voice. Although the old Garen was weak, the new Garen would not back down from a situation like this.

“Ha... How dare you speak to me like that? I will teach you what respect is!” Lombarth suddenly tried to slap Garen’s face. He applied martial force to his palm. The strength of the slap was doubled with the use of his combat techniques.

Lombarth, with a roar, motioned toward the left side of Garen’s face.

Pa

Garen used his palm to block the attack, their palms colliding with each other in mid air. Their strength level was similar, neither had an advantage during the exchange.

Garen was a bit surprised that his playboy cousin knew any martial arts, but he himself had already reached the first level of professional martial artistry. He applied more force into his palm and angrily pushed it toward Lombarth.

Unable to handle this counterattack, Lombarth took the hit and toppled sideways. He crashed into a middle-aged man beside him and he flushed in embarrassment. Lombarth looked at his right hand, which was already swelling. It hand burned with a fiery pain and he could no longer raise it.

“Good... Garen... You are pretty good!” Lombarth said and looked at the girl beside him again.

“You just wait, I’ll make you pay for this!” he yelled.

Garen decided not to waste any more time. He knew that although Lombarth probably learned some martial arts growing up, that there was no way Lombarth could fight him. Garen had bitterly trained himself with incredible fervor. Even if Lombarth wanted to send someone else to beat Garen up, Tyr would never allow such a thing to happen.

“Save yourself some time. I can’t imagine how disappointed my uncle will be if he sees you fight like this,” Garen said as he exited the hallway through a small wooden door. From behind, he could still hear Lombarth crazily yelling curses at him.

Garen returned to the district by the way he came. There were more people on the main road than before and he spent about half an hour getting back to Bluetree Street.

He entered the district; the fourth building on the right with a red roof was his home. There was an old gentleman walking down the stairs slowly with a cane in his hand. The stairs were narrow, so Garen stood to the side and waited for the gentleman to exit the building.

The gentleman gave him a friendly smile, but did not say anything. He walked straight toward the parking lot on the right. Though the gentleman needed to support himself with the cane, he was walking carefully at his own pace. His crisp black suit gave him a solemn aura as he walked away.

Garen withdrew his gaze and stepped onto the stairs. He went up the dim stairway and heard footsteps from above, and he peaked through a gap in the stairway. He saw Ying Er walking upstairs slowly, it seemed she was carrying something very heavy.

“Ying Er!” he yelled.

“Garen? You’re back? Come help me. I bought a bunch of white pears.” Ying Er heard the voice, put the groceries down onto the ground, and peeked through the stairway back at Garen. She was still wearing her black dress, the hem of her skirt barely covering her thighs.

“Coming.” Garen started to move, but from his angle, he could see something white through the black tights under Ying Er’s skirt. He started to blush.

“You fool, stop acting like Lombarth!” Ying Er realized where he was staring at and started to blush as well. She immediately closed her legs tightly.

“You should’ve been careful in the first place!” Garen tried to explain and ran toward her. He held the wooden yellow basket above his chest, holding about 20 fist-sized white pears in it.

“Am I not being careful?!” Ying Er yelled with arms akimbo.

“Let’s talk after we get back home!” She realized she was being too loud and looked around to make sure that no one else was there.

Garen shrugged his shoulders and stepped up the stairs again. Ying Er opened the door with her keys and they quickly entered their home. Garen put the basket down from his hands and ran away after changing his shoes.

BANG

Ying Er slammed the door closed, and raised her fists while still blushing.

“You are dead, Garen!” she yelled and rushed toward Garen. She was faster than Garen, even after his hard training

Ying Er started to chase Garen in the living room. After about ten seconds, Garen was tripped by Ying Er and fell down hard to the floor

‘She knows intermediate level martial arts... and it’s even trained using some Secret Art.’ Garen thought while staring speechlessly at Ying Er. Even though he did not use any martial arts and wasn’t being serious, he could still tell how strong his sister was just by watching her moves. Ying Er’s martial arts were more about speed and dexterity, while the White Cloud Dojo’s arts were more about bursts of strength. Ying Er had probably already reached the intermediate level.

Different dojos had different focuses when developing their basic martial arts. Some focused more on strength, some focused more on bursts of damage, some on agility, and some had buffs to stamina, dodging skill, or innate resistances. Their basic martial arts had different names, but were just used for common fights, unlike Secret Arts.

Secret training arts referred to special ways of exercising the body, and different dojos usually developed different versions. For example, the basic martial arts from White Cloud Dojo was not its secret arts, it was just a strength burst technique. Compared to basic martial arts, secret training arts would only be passed down to the true disciples. If these disciples kept exercising their bodies with the secret training arts, most of their attributes, such as strength, burst, agility, resistance, and flexibility, would be constantly increasing.

Garen heard that the disciples of White Cloud Dojo showed their strength during various competitions and that their secret training arts were probably developed to increase their strength. Ying Er’s speed was ridiculously fast, she had probably used some sort of special training arts to attain this level of speed.

Garen stopped musing and turned his head to the side. From his previous angle, he could again clearly see what was under his sister’s skirt. Garen could see Ying Er’s long, slim legs through her sheer black tights.

“Of all the people to take after, why do you decide to be so much like Lombarth!” Ying Er was breathing heavily as she kicked Garen in the chest. Garen’s coat was thick, so Ying Er was not worried about him getting too hurt.

Garen blinked his eyes and suddenly fiercely pulled at her feet with his hands.
PONG

Ying Er fell on his body and they both groaned in pain.

Garen could smell the girl’s fragrance and her soft breast pushed at the area above his chest. Garen somehow felt a little excited.

“Come on!” Garen stood up while rubbing his stomach.

“What are we having for the lunch?” he asked.

Ying Er was not paying attention to Garen’s movement and accidentally fell on his chest. She was going to blame Garen, but she started to blush again after realizing she was right above his chest. Garen was much stronger than before and she could feel his chest muscles. Unlike the last time he was tripped by his sister, Garen acted like he did not care instead of getting angry. Ying Er felt surprised after hearing Garen ask her about lunch and she hesitated for a second before standing up.

“I made sweet bean cake, onion pancakes, and coconut with sweet melon soup,” Ying Er answered as she brushed some dust off her dress.

Chapter 10: No title

Garen gradually noticed the change in his sister. His adult consciousness allowed him to sense that Ying Er treated him slightly different; she seemed to take his every word very seriously. She was very careful with her actions when they were playing tag earlier, using only a very slight amount of force, as if she was worried that she might hurt him. That was how he managed to sneak an attack on her and take her down in the end.

“Have some lunch first. Making breakfast and lunch, going out to buy fruits, it’s been a tough day for you, Ying Er.” He reached out a hand to pinch his sister’s cheek. There seemed to be much less acne and freckles on her red face recently; it felt soft and smooth to the touch.

“Ugh, you!” Ying Er slapped away Garen’s hand. “Did you take the wrong medicine? Since when did you know how to show concern towards someone else?” She quizzically looked at Garen. Although she usually tried very hard to pretend as if she wasn’t close with her brother, in fact, she was constantly concerned about everything related to Garen in secret.

Garen's heart skipped a beat. He realized that he had gone slightly overboard with his change in character; he immediately retracted his hand without saying another word. "Can't I have grown up? Do you have to act all shocked? Come on, let's eat."

After a rushed meal, the brother and sister duo worked together to wash the dishes, then quickly went back to their respective bedrooms, both seeming slightly off. Ying Er kept feeling as if there was a gust of wind under her skirt ever since she was accidentally exposed, and she constantly felt uneasy in front of Garen. They were step-siblings after all; a relationship built through the fusion of two single-parent families was not considered to be blood-relations.

Garen, on the other hand, was rushing back to his room to further ponder about Attribute Enhancements.

Standing by the window, he quietly stared at the pale red Attribute data in the lower part of his field of vision.

"If skills can indeed be enhanced, I will be able to participate in the tournament within a short period of time and win the large prize pool if I enhance my archery or sword skills. My only worry is that it would stick out like a sore thumb if a student that seldom practices suddenly participates and wins the award. Putting aside what others might think, Ying Er knows my situation well. She is aware that I don't usually practice my archery or sword skills." He rested his hand against the glass window pane.

"If that's the case, this idea with archery and sword skills won't work. But what about the White Cloud Dojo? I've always been attentive to the Dojo's training. If I dove into the tournament, people would assume I have steadily accumulated the skills through observation, and it would attract less attention. Moreover, the Dojo isn't the Academy; it's an independent party. It wouldn't attract much attention even if something unusual or exceptional happened there. It's just that the prize money is a little on the low side... I could approach the Dojo and inquire whether there are any inter-dojo tournaments. Those offer much more prize money than internal tournaments! Now that's an idea!"

He lightly grazed his hand over the surface of the glass; it was smooth and cool to touch. "If that's the case, I'll pay a visit to the Dojo this afternoon and ask a trainer about the general situation."

After resting in his room for a bit, Garen quietly walked out. When he walked past his sister's room, he saw Ying Er lying on the bed, cheeks rosy and sleeping soundly, and decided not to bother her.

He gently put on his scarf and coat, then changed his shoes and walked out the door. Walking out of his cul-de-sac and grasping the 300 dollars from his uncle in his pocket, Garen hailed a black carriage and stepped into it.

"To the White Cloud Dojo."

“It’s ten dollars yeah?” the driver turned around to confirm.

“Yup, just go.” Garen nodded in consent.

Sitting in the carriage and looking out the right window, he could see buildings with pale yellow walls swiftly pass by one after another. A few minutes later, after turning a corner, the streets gradually became deserted. The previous scene was replaced by solemn, gray buildings. Shops with round arch doorways formed a row, all of them selling clocks and sundries.

Garen looked closely at the Skills section in his field of vision.

Fighting skills: Amateur. Archery skills: Amateur. Sword skills: Amateur.

“If I can pass the assessment and train in the Secret Arts of White Cloud Dojo, I can enhance my physical quality. Couple that with my Attribute points to concurrently increase my power, the effect of my training would be exponential compared to that of my peers!” His wine-red eyes narrowed slightly, indicating a trace of anticipation.

“If I keep using Attribute points to enhance a single skill, I wonder what the maximum level of increase would it reach. It’s been said that different people have different talents, leading to great disparities in the effect of training in the Secret Arts. This could help conceal the fact that I’m enhancing my skills with Attribute points. This way, even if the level of the training method is slightly inferior, it would still be able to match up to top-level training methods. Now, my only hope is that Attribute points can enhance training methods like they enhance personal qualities.

Recalling whom he could inquire with at the Dojo, Garen could only come up with three people: Sharmilla, Luo Ya, and the girl with short and silver hair that he trained with.

There was one that left a deep impression though: the best in their batch, Erwin. He would always achieve high rankings with overwhelming skills. In addition to that, he had a mild attitude, was very humble and was well-brought-up. If there was someone with a hundred percent chance of being a Formal Disciple of White Cloud Dojo, it would be Erwin.

“I could go to Erwin. This guy would definitely be training in the Dojo even if it’s the weekend, no exceptions. Moreover, he would definitely be clear about these things,” Garen thought. He has heard of grand inter-dojo tournaments where the crème de la crème of Galantia Province – in which Huaishan City is located – were chosen, and were presented awards and medals by officials. “This tournament is a great way for dojos to avoid vicious competition, exhibit their talent pool and solidify their social status. The annual grand prize is almost never below 100,000 dollars, and the winner will qualify for the national tournament.”

While Garen was busy sorting through what he knew, the carriage gradually slowed down to a stop.

“Sir, the White Cloud Dojo,” the driver’s words interrupted Garen’s train of thought.

“Yes, very well.” He dug some notes from his pocket and handed it to the driver. Once he received his change, Garen immediately leapt off the carriage.

The streets were narrow, giving a messy and complicated impression.

The ground was paved with gray and black pebbles, which made it uncomfortable to step on. The heights of the buildings on both sides of the street were varied; there were red ones, gray ones, and pale yellow ones. There was a variety of patterns too: squares, triangles, plaid, wavy arcs, etc. It all looked a mess. Ten odd steps from Garen, a khaki-yellow bell tower stood in the middle of the street; at its base, a round and arched doorway allowed pedestrians through.

A smattering of pedestrians continuously went in and out from the doorway.

There was a white wooden board on the left side of the doorway displaying a paper notice. Two people were standing there reading it.

Garen walked over to the notice and checked it out.

“White Cloud Dojo Notice on Recruitment over the Holidays: Under-18 applicants with a student card can enjoy half-off student fees. The specific adult fees schedule is as follows: ...”

One of the people reading the notice was a freckled teenage boy who frowned after he read it. “Let’s go, Jim. Martial arts training is too exhausting, and it’s not as if it would serve any purpose. No matter what arts you train in, a shot from a pistol would still take you down in an instant.”

The other boy shook his head and both walked past the board through the doorway, leaving Garen standing there alone.

To the right of the notice was the façade of a building with a grayish-white steeple. Mahogany strips were affixed to its main entrance like a spider web. The mahogany door at the entrance was wide open, displaying the deserted scene beyond: a lone student wearing khaki-yellow robes was sweeping inside.

Garen browsed the contents of the notice, then immediately walked towards the entrance to the right.

The student who was sweeping looked up at him, but kept silent.

Garen went through the main entrance, the middle hall, past the khaki-colored courtyard, and headed directly towards the innermost row of short buildings.

The row of short buildings at the edge of the courtyard formed a straight, dark gray line. Garen walked towards the entrance of the leftmost house. The sound of people hitting sandbags came from inside the room.

He gently opened the door. It was quite dark and empty inside, with only four black sandbags hanging on the wall at the far end. Two guys and a girl were each hitting a sandbag at a fast pace, and there were three students by the side holding towels and the like for them.

An endless stream of thumps could be heard.

Garen's entrance went almost unnoticed. One of the students holding a white towel turned around to look at him, and then proceeded to ignore him. This was the gym where any student could train in, but with relatively high specifications. The sandbags here were extremely heavy, only suitable for Formal Disciples to train with. If normal disciples tried to train with these sandbags, they would probably hurt themselves.

Garen's sight swiftly fell on the leftmost boy.

The boy's upper body was bare, and the bronze muscles on it were distinct. Sweat poured down his back and drenched his gray shorts. He was completely focused on the sandbag in front of him, punching it at a moderate pace, only causing it to tremble slightly at every punch.

Garen walked over and waited patiently by the side.

More than ten minutes later, the boy stopped. He wiped the sweat off his face and combed his short, pale yellow hair – completely drenched in sweat – backward. He yanked a black towel off the rack to the side and started wiping his sweat.

“Senior Brother Erwin, I'm Garen, one of the students in your batch. Can I ask you something?” Garen took the opportunity to step forward and said aloud. The room was filled with punching sounds; he wouldn't be heard if he didn't speak up.

“Garen? Oh... I know you.” Erwin put down the towel and gave a kind smile. “Just ask anything you want. We're batchmates, no need to stand on ceremony.”

“I'd like to inquire about the student tournaments.”

Ten minutes later...

Garen came out of the room with a good general understanding of the tournaments. One had to first participate in the dojo's internal tournament and get a good ranking in

order to participate in the tournament jointly organized by two neighboring cities. The winners would then be selected for the provincial tournament, which would eventually lead to the national tournament; the multiple stages formed a ladder-like hierarchy. Additionally, only the internal and inter-city tournaments would be held within a span of three weeks from start to finish; the rest would be held in the next year or in the year after that.

“But it’s good enough if I can get my hands on some prize money. The first prize for the city tournament this time around is 10,000 dollars, 5,000 for the second and 2,000 for the third. I’ll be able to resolve this money issue as long as I get second place.”