

Darkness. This was his first thought after waking up.

'Where am I?'

He tried to move his limbs but the sensation of touch had something amiss from what he was used to.

'Wait, can I think?'

'I clearly remember getting shot in the chest by those gangsters. Am I in a coma?'

He tried again to move or open his eyes but the only thing he could feel was the sensation of being cramped and the only thing he could see was darkness.

'I guess I'm still alive, seems that I can't even achieve a quick death in my life. Well, at least it's warm in here.'

There was a constant warmth in his body, making the environment quite cozy.

'At least after I wake up my parents will let me off the hook for a while. Maybe I should just take this chance to get away from that house and go abroad, there should be at least a cleaning service hiring me.'

He thought of the possibility of exploiting that near-death experience as a mean to break free from the cage he called home. He considered how his parents would react once he said to them that he will drop the university to be a dishwasher.

'Dad will not make too much trouble for me, but mum will surely go crazy. Nowadays the only thing I can do home without starting a fight is reading. Maybe I will lose that too'

Since he remembered, he loved playing games, reading books and getting drunk. He found anything else boring and this seriously affected his school career since high school. So, the situation in his house grew more and more difficult for him to sustain as his parents would rather yell all the time than accept that the university wasn't fit for him.

'I guess a big part of that situation is my fault, after all, I've spent most of my life being drunk or isolated in some book. Not a good job as a son indeed.'

Thinking this, regret emerged in him. If he knew better at that time, he would've not used booze as a mean to vent and maybe the situation in his family would have been more peaceful.

'Well, I can't change what has already happened, and I didn't really have many options to keep myself cool while pretending all the time'

When he was 14 he figured out that something was not entirely right with him. He would see his friends going after girls or pretty clothing, emphasizing love and social status in a group of people. Yet, he only felt curiosity toward sex without ever being able to really bind with someone. As for human society, he saw it as a bunch of rules created by humans in order to force them to live together.

'Aren't those rules created by men? As a man, I should have the right to ignore them and live the way I want to.'

Time kept on passing while he was thinking, without him noticing that his thinking speed was way lower than usual.

'In the end, it's a world ruled by money. If you have it you can do whatever you want; if not you can only end up in one of the gears of society, accumulating money till the moment you die.'

'What a pitiful way of living. Forced by the rules of humans to work in order to accumulate pieces of paper, while those have value only thanks to the same

rules you are obeying. True freedom is only achievable by gathering enough paper. Is there even value on living a life like this?'

His reasoning would stop from time to time as he would sleep or try to wake up his body.

In this way, days passed.

'Maybe I'm in a permanent coma and I will have to wait for true death in order to be freed from this darkness.'

The darkness surrounding him started to affect his mood, the only thing keeping him sane was the warm feeling in his body.

It was at that point that light appeared in the world of darkness, which seemed to get bigger as time passed by.

'Finally a change! I should follow th---'

All of sudden, some kind of compression pushed him from the cramped space he was in towards the light. It seemed to be a slow and painful process of which he felt the pressure. After some time, the world of darkness became a world of light so bright that his eyes hurt. He started hearing some cheers and voices speaking an unknown language.

When his eyes got used to the light he could finally see what was around him: a middle-aged fat woman was looking at him with worry, lightly touching his chest. The strange thing was that her hand seemed to cover his entire body.

'The fuck is happen---'

He could not finish his line of thought that the fat woman already turned him to the side and lightly slapped his buttocks.

For some reasons, he felt pain from that light slap.

'What the fuck are you doing woman?!?'

He said, yet what came out of his mouth was only a shrill cry.

After hearing that cry, the faces of the people in the room relaxed and the fat lady brought the baby to the arms of a pale but beautiful woman lying on an old-fashioned bed.

"It's a boy, my lady, and a pretty curious one, according to the way he looks at everything"

Even though he understood nothing of what the fat woman said, the young man in the body of a baby could easily figure out the situation he was in.

'Am I reborn? Wasn't it a coma?!?'

The woman holding the baby uncovered her chest and attempted to feed him.

'Wai--!'

Before he could say, or rather yell anything, a liquid poured down inside of his mouth and he lost himself in the dizziness of his first meal.

"I will name you Noah, yes, Noah Balvan it's a good name"

Noah looked at the woman feeding him with half closed eyes. The woman had long black hair untied on his back and ice-blue eyes below her thin eyebrows.

'Sure my mother is beautiful. Noah should be the name she gave me, at least it's a good name'

The door of the room opened and a man in his forties with short black hair and a stern face walked directly toward the woman on the bed.

"Lily let me see the child"

Saying so, the man directly took Noah in his arms and raised him in the air to have a better view of the baby. The fat woman and the other two maidservants on the side of the bed lowered their heads at the sight of the man.

Even Lily held her angry voice back at the sight of Noah being suddenly taken away from her chest.

"Mh, a bit pale and skinny but there seems to be some kind of wits in him. Maybe he will not be able to be a guard for the main family but he might succeed as counselor. You did a good job Lily"

Saying so, the man gave the baby back to his mother and moved toward the exit. Seeing this scene, Lily said softly:

"Rhys he's your son and his name is Noah, can't he aim at being more than a simple guard?"

Stopping at the edge of the exit, Rhys turned to look at Lily and said in the most natural manner:

"Even if he has my blood in his veins he has yours too mixed in, the son of a whore should consider himself lucky enough if he can protect the descendant of the main family"

And he went out of the room, leaving Lily with watery eyes hugging Noah. She didn't see the deep stare of the baby in her hands toward his father after he left through the door.

'It seems that this family is not so simple, I should do my best to learn the language of this world as fast as I can'

Thinking so, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

#### Chapter 2 - 02. Dragon

Five months have passed since Noah was reborn in this world.

It was spring, or at least it seemed so for what he saw of the outside environment. The mansion he lived in resembled a countryside villa from his previous life, yet it had the size of a castle and was mostly made of wood, with a wall made of rocks on the perimeter.

In that moment, he was in the arms of his new mother, peeking around while she was walking through the mansion talking to him. Little did she know that Noah managed to understand most of what she said.

'The language of this world is not so hard, also because it has a lot of similarities with the English of my previous world. Well, it's also thanks to Lily never leaving my side and continuously speaking to me'

These five months were spent by him mostly in his mother's embrace walking around Balvan mansion, with Lily explaining the most random things to him. Thanks to that he had a general idea of his position in the family and how the mansion was structured.

The mansion was divided into 2 rings, outer and inner. The inner ring was composed of a 4 stories building and it was the place where the main family lived; the outer ring had two 2 stories buildings and a 3 stories one and they were respectively inhabited by guards, servants, and guests.

At the moment, they were on the first floor of the guest's building, which was reserved to them since he had the blood of the main family in him, and since Lily was the beloved concubine of Rhys.

Noah's father, Rhys, was the third and last son of the old patriarch of the Balvan family, Thomas. As such, even though they did not get access to the inner ring, they could still live a comfortable life in the outer one.

"You must grow strong, little dear, the people in the inner ring will see you as a bastard and will spare no effort to abuse and bully you, especially the legitimate grandsons and granddaughters of the patriarch"

Hearing this, Noah's mood became heavier.

'I lived a life without meaning, in a world full of compromises and now that I'm reborn I'm asked to endure bullying because of my social status only to

become a tool for the main family to use. It seems that I will live another life void of meaning'

Lily kept talking but Noah's mind was away, trying to figure out the best course of action for this life.

'If I stay here I will probably have a lot of benefits, after all, the Balvan family seems quite wealthy. I just don't know enough of the outside environment of the mansion so I can't be sure of the possibilities the outside world has to offer'

Noah was already considering running away from the family. He appreciated the affection and the efforts of this new mother, but these feelings were far from the love he should've had for a parent.

'I already had a family and it didn't go so well. This time I don't have to go through various experiences to understand the kind of person I am so I can always choose the things that suit me the most. If life in the inner circle is too hard for the sole reason of being a bastard I won't mind abandoning the mansion. Plus, I have 25 years of experience in advance and the knowledge of a more advanced world, my possibilities should be plenty.'

From the clothing of the people, the structure of the buildings and the state of the furniture, he could guess that this was a world without electricity, so way behind in the field of technology compared to his previous world.

'Yet, this might be also a disadvantage; my habits are those of the industrialized society and my thoughts are those of a guy from the 21st century, I don't know how the people here might react to some ideas. I must be careful.'

Sometimes thinking about his future, sometimes listening to his mother, the day passed and the night was approaching. Lily walked to a balcony in order to watch the stars appear on the dark sky. Noah used this chance to study the

environment outside the mansion. Outside the defense wall, there were sheep grazing the fields, there was a large stone road that started from the main gate of the mansion and stretched in the distance, cutting the green fields into 2 halves. A field of what seemed corn was being cultivated on his right side and a forest was barely visible on his left in the distance.

It was a beautiful scenery, one Noah wasn't used to seeing, and now this was his new world. Then he shifted his gaze to the sky, and he seemed to see the darkness enveloping the redness of the clouds due to the sunset. At the beginning it was like a small dot in the distance, becoming bigger and bigger as it was going in their direction. Only then he realized that something was wrong. The darkness wasn't caused by the nightfall but by the silhouette of something undulating through the clouds.

It was fast and it was getting closer and closer.

At some point, a deafening roar ran through the peaceful countryside. It was coming from the figure in the sky.

A black winged body dove from the clouds diagonally, speeding toward the flock of sheep outside the mansion wall.

It was 7-8 meters long and had big black scaled wings, actually the scales were covering all of his body.

It dove at such a high speed that Noah could not make out the time difference between its exit from the clouds and its nearing to the terrain where the flock was.

Suddenly, the wall illuminated with purple and runes appeared on its surface. It emitted a steady but loud hum and the purple color of the wall spread toward the countryside in the direction of the flock.

The beast seemed disturbed in its descent and tried to halt itself mid-air spreading its wings.



But its speed was too high and it inevitably fell on the ground where the purple halo was going, creating an immense pit.

The moment the purple halo touched the dragon, smoke rose from the pit and another roar, one of pain, sounded in the dusk.

The dragon rose to the sky again as fast as possible and stared with venomous eyes at the mansion. Smoke kept flowing out of his belly like from an open wound. Apparently, the purple halo had injured the dragon.

Filled with hatred, the dragon inhaled and then spat out a tongue of red flames toward the mansion that took the form of a lance as it kept nearing the outer ring.

Lily was frozen in fear seeing the lance of fire coming in her direction while Noah was still too stupefied by what he was seeing in order to even recognize the danger he was in.

Before the flames could reach the outer wall though, a figure appeared mid-air in between them.

He raised his right hand and mumbled something then the lance of flames hit something like a wall of air.

The attrition between the flames and the shield lasted for some seconds before the flames were extinguished and the floating figure was visible again.

He was an old man, with a straight combed long white beard reaching his waist and unbound long hair flowing in the wind. He was wearing a Chinese kimono with large sleeves yet the right one was now burned, showing his slim but sturdy arm.

He looked at the dragon right in its eyes and the dragon did the same.

That standoff lasted for about 10 seconds before the dragon roared once again and turned to leave at high speed through the sky, in the direction of the forest.

The old man waited a bit more in the air over the wall looking at the direction where the dragon went. After being completely sure that the beast was gone he sighed and disappeared.

Lily was still frozen by fear and did not notice that was holding the frail body of Noah too tightly.

This pain was what made him return to reality as he left a small groan to wake his mother from the reverie.

Lily returned to reality too, softening the grip on Noah, and she was about to say something before being interrupted by an aged and deep voice.

"So, this is my latest grandson, am I right?"

#### Chapter 3 - 03. Power

Noah didn't believe in the existence of the soul during his previous life, living was after all about empirics and reality, no place for religious or spiritual thoughts. But after he was reborn, he started considering the idea that there was much more than the eye or the advanced machinery could see.

As he was staring at the old man gently standing on the edge of the balcony, seemingly appeared out of nowhere, his mind fell into chaos.

'There was a dragon appearing and going after a sheep. So this world has dragons in it. Then the wall lighted up and hurt the dragon right? Then the dragon got angry and wanted to burn all of us but this old man, which apparently is my grandfather, blocked it with one hand while flying and then stared at the dragon to make him fly away.'

After a brief sum up the previous events in his mind he only had one thought.

'Where the fuck did I end up?!? This guy can literally fly and fight dragons and they want me to protect them?? Is something wrong with their minds? Wait, if they want me to protect them, it means that I should be able to learn a thing or two.'

His line of thought got interrupted by Thomas entering the balcony and slowly walking in their direction.

"Yes, lord Patriarch. This is Noah, son of Rhys and my own son."

Lowering her head, Lily gently exposed Noah to Thomas in order for him to have a better look at the baby. Maybe Lily wanted to use this occasion to impose a tinge of love in Thomas for his grandson so that he could protect him in the future, or maybe she was just scared stiff at the sight of the old patriarch that she could do nothing else but to expose her son with trembling hands.

Noah, in the meantime, was staring at the old man with fervent eyes.

He didn't even notice the passion and curiosity that his stare was displaying.

'People in this world can fly and fight with fucking dragons! Old maaaaan, look at how cute I am! Teach me how to fly!'

But only some sounds came out of his mouth, they resembled words but they had no meaning. So Noah stretched his little arms toward Thomas, in order to appeal to his feelings, putting a face of happiness at the sight of the nearing patriarch.

'You fight dragons but you still love your kin, right?'

Needless to say, the whole dragon incident left a deep impression on him. After all, dragons were only legends in his world and were represented as mighty and unbeatable. While their might was up to fantasies, in this world dragons could be fought, and you could win.

"Oh"

Looking at the baby happily stretching his arms toward him, Thomas could not help but show a trace of warmth on his serious face. Then he picked up Noah from his armpits and stared at him with a slight smile.

"Ooh, he seems pretty interested in me, there sure is some smartness in this child. Maybe he will really become a good counselor of the family. I'll keep an eye on him from time to time"

Hearing this, Lily was ecstatic and hurried to say the most respectful thanks she could muster.

"Many thanks, lord Patriarch. I'm sure that his safety can be assured for life with just one gaze of yours"

She bowed saying so, with both hands forming a praying form.

"There is no such being that could do that. Here, take Rhys' son and bring him back to his room. Today's events are not for a child this little to see"

Thomas handed Noah back to Lily and disappeared from the balcony. Lily could not stop her excitement after he left and kept cheering Noah.

"Have you heard? He will keep an eye on you! The Patriarch of the Balvan family will keep an eye on my son. Hahaha, this is wonderful. And he said that you could become a counselor, this is wonderful too. Not only my son will be protected by a mighty cultivator, he might also be away from the battlefield for life."

As a mother of a bastard son, Lily knew that the possibilities of Noah were not the brightest compared to the other descendants' of the main family so she was suddenly relieved when she heard some insurance from the patriarch.

Carrying Noah back to their sleeping quarters in the center of the first floor, she did not notice that the baby in her arms was silent and that his eyes were growing more and more determined.

'A counselor my ass! What's the point in giving advice to people with such powers. Any problem can just be blasted out like the old man did with the lance of flame! To think that a power like this actually existed! I must get my hands on it. I might have to risk a bit though, it seems that the purity of the bloodline is kept in high regard inside the Balvan family so showing some talent might attract unwanted attention from the main family descendants. Yet, I need some information to really understand what's going on'

From all the books he read, he could imagine that the fight for succession or even the envy of someone with a higher status than him might end up in blood.

'I already died once, and it was by accident. I don't want to be put in a political scheme and end up dead again, being powerless about it.'

A never felt determination ran through his little body, while Lily was preparing to put him in his cradle.

'A world where power is not given to men from the society they created. A power that seems to come from the inside of each individual, a power that belongs only to themselves. Lily called him a "cultivator", I must find something about it. I must learn to walk and read as fast as I can so that I can have some form of independence and at the same time show some early talent in the literature field. It might bring me to books that describe what a cultivator actually is and how to become one.'

From that day on he started eating more and more in order to grow stronger and get rid of the skinny physique he was born with. He started to actively try to walk, first in the cradle and then on the ground, worrying the maidservants

or his mother every time he fell from his attempts to stand on his feet. Yet, this kind of pain was nothing.

'A bullet in the chest hurts way more'

And so, only 8 months after his birth, Noah was standing upright on the ground, taking his first steps.

'This is so fucking slow, I need to train for this. I should start running from time to time in order to be more healthy and be more comfortable with my body.'

Even though he was disappointed with how slow he was growing up, Lily and the maidservants were stupefied.

"This baby has been trying to stand up for 3 months and now he did it. Most importantly every time he fell he would not cry but try to stand up again. If we didn't stop him every time he could have gotten a big injury by now"

The chatting maidservants were totally ignored by Lily as a sense of pride enveloped her seeing her baby walking at the age of 8 months.

"This must be the patriarch blessing, I knew something good was bound to happen since that day."

Luckily or not, Noah achievement was pinned to the supernatural character that was Thomas Balvan.

Surprises in the first floor of the guests building were far from over though.

After being sure of having a good balance, Noah took slow and careful steps in the direction of his mother. Slowly but surely, and with a bit of sustain given by the wall at his side, he arrived in front of his smiling mother.

"Come to mummy little one, you did a wonderful job today. Mum is happy!"

Saying this she half-kneeled on the ground with spread arms waiting for Noah to reach her embrace.

Noah looked at her and smiled, then moved with spread arms toward her and yelled at the last moment before the embrace:

"Mommy!"

And then he fell in his mother embrace, while Lily and the maidservants stared at him with wide eyes.

'This should be enough to get me an early education.'

#### Chapter 4 - 04. Breath of Heaven and Earth

Time kept passing, and rumors about an intellectual prodigy spread through the Balvan family.

"I heard he was able to talk fluently only one year and a half after he was born"

"I heard that kid started running around every morning before breakfast only three months after he learnt to stand up"

"You won't believe me, but I personally saw that kid going alone in the library of the guests building trying to pull books out of the shelves. Believe me, I was doing the cleaning service there at that time and I found him looking at the symbols on the book as if he could read. And he was only two at that time!"

"That's impossible, his mother requests to get him a teacher got approved two years and a half ago, are you saying that he knew how to read before he even got a teacher?"

"I'm only stating what I saw. I'm not sure he was reading, but he sure looked like he was trying to"

Rumors like these were everywhere in the guests building, spreading from servant to servant. Everyone was waiting for the next record the bastard son would break in his growth speed.

Five years had passed since his birth in this world with him working hard to improve himself and gain a stable foothold in the family.

He kept running every day, adding some light workout in order to make his still frail body less weak. This gave him a slim but rosy figure and he felt his body growing stronger every day. Yet, even if he was stronger than the average kid, he was still just a kid. He would only do half an hour per day of training since that was the limit of his young body. The rest of the day was spent eating large meals made of rice and meat, sleeping or reading.

Two and a half years ago he finally got his teacher, so he could stop sneaking out at night trying to decipher the strange symbols they called writing.

His teacher name was Li Neregnes. He was one of the scholars hired by the main family to instruct their descendant and his position in the family was quite high for a guest. Noah's father, Rhys, accompanied him to the outer ring personally, underlying how much the instruction process should be taken seriously and not as a game.

Apparently, the scholar position was of a higher rank than his in Rhys's eyes, since that was the first time Noah saw his father after his birth.

Li Neregnes was a man in his sixties, with grey hair tied in a ponytail and a short black beard noticeably cured. He had an apathetic face as if nothing was of his interest and explained things in a slow but concise manner. Yet, even this lofty character had to change his disposition toward Noah when he found out that he learnt how to read in less than 6 months of teaching.

After that, he would finish every book the scholar imparted him in less and less time and he even had time to rent books of his interest from the library on the ground floor. The servants were so used to him picking books that they would not even remind him to bring them back.



At the age of five, Noah had a general understanding of the topography near the mansion, of the social status of the Balvan family, and finally, he found something regarding cultivators.

Balvan mansion was situated in the countryside near Evergreen Forest, called like this for the type of trees that forest was made of. The big stone road of the main gate flowed into an even bigger road that led to the nearest big city, Mossgrove, that was ruled by the Shosti family.

Balvan family was an underling of the Shosti family and had to pay an annual tribute of gold or goods in order to keep his rule over this part of the countryside. They were the landlords of the 50 square kilometers surrounding Balvan mansion and had to exact annual taxes from the villages in this area and protect them from the attack of bandits or magical beasts.

Magical beasts! In that world, there were species of animals with the innate gift to absorb energy from the world and using it to empower their natural abilities. The lance of flames used by the dragon years ago was a type of usage of the energy of the world that empowered its already powerful flames, giving them more range of attack and destructiveness.

Finally, about a year before, Noah found a book about cultivation. It was an old and heavy book, written by a cultivator that wanted to spread the notion of cultivation to the common people and that later became a classic of literature. The cultivator's name was lost with the passage of time but the name of the book was still known to all people of culture as "Yin-Yang system".

'According to that book, the energy of nature is called "Breath of Heaven and Earth" and cultivators and magical beasts absorb and store it in order to empower their bodies, prolong their lives and use magical techniques. The "Breath" can be used as a mean to empower the body and the martial techniques or can be linked to someone's own mental energy to release elemental attacks. The 7 elemental types are light, darkness, fire, water,

earth, wind and thunder and someone's aptitude to one of these is decided at birth. Generally, everyone has the aptitude toward one element yet the difference in mental energy decrees his ability to manipulate that element'

Noah was currently having a lesson with Li Neregnes about philosophy in a room on the first floor of the guests building, but his mind was constantly wandering on the topics described in the "Yin-Yang system".

'Magical beasts have an innate ability to manipulate and absorb the "Breath" and they will learn to use it naturally in the course of their life, it can be said that their bloodline is quite advantageous according to this aspect. Yet, Heaven and Earth are fair so most of them lack the intellect to better use their gifts.'

'Humans, on the other hand, can make a lance out of rocks and bow and arrows out of a tree but they need techniques in order to absorb and use the "Breath" and even special devices to understand their aptitude toward an element'

'No wonder this book wasn't destroyed by cultivators and managed to survive till now, even if you know the general theory behind those powers you can't do much without the proper techniques. The best this book can do is give a better understanding of the supernatural to normal people.'

'Heaven and Earth are fair he says, yet if you are born in a poor family you can just dream about obtaining techniques. Even for me, born in a family with cultivators, it's hard to say if I'll ever be able to take a look at these magical techniques... Fair my ass'

Even though Li was engrossed in his exposition, he started to notice that Noah would just nod at him in answer every time he would look at him, while his eyes had been staring fixedly at the same point of the book in front of him for one hour.

A bit enraged, Li took a wooden stick from behind his back and trusted at Noah's left arm.

SNAPP!!!

A slapping sound ringed and Noah lifted his head to stare at his teacher while holding the spot where the stick had just hit.

"Are you still thinking about that cultivation nonsense? How many time do I have to tell you: don't waste your time. You are just a bastard of a medium-size noble family, even if the Balvan family had some techniques they are not meant for you. Moreover, literature is the real representation of humans, cultivation is just about killing and getting killed, there is nothing noble in that."

Li berated him, apparently this was not the first time Noah's mind wandered. Actually, it was since he finished the "Yin-Yang system" that he completely lost interest in the instruction of literature. After all, he reached his objective of finding out more about the world of cultivation so these lessons became only a boring obligation.

"But teacher, even the wisest man has to bow his head to the weakest magical beast. If you don't have the power to protect yourself all your knowledge is useless"

SNAPP!!!

Another hit of the stick landed on Noah's right arm. To teacher Li's helplessness, Noah would just hug his arm and let out a little grunt while no trace of fear ever appearing in his eyes.

'What's wrong with this kid, I instructed the son of the patriarch's firstborn and even now that he turned 25 he still fears my stick. This kid though...'

These were the thoughts of Li Neregenes, incapable of taming a five year old kid.

"Nevermind, just go to rest and don't wander in the library all night like your usual. I'll see you again in two days and you will better have forgotten about all that cultivation garbage."

Massaging his temples, he said that while pointing the exit door to Noah.

At his words Noah got up, picked his books, bowed and then left the room.

#### Chapter 5 - 05. Training

Noah's life kept going. His black long hair kept growing so his mother would often comb them for him. Lily kept managing the first floor of the guests building, occasionally meeting Rhys deep in the night. She would often beg him to do more for his son, explaining Noah's interests in cultivation and martial arts but Rhys would always refuse, hiding behind the rules of the main family.

"I can't do anything about him, Lily. The rules are fixed: his position allows him only to get access to the low-level techniques and that is only permitted if he shows some merits in the family guard and completes some mission. You can send him there and see how it goes."

Lily's face darkened hearing these words. Truth was that Noah wasn't spending his time in the library anymore since he had turned 8, he would rather go to the guards building doing chores in exchange for some combat tips.

With the most pleading voice Lily could muster, she asked Rhys:

"Our son is smart, he has already figured out that he can not find anything relevant about cultivation in the library and shifted his attention to the guards hoping to obtain something valuable. He is only 10 now, he must be 13 to officially join the guards, but he has been doing chores for them for 2 years now only to get a better starting point! Can't you give him anything? You did that with your other two sons----"

SMACK!!!!

A slap hit Lily's left cheek. She yelled lightly and then she recomposed herself in a half-kneeling position with her head lowered and a metallic taste enveloping her mouth.

"Remember your position! Remember that it was me who allowed you to give birth to that bastard and that's only because you can ease the grief I feel for my dead wife. Don't you dare compare the son and daughter Rebecca gave me with the son of a lowly whore anymore. You should never forget that I'm the one allowing the two of you to live."

Trembling a bit, Lily answered:

"I'm sorry my lord!"

And then she completely kneeled with her head touching the ground.

"Tsk, you better stand up and make up for making me angry"

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At the same time, in the guards building, a kid about 10-11 years old was carrying 2 large buckets of water to a group of guards sweating under the sun.

This kid was, of course, Noah doing chores for the guards.

Since he understood that he could not achieve anything reading books he started searching for other ways to come in possess of cultivation techniques. Apart from breaking in the inner building and steal the books, which was impossible, the only option he had was to enter the family guards and obtain enough merits to be granted access to the inner circle. His teacher scolded

him for half a day before giving up on him and going back to the inner circle while his mother only hugged him and said:

"Be careful"

Even though Noah could see a trace of disappointment in Lily's eyes he could not help but follow his decision. He didn't want to give up and live another worthless and unappealing life now that he saw hope to be more than a normal man.

'Yet, she really loves me. After all this time she still keeps seeing that father of mine. It's probably for my sake that she endures his character.'

Lately, whenever he would go back to his quarters, he would find some new bruises on his mother body and yet, he never saw Lily without a smile when she looked at him.

'I guess I should try a little harder in this life. I don't think I can live happily if I don't do my best to take care of her.'

A slight smile appeared on his face after this line of thought. Sadly, it was interrupted by a guard yelling to him:

"Hey, whoreson, the fuck are you doing smiling like an idiot while still carrying our water?"

He snapped back to reality and hurried himself to the group of guards to deliver the buckets.

"I'm sorry honorable sirs, I hope your training went well. Maybe you want to ease your mind ranting about how hard your workout is, which are the harder positions to maintain, how to--"

"Shut your mouth, the last guy you scammed was sent by the captain to clear the latrines for three months. No one will tell you anything, yet if you like helping us in the usual way I bet that there will be more than one candidate"

The guard interrupted Noah's facade before it even started. He was right though, in the previous two years, Noah managed to obtain some techniques by faking innocence in front of some lonely and tired guard. He would usually choose the ones that seemed excluded or bullied so that he could start some kind of connection with his status as a bastard and then he would ask them to show their forms and techniques in order to be "impressed" and boost their morale.

In the last year though, the higher-ups of the guards building started to notice his true intentions and chose to punish the guards revealing important information. They didn't dare punish him since he was still a young kid and, even has a bastard, he had the blood of the main family in his veins.

As for the "usual way of helping", it basically consisted of the guards hitting Noah a couple of times till he was on the ground as a form of "combat training".

It must be said that the combat training was still Noah's idea after he could not manage to scam any more guards. After all, in his previous life, he had basically no experience in fighting so it had to make up for that.

"I guess there is no other option. Let's go for a round, should be fun."

The group of guards cheered when they heard Noah's answer and started playing some hand games in order to decide who would have been the lucky one to teach that shameless kid a lesson.

In the meantime, Noah went to the training swords deposit to pick a short saber out of habit.

The guards building featured a large courtyard at the center in order to give the guards a spacious and private place to train. Noah only managed to get in thanks to his initial fake innocence and his diligence in doing their chores.

The deposit was on the side of the yard so after a couple of minutes he came back to the group of guards with a steel blunt short saber. The guards were, by then, used to this kid able to wield with quite dexterity the saber with his left hand.

"HAHAHA! Kid today is my turn, I'm still mad about the last time"

The guard standing at a distance from his group was 1.80 meters tall and had a burly musculature. He was bald and had a long curly beard, and hairy chest and bulging muscles. From his shirtless status, you could describe him as the archetype of the perfect soldier.

" Oh come on Micky, it was just a sword form and not even that well done!"

Hearing this, a tinge of anger rose in Micky as he started to get closer to Noah.

"Using weapon won't be fair since you are still a kid, so I will limit myself to these arm guard. I know you are training the Ice-Fire revolving technique so don't expect me to go easy on you."

Micky sprinted toward Noah while using his arms in a crossed guard to cover his head and chest.

Noah went in a position he learnt from a sword style and waited for the right opportunity, shifting his weight on his front leg, ready to sprint at any time.

When the guard was one meter and a half far from him, Noah sprinted lowering himself to dodge the guard's charge and hide from his line of sight. He was basically half the guard height after all.

While he was sprinting he slashed his saber diagonally to the right leg of the guard.

CLANG!



The sound of metal against metal sounded as an arm guard appeared in the saber's trajectory. The guard anticipated his move.

Without waiting any further, the guard pushed himself toward Noah aiming to hit him with his already lowered shoulder.

Contrary to the expectations, Noah did not dodge but twisted his left wrist holding the saber in a strange manner. The saber disappeared for a second only to reappear on Micky's neck without him noticing anything.

'I finally did it in real combat, I guess it's time to lose'

Thinking this, Noah let go of the saber and let the burly man hit him in the chest.

He flew for 2 meters before landing on the ground. Then he kneeled and coughed a bit of blood.

"You are lucky I went easy on you if I used my whole strength you would have been bedridden for at least 6 months."

After that, Micky cheered, happy to have triumphed on a 10 years old kid.

"You are super-strong Micky, now I should go home and rest. Your mighty strength is hard to digest."

Noah said getting up and hurrying towards his building. When he was on the exit he heard the group of guards laughing with an angry yell in the middle of the laughter that resembled his name...

In a room in the guards building, two figures were staring at the courtyard across a window where the group of guards was mocking a bald one.

"So, what do you think of him?"

One of the figures asked the other one

"He clearly won the round but still faked his loss. He is conscious of his position in the family so he tries to lay low as much as possible, yet he can't give up to his search for power. He's surely a genius, the rumors were not fake. I didn't think that he would learn the snake-wrist technique in less than two years..."

Chapter 6 - 06. Master

"What is your opinion of him, instead, captain?"

The other man on the window thought for a while and then said:

"If Micky had used a weapon and his full strength that kid would not have had any chances. Yet, he used his age and appearance to his advantage, using our men as training for the few things he learned in these years. He is calculative, manipulative, fearless of pain and of great determination. That incident with the dragon 10 years ago must have twisted his mind to no small degree. To think that a kid can be so relentless in his greed for power scares me a bit"

Silence ran through the room as the two men kept on staring at the guards in the yard. That group, in the end, got bored of mocking Micky and agreed on a round of wine to end the day.

"So, what should we do with him, captain?"

"If that guy is left free like this it's just a matter of time before some major trouble will happen. It's pretty obvious that he will not stop his research for techniques, I just don't know how far he is willing to go."

"So, what should we do, captain?"

The other man repeated. After working together for so many years they had a tacit understanding of how their conversations went. Seeing the captain thinking with his eyes closed he kept silent waiting for his orders.

The captain opened his eyes and with a light sigh he said:

"We train him."

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In the meantime, Noah returned to his quarters and found out that his mother was still closed in her room. Light moans could be heard if you listened closely.

He chose to take a bath to wash over the dust from the chores of the day, then he ate an abundant meal and went to sleep.

Around midnight, a servant came to his room to wake him up with a bowl of water. After sending the servant away he washed his face and put himself in a cross-legged position on the floor, breathing in a strange but rhythmic way. Seeing how smoothly the process went, you could see how Noah was used to this process.

His body muscles would bulge from time to time only to return to the normal size with a slight increase of volume.

After about an hour, he woke up from his meditation with traces of sweat on his body.

'The Ice-Fire revolving technique is only a way to strengthen the body through forcibly absorbing yang energy during midday and yin energy during midnight, far from the standard of a cultivator. Plus, my body is now saturated with energy, so my limit is the strength of a 14-15 year old boy until my body grows up and allows me to absorb more energy.'

Then he got up and picked a short metal saber from under his bed. Flicking his wrist, the saber disappeared and appeared in another position from a

different angle. After he did this exercise with both his hands for a while he put the saber back under his bed, then he lied on it and fell into deep thought.

'The snake-wrist technique is just a trick to surprise your enemies and finish them in one hit, it's not really worth being called a combat technique. Its usage is even limited by the quantity of "Breath" I can hold in my wrists. The other forms that I learned from the guards are either part of a set or are about weapons that I still cannot wield. What should I do now? The guards are wary of me by now and they won't reveal any kind of information. Do I really have to wait 3 years before officially applying for the family guards? This is way too slow, especially since I can't make valuable progress in these years.'

His stream of thoughts kept going for a while as he started to consider more illicit ways.

'I might steal some books from the guards, but that would require me knowing which techniques are worth the risk, who has them in the form of a book and it also would require me to escape from the mansion after that. There is the death penalty for crimes about cultivation and similar.'

Lily's face smiling to him appeared in his mind, a little grip formed in his throat.

'I don't think I can leave after all. To be more precise, I don't want to leave. Apart from my mother's problem, the technique issue still remains. I know this family has the techniques but I'm unsure of the situation of the outside world.'

Light struck his window, the sun was rising.

'Never mind, maybe I'm being too greedy. I always knew that I would have had to catch up with the lucky brats in the main family at some point. My body is still growing and the Ice-Fire revolving technique can keep up till I reach 18 years of age. In the worst case scenario, I can still be admitted in the inner circle through merits in the guard and scam some of the other descendants of the main family.'

'No, the worst case scenario is me scamming them and being killed out of their anger. Life here is too peaceful, I'm starting to forget my position. I won't be surprised if there is some servant giving information to the inner circle after the display of abilities in my early days.'

"Are you done with your reasoning, I'm getting bored of waiting"

Hearing this voice, Noah's body stiffened as he sprinted to the opposite point of the room toward the exit door. Then he bumped into something and fell on the ground, some blood went down from his nose into his mouth. The object he ran into was the body of the person talking that moved towards the door before he could.

'I can't escape!'

He was ready to turn back and pick the saber up from under the bed when the man said with a nonchalant voice:

"Relax, I'm not here to hurt you. Actually, I think you might like my offer."

After he talked again, Noah stopped and thought for a bit. Then he slowly turned around to take a look at the man.

He looked like an average man in his forties, 1.70 meters of height, no beard and some slightly long blonde hair. He had a playful face and a slight smile.

"Who are you?"

Noah asked.

"I'm the vice-captain of the guards of the outer ring, William Challi. I'm here by order of the captain of the guards, we want to recruit and train you before you make some mess."

Noah was a bit speechless when he heard the words coming out of William's mouth. After a moment of pondering he asked:

"What kind of mess might I ever be able to do, some guards voluntarily gave me some pointers on how I should train."

He put the most amiable smile he could muster, after all, he was still in a 10 years old body.

"Cut the crap, we know that you learned the snake-wrist technique and that you faked your match with Micky. Plus, do you really want to keep scamming soldiers for some shitty technique like the Ice-Fire revolving technique? That thing is just an imitation of a cultivation technique"

Noah went from scared to know that his disguise was so easily discovered to dispirited when he heard that the most complete technique he learned was considered an imitation.

Looking at the smiling man in front of him he finally asked the only question that mattered in his mind.

"Will you make me a cultivator able to fight dragons?"

William was a bit taken aback from the honesty of such a question. He looked at Noah in the eyes and, sensing his determination, he chose to answer in full honesty. He sighed a little and, putting down his smile, he said:

"The road of cultivation is a personal road, people with the best techniques might not reach the level of the patriarch in their entire life, while people with just a simple respiration technique might cleave the sky in two. I won't hide it from you: I can't teach you the best techniques the Balvan family has but I surely will put you on the road of cultivation. Honestly speaking, this is the best bet you will be asked to take considering your position. So, what wil---

"I accept!"

Before he could finish his speech, William got interrupted by Noah. Looking at him, he could now see that part of that honesty he had before disappeared, replaced by determination and scheming eyes.

'What a frightful kid, I can't lower my guard for even a second'

Putting back his smile, William happily said:

"Then from now on, you must call me Master!"

#### Chapter 7 - 07. Techniques

The day after he accepted William as his Master, Noah went early in the morning to the guards building as per William instruction.

The previous morning he explained the situation to his mother and, seeing the new bruises on her body, he could not help but feel gloomy.

He entered the building and went straight to the first floor, apparently the men guarding the stairs were informed of his arrival and let him pass without troubles.

Before he put his foot on the last step, he heard the voice of William at the end of the corridor.

"You're early"

Watching the yawning figure that was now his master dressed in a white gym suit he felt a bit of trepidation.

He put up a serious expression and did a slight bow with his left fist in his right hand.

"Disciple was eager to learn, Master"

William didn't even look at him and gestured to follow him. Together they entered a spacious room with weapons on the walls and some wooden dummies sparse around.

Suppressing another yawn, William pointed at the floor:

"Sit, I'm not really good at mornings so I wish to explain everything just once, then you can ask me questions"

Noah almost immediately sat cross-legged on the floor. Yearning clearly visible in his eyes.

William sorted his thoughts for a little and then started explaining with a serious face:

"First, I want to make sure that you understand the reason why the captain chose to let you enter the guards. We can't have people scamming men for their rightfully earned techniques, especially a kid with your position. Weighing the pros and cons of the situation, we decided that it was better to use that greed of yours for our needs rather than punish you. So, remember to thank the captain for allowing you to keep your hands, when you see him."

A drop of cold sweat ran through Noah's back, he finally realized how reckless he was.

'The facade of the kid can't work against powerful people, maybe it's more right to say that they don't care that I'm a kid'

"Second, we won't gift you anything, a guard has to gather merits to obtain rewards and you will be no different but since you are now my disciple I will give you something to start with. Consider it as a loan that you will repay through serving in the guards. Do you understand me? You will have to spill blood for your family to obtain what you want"

William looked at Noah's eyes with probing intention. His situation wasn't exactly a secret, so it was reasonable to question his will to protect the Balvan family.



'I know what he wants to say. He is afraid that since I'm a bastard I might have accumulated hatred towards the Balvan, and use the guards as a mean to strengthen myself only to get revenge. He is not wrong but he totally missed my reasons.'

Looking conflicted and in thought, Noah lowered his head only to rise it with an even more determined face.

"Disciple understands!"

William stared at him, trying to decipher his face.

'If he is lying, he sure is good at it.'

Then he gave up on understanding the kid in front of him and resumed his explanation:

"Then it's settled. You are now the youngest member the guards of the Balvan family ever had. Our duties consist mostly in solving issues with bandits and magical beasts in Balvan's territory since it's the duty of the troops in the inner circle to personally protect the family members. I will explain more about missions later, now pay attention, I'm starting with the part you almost lost your hands for."

Needless to say, Noah's attention skyrocketed.

"You read the Yin-Yang system so I can skip the part about the "Breath" and elements. Human cultivation can be divided into 3 centers of power: dantian, body, and sea of consciousness that are deeply connected to each other."

"The dantian is in your lower abdomen and it's usually formed by the age of 15. It is the place where cultivators accumulate the "Breath" and, once accumulated, it will nourish the body and the mind as a result."

"The body is the shell of a cultivator, it can be nourished by flooding it with "Breath" and the stronger it is, the more stable your dantian and mind will be. You have already started nurturing it with the Ice-Fire revolving technique."

"The sea of consciousness is at the center of your brain and it's the place where your mental energy is generated and accumulated. Enlarging your sea of consciousness will not only give you more space to store mental energy in and raise its production, but it will also sharpen your senses and fasten your thoughts. It is said that at some level you can even start predicting imminent dangers."

"Now, you can start with your first round of questions."

Noah closed his eyes and repeated what his master said in his mind in order to memorize it. After scanning through the pieces of information a couple of times he found two things he was unsure of.

"Master, I have two questions: haven't you said that the Ice-Fire revolving technique is just an imitation of a cultivation technique? If the dantian is formed at the age of fifteen, does this mean that I cannot cultivate for the next five years?"

William's answer was immediate, as he had probably foreseen the doubts coming to his disciple's mind a moment earlier.

"Real body-nourishing methods use the "Breath" in the dantian to flood the body and nourish it. In comparison, the Ice-Fire revolving technique is just a process to forcibly store "Breath" in the body that will be naturally used as nourishment. The difference lays in the quantity of "Breath" used, besides the fact that the technique you practice can only accumulate a tenth of what methods using the dantian can accomplish. Moreover, you can clearly feel that that technique is bound to the physical limits of the body, while real body-nourishing methods can allow you to break those limits."

"As for the other question, yes, the usual age at which a human has completely formed his dantian is fifteen. Yet, as I told you, the three centers of power are deeply connected. Probably you have already sped the process of creation of the dantian up by practicing the Ice-Fire revolving technique. Who knows, you might have gained some months of growth already."

Hearing this, Noah's eyes lit up.

'This means that I can speed the process up by training the other two centers of power. Wait, something is strange, doesn't that mean that when someone trains all three of them at the same time his growth will be exponential?'

A confused expression appeared on his face. Eyebrows knitted together, he looked at his Master and was about to ask more questions when he got interrupted.

"You will understand more once you start practicing. Cultivation is innately an act of defiance against Heaven and Earth since we take its power and make it ours, so the process is extremely long and painful. Therefore, since the three centers of power are connected, if it's true that empowering one will affect the other two, it's also true that leaving behind one will slow the growth of the other two. But as I said, you will understand it once you step on the road."

William then sat on the ground and took out a pile of sheets from beneath his suit.

"I will give you a training method for the sea of consciousness and let you choose a martial art and a body-nourishing method that doesn't need a dantian out of the ones I sorted out for you. These sheets are only the general description of the techniques so come closer and read them carefully. Remember to pick those in line with your personality and needs."

Before he could even put the sheets on the ground, Noah was already sitting on his knees in front of him.

'This fucking kid didn't even run this fast when he was running away from me'

Releasing a soft sigh, William added:

"Take note that you will have to change the body-nourishing method once you form a dantian and that the martial arts use "Breath" to express their true power, so for now you are limited to the one you accumulate in your body."

After the last warning, he laid the sheets on the floor, with body-nourishing on the right and martial arts on the left and watched with a slight smile this disciple of his reading them with fervent eyes. It seemed he could consume them with just one stare.

'He sure has the will of a cultivator, I wonder how far he can go'

#### Chapter 8 - 08. Helplessness

Noah chose to first sort out the pile of sheets on the left, the one having the martial arts.

'Five sheets:

Balvan sword style, a two-handed sword style created by the Balvan family, balanced in both attack and defense, perfect for soldiers. "Breath" will empower the thrust attack, able to shatter rocks. Rank 1;

Phantom saber style, a one-handed saber style made of peculiar moves hard to defend against, good attack and poor defense. "Breath" can make any of the willing body parts disappear in order to catch your enemy unprepared. Rank 2;

Flow of the sword, a two-handed sword style focused on deflecting your opponent's attack and counterattack at the right time, excellent defense. "Breath" can create a shield of air for a period of time. Rank 2;

Twin saber style, a one-handed saber style wielding two sabers, focused on speed, can defend and attack at the same time. "Breath" will enhance the

perforation ability of the sabers allowing the wielder to cut without the need for the blade to touch. Rank 2;

Iron palm style, a weaponless style that uses hands as a weapon, excellent attack and maneuverability to strike. "Breath" will harden the hands of the user making them able to stop blades or release a shockwave to hurt the internal organs of the opponent. The hardening of the hands can be permanent with training. Rank 2.'

Noah fell deep in thought.

"Master, why is there a rank on the side of the arts?"

As if expecting the question, William seriously explained:

"The rank represents the potential of the technique when using the "Breath", it basically defines how strong their effect and destructiveness can be. There is a rank for every technique and magic and there is a rank even for cultivators, but I will explain the cultivator's part once your dantian is formed."

Noah started to think again, looking at the sheets in his hands.

'I guess I can already reject the Balvan sword style since it's rank 1. The iron palm style seems cool, especially for the permanent hardening part, but I got quite familiar with the saber in these years so I should stick with it.'

Saying so, only 2 sheets were left in his hands.

'The Phantom saber style should be where the snake-wrist form came from, so I'm actually advantaged in learning this one, but it feels like it's a killing method against men, will a dragon fell for the invisibility trick?'

Like this, only one sheet remained in Noah's hands.

"I choose the twin saber style as a martial art."

William happily smiled and kept on nodding.

"Good choice, since you need to wield two sabers it will be a bit harder at the beginning, but you will soon understand that it is a style which fits every situation."

Noah shifted his attention to the group of the body-nourishing methods. He didn't notice that the smile on William's face had disappeared, being replaced by a worried expression.

'Mh, maybe I expected too much from a group of methods without the need for a dantian. Every technique seems similar to the Ice-Fire revolving one, they just add some peculiarity like more strength or more speed. At least they are all rank 2 so they should be better than my current one.'

He was almost ready to choose a nourishing method that would enhance his speed when he reached the last sheet.

'Rank 3'

The worry on William's face grew, as he stared with pleading eyes at the kid in front of him.

'Please don't choose that one. That is not a technique but pure torture.'

He didn't want to put that method in the block from which Noah had to choose but his captain thought differently so he had no choice.

"William, we have to respect his desires. If he gets in the guards and then finds out that we kept that method hidden from him, he might lose trust on us and revolt."

Such were the words his captain said to him the day before.

'Still, I don't think that a kid can understand the kind of pain we are talking about here.'

While William was lost in worry and thoughts, Noah was reading incredulous the rank 3 method in his hands.

'Forging of the Seven Hells, the peak body-nourishment of the ones that do not require a dantian, it equals the methods that require a dantian in terms of power, so if the user survives the treatment he will obtain a rank 3 body capable of blocking rank 1 martial arts and rank 0 magic spells almost without harm. In addition, since it's a body shaped by the "Breath", it will have a better attunement with it, speeding its recovery and its manipulation. The treatment consists of breaking a fixed number of acupoints in a specific place in order to create an absorption vortex that will force the Breath of Heaven and Earth to enter the body and reconstruct the acupoints. Then the man must rest and let the newly acupoints shape and nourish the body for a period of time. Then he must repeat the treatment 6 times. Warning: extremely dangerous, the user must not lose consciousness during the process in order to manipulate the "Breath" or else there might be an error in the reconstruction process causing permanent paralysis or death. Warning: extremely painful'

Raising his head, Noah finally noticed the worried expression of his Master.

"Master, I think that in order to choose properly I have to understand in a better way the difference in ranks between the different arts."

William tried to hide his worry with a slight smile and said:

"Sure. Try to look at it in this way, the more variables you add into one attack the more powerful it is. The weakest of all is the body, which consists only in a strengthening, like reinforcing a wall. Then comes the martial art, which is a mixture of body and "Breath", so of course, its power will be one time and a half higher than the simple body. In the end, there are magic spells, which use a specific element of the "Breath" you accumulate in your dantian mixed with mental energy to create spells, so they will be the most powerful and destructive. Generally speaking, a cultivator's highest rank is the body, while the level of his cultivation and mental energy is pretty similar. For now, just

consider the dantian level as a form of fuel: the higher it is, the stronger its effects will be once used for martial arts and spells."

Noah shifted his gaze back to the sheet in his hand.

'The advantages of this technique are pretty awesome, I just don't know if it's worth the risk.'

"How much does it take for a man with a dantian to obtain a rank 3 body with the orthodox way?"

William hesitated a bit before answering, and then he simply chose to tell the truth.

"If from the beginning a man trains a method for a rank 3 body, without going through methods for rank 1 and 2, it will take between 5 and 15 years."

"What body level am I right now? How much will it take with the orthodox methods once I get a dantian and while training a rank 2 method in the meantime? How much with this technique?"

A tempest of questions came out of Noah's mouth. If he had to risk his life he wanted to make sure that the benefits were way higher than the dangers.

"Right now, your body is below half rank 1, since your body is still growing and you trained in a method without the need of a dantian the results will be lesser if compared with the benefits provided by the techniques of the same rank which instead need a dantian. The same will go for the rank 2 methods below you. If you start training in one now, by the time you get your dantian you will have a body of rank 1 and a half, so to say, and you will probably reach rank 3 in 5-9 years. If you use that torture instead, it might take you between 3 and 5 years to complete the process."

Noah was a bit stupefied. The orthodox method didn't seem too slow at all. He was confident that with his rigid schedule, he would have achieved the rank 3



body in the shortest possible time, wasting about four to five additional years, but also avoiding such an extreme risk of his life.

He was about to reject the idea of going through the Seven Hells technique when he looked at his Master's eyes that seemed filled with shame. Then he thought of something and asked with a bitter smile:

"How hard is to get a proper rank 3 body-nourishing method?"

This time, shame ran through William for being found out. He lowered his head a bit to recover his composure and then said with a soft voice:

"You must enter the inner circle in order to request it."

Still smiling bitterly, Noah handed the sheet to his Master.

"Then I choose the Forging of Seven Hells method."

#### Chapter 9 - 09. Sea of consciousness

William's fear came true, and he could not help but feel sad. After a moment of reflection, he straightened himself up and walked around the room. Then he started talking:

"I accept your decision and I will help you train in that method but I have some conditions. First, I want you to train your mental energy for six months and if after that time I won't consider you ready I will not allow you to begin the treatment. The second condition is that you will have to train the twin saber style with me personally. Will you accept?"

Noah looked at him a bit confused and rebuked quietly:

"May I know the reason behind these conditions?"

William stopped in place and answered:

"To withstand that kind of pain and still be able to manipulate the "Breath" you'll need a way stronger mind than the average man. If you train your sea of consciousness for some time you will increase your chances to survive the

treatment. As for the second condition, I will be practicing torture on a kid and I don't really feel good about it. At least I will vent a little by training you and you might even raise your tolerance of pain during the process."

Noah was a bit taken aback from this answer, especially concerning its last part.

"Master, you don't have to force yourself to do the treatment to me if you don't want to."

"No one from the inner circle will help you do that and the only ones in the outer circle that can use the "Breath" skillfully enough are me and the captain. Yet, my precision in its usage is far better, so I'm the best candidate to perform it."

Noah fell into thought.

'Even though he tried to con me earlier, he's not a bad character. Well, it's either trusting him or going back to scam guards so I don't have much of a choice.'

"I agree"

Said Noah in the end.

"Wonderful"

Answered William, and then he took another piece of paper that was folded from a pocket in his pants. He handed that folded sheet to Noah and then started explaining again.

"Inside that sheet, there is written a rune called Kesier rune after the species of magical beasts they were obtained from. It is said that these beasts had such a powerful mental energy they could squeeze an adult man into a little ball of flesh with a single thought. They were similar to big monkeys and each of their kind had a different number of these runes embodied on their back,

the more runes they had, the more powerful their mental energy was. When humans found out that they could use these runes to empower their mental energy, a big extermination begun, and of the Kesier species, only the runes remain now. The method to train the mental energy is the result of years of experimentation on these runes. Nowadays, there are three sets each made of three runes for a total of nine runes."

William paused a bit and then pointed at the folded sheet in Noah's hands.

"That one that I gave you is the first rune of the first set. When you will read it, you will feel a terrible pain in the center of your brain, which is caused by your first interaction with the sea of consciousness. Actually, there is a painless method to interact for the first time with the sea of consciousness but it will take you a week and knowing the kind of masochist you are I figured out that this method will suit you better. Go ahead and try reading the rune, after the pain comes, focus on it to enter your sea of consciousness."

Noah smiled a little at being called a masochist, he was just eager to get stronger, wasn't that the same for everyone?

He slowly unfolded the sheet in his hands till a strand of ink was visible. Immediately, he felt like his head was going to split open. He groaned, enduring the pain and hiding again the rune and then he focused on the origin of the pain.

He felt that he was in another world. The feeling of being on the ground disappeared and there was no smell, only the constant noise of sea waves was present. He opened his eyes and looked around him. He was sitting cross-legged in the air, his figure half transparent. Above him there was darkness, separated from him by a spherical barrier, beneath him there was an azure sea, with slight waves on its surface. After some seconds of pure amazement, he found himself back in the room with William staring at him, it seemed just one instant had passed.

"Master, can you explain?"

Asked Noah completely stupefied by this out-of-body experience.

"You have just seen your sea of consciousness. Consider it a personal dimension, where your thoughts, emotions and mental energy are stored. The bigger that dimension is, the more influence it will have on the material world. The water inside it represents your ability to think, so be careful when you train mental energy or cast spells because it will deplete that water, and once you are out of it, your ability to think will be greatly affected until the sea of consciousness is replenished. You might even faint in that situation and if it happens too often, you can even damage your sphere. Once the sphere is broken, your mind will shatter and you will just be a living body with no will or thought."

William was talking with a really serious face in that moment, it was hard to imagine how many men had shattered their own sphere trying to push their limits or overexerting themselves.

"The training method of mental energy is pretty simple, just memorize the rune. You will know that you have memorized it once the rune appears inside your sea of consciousness like it did on the skin of the Kesier species and looking at it will cause no more depletion of mental energy. Once you've done it you can be considered a rank 1 mage and you can learn your first spells after confirming your elemental aptitude. The ranks of mages go from 1 to 9 based on the number of Kesier runes in their sea of consciousness and they have an auxiliary title based on their rank. For rank 1,2 and 3 it's apprentice mage; for rank 4,5 and 6 is intermediate mage; for the rest of them is high mage. Basically, every wealthy family has a set of the first three runes, Balvan family should have the first five ones, while for the higher ones only the Shosti family or similar high-noble families might have them. Now, enough with the explanations, go back to your home and start practicing the first rune. I will

send the twin saber style forms and descriptions to your lodging including another saber. I will see you again in one week from now to check your progress with both of them. Remember not to exhaust your mental energy!"

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Inside his room, Noah was staring fixedly at a piece of paper in his hands. The process seemed hard, as beads of sweat ran down his forehead and his eyes kept trying to close.

'This is fucking hard! Keep going, keep going! Fucking eyes stay open!'

Noah was completely focused on his task and ignored everything around him.

As time went on, his hands started to tremble and his eyes became redder and bloodshot.

Inside his sea of consciousness.

Waves kept surging from the center of the sphere where Noah's half-transparent figure was standing with eyes closed. A deep frown was present on his face.

The waves would crash on the borders of the sphere enlarging its circumference by few millimeters every time. As this process kept going the sea level would lower and by then it was already covering less than a quarter of the sphere.

Noah abruptly folded the sheet containing the rune and let a long breath out while lying on the floor with arms spread open.

'I feel that my head is about to explode! My sight seems confused and even thinking makes the pain increase. Terrifying, this kind of training is terrifying! And I feel so sleepy too.'

Some knocks sounded from the door of his room.

Noah cursed a bit in his mind, only to feel again an increase of pain that made him curse again.

He stood up by first leaning against the floor and then against the walls and eventually went open the door.

The figure of Lily appeared on the other side of the exit with a radiant face, carrying two old books and a case.

"Some guards took these to the building. They said that the vice-captain sent the-

She interrupted herself seeing the state her son was in.

He looked incredibly tired. His face was ashen and his eyes were half-closed and completely red. She noticed how he was using the door as a support to keep himself standing.

She hurriedly jumped on him and put her shoulder below his armpit as support.

She then moved towards the bed yelling:

"What happened to you!? Is that William right? Or is it the guards? I'm gonna talk to the captain right now! I'm gonna-

Before she could finish her venting, Noah sat on the edge of the bed and raised a hand to stop her from yelling any more than that. His head ached like hell but he forced himself to talk because he felt the need to explain something to his mother.

"Mum, don't worry. It's just a special training that will make me able to do magic one day. I exaggerated a bit because it was my first time doing it but I will feel better after I get some sleep. Don't worry, the guards are nice to me, they don't do anything against my will."

Lily halted from talking anymore and looked at her son. Touching his black hair and looking at those icy blue eyes she felt warm from Noah's resemblance with her. She then sat next to him and hugged him caressing his head.

'This son of mine is so stubborn. His precocity is only surpassed by his determination'

Looking at the kid in her embrace she observed how carefully defined were his muscles and the high number of calluses on his hands. A bit of pride for such a hardworking son invaded her and so she broke the embrace and put him in front of her, hands locked on his shoulders.

"Ok I won't do anything but you must promise to be more careful! I don't want to see you in this pitiful state anymore! And don't work too hard, remember that rest is also a part of the training process. And don't you dare anymore to skip your lunch otherwise there will be consequences! Do you understand me, young man?"

Noah felt extremely warm in hearing these words. But his focus was elsewhere.

'One, two... and that's only as far as I can see'

He was counting the new signs of violence on his mother's body, it was a habit he picked up when he saw the first one appear on Lily, by the time he had requested for a teacher.

"Ok mum, I promise, I'll be careful"

Noah said while forcing a smile.

Lily looked at him for some other time and then stood up leaving the books and the case she was carrying on the bed.

"I have to go now, I will ask the servants to bring you a big meal. Always remember that your health is the most important thing. As long as you're alive you can do anything!"

She then kissed Noah on his forehead and after a last look at him, she exited the room.

Noah kept looking at the direction his mother went, the smile disappearing from his face and his bloodshot eyes acquiring a coldness that he rarely showed to others.

'324 visible ones till now, daddy is increasing his ratio.'

He would only see Rhys entering and exiting Lily's room randomly, never once his eyes went to the son of his.

'It seems that I can only practice the mental energy at night or my mother might see the after-effects of it, I don't want to worry her'

As coldness enveloped him, the pain on his head kept going but he totally ignored it.

'I spent about four hours in the sea of consciousness, I can probably stay for more time if I force myself, I just have to understand the recovery rate with one night of sleep'

He looked outside the window and saw that it was probably still five or six in the afternoon. Then he shifted his attention on the books to his side.

'Twin saber style and Forging of Seven Hells, apparently my Master wants me to get accustomed to the treatment even if he hates it so much.'

He first picked the book describing the saber style and started reading it, ignoring the pain it caused to his head.

'It is indeed a complete martial art and the usage of the "Breath" seems a bit easier than with the snake-wrist technique'



In order to activate the true power of the martial art, one had to move the "Breath" according to a specific rhythm and pattern and then he had to synchronize this manipulation with the correct body movement.

'I can't really train it now since it might do more harm than good but tomorrow in the morning I will definitely start practicing it.'

He closed the book and opened the case, a short saber was inside of it. Its quality seemed to surpass the one he stole from the training yard.

'What a nice saber, William is really taking this Master stuff seriously.'

Then he took a look at the book containing the Forging of Seven Hells method, in the meantime, an abundant meal composed of rice and chicken meat arrived.

Noah ran through the information contained in the book while eating, a bit of nausea due to the strong headache arose from his stomach but he forced himself to eat anyway.

'The Mad Doctor joined and founded at least 12 cults to do his experiments on body-nourishing methods. The cults were responsible for providing for children of age inferior to 13 in order for him to experiment on them. At the end of the process, the Seven Hells method was created but the mortality rate only got lowered from 99% to 85% without considering the after-effects that the treatment caused on the specimens.'

Noah stopped his reading seeing that the night had come and he felt completely drained.

'I'd better go to sleep, tomorrow I'll start training with the twin sabers and I'll probably begin with mental energy late in the afternoon, I wonder if tomorrow I will see some changes from today's training.'

Thinking that he put the books to the side of his bed and the saber back in the case and went to sleep.