

Mystical 171

Chapter 171: The Day Before 1

"Grandmaster, my martial arts takes priority over my family household." The youngster replied with respect.

"Di Youwen Household?" Garen was slightly stunned as household was very well known. It had the potential to be in the top ten households in the whole Federation. They often appeared in the news as well. The household was one of the founders of this country and had great authority. They were considered the big guns in the southern region, and Garen didn't expect that a member from this household would want to join his sects.

"When did you enter White Cloud Gate?" Garen frowned.

Simon was stunned and quickly explained as he knew there must be some misunderstanding.

"Master, Yuan Reese joined when Corinne and I were taking care of the sects. He enrolled as a normal student after the battle between you and Andrela. I recommended him after I realized that he was qualified to grow even more."

"Oh?" Garen didn't expect him to join in that early on. He looked at Yuan Reese. A youngster with deep eyes and a sharp gaze. He seemed to have very high perseverance, and obviously had a strong motive.

"There are so many sects out there. Is there any reason you chose White Cloud Gate?" He asked him directly without trying to hide his suspicion.

Yuan Reese was stunned for a bit but naturally recovered from it.

"Yes. Sister Felicity and I were best of friends. She was the one who introduced me to learn martial arts."

"Ah, Felicity." Garen understood and recalled that noble and naughty woman. "If it's her then it'd be expected. How is she now?"

"She's well, except that she is currently grounded and isn't allowed out of the house." Yuan Reese softly replied. This youngster seemed to be very soft and weak when he spoke. He looked so elegant that he didn't look like a male at all. People might have sized him up as a female if not for his adam's apple.

After looking at Yuan Reese and Karina again, the female was cold looking whereas the male was gentle and beautiful. Although they looked different physically, both of them had the same, firm gaze. He wasn't sure if they had joined the sects because of the benefits it would bring to their household, or if they were here on their own accord.

"Both of you have spirit. If you work hard enough you'll definitely succeed before you reach twenty years old. It all depends on whether you guys can hold up to it." Garen nodded his head in satisfaction. No matter how you looked at it, Both of them represented the power of complete surrender on this land and a powerful household in this country. The White Cloud Gate would be fine with these two around. This was especially true for Yuan Reese as he, a household member of the top ten households in the Federation, and even enrolled into the White Cloud Gate, meaning that he acknowledged Garen and the entire White Cloud Gate.

"Since Grandmaster is here, I have a question to ask, but I'm unsure if you would want to answer it." Yuan Reese lowered his head and asked.

"What's your question?" Garen agreed as he was in a good mood.

"It's regarding the key elements to martial art. What is the most important factor for a martial artist? What makes the martial artist able to keep moving forward?" Yuan Reese directly questioned the core of the subject.

Simon, Corinne and even Garen was slightly stunned. If he asked this question, it meant that Yuan Reese was not mentally ready yet.

Garen looked at the beautiful boy again. Through his gaze, he saw a firm and strong will.

Only a faint breath and heartbeat could be heard in the performance hall, as no one spoke for a short while.

Yuan Reese continued staring at Garen. Although he looked relaxed, he was actually under a tremendous amount of pressure. He felt like something was pressing onto him whenever he tried to inhale. Sweat started to break out from his temple and flowed down along his face.

He had the same feeling when he met his uncle who was a lieutenant general. However it was not as intense as this. Even meeting the patriarch of the parliaments wasn't this terrifying.

It was totally different from them. When he faced the Grandmaster Garen, he felt a sense of horror.

Yuan Reese's was so horrified that his hair all over his body were frozen. It was as if there was an abyss in front of him and the moment he leaned forward he would fall into it.

"Your household didn't agree to let you join the sects, right?" Garen suddenly questioned him.

Yuan Reese was stunned and bit his lips.

"Yes. They strongly opposed me from joining. I came here without their knowledge."

"This!!..." Simon and Corinne were both stunned.

Being a member of the top ten households in the Federation meant he had a huge authority.

"Didn't you say they agreed to let you join?" Simon panicked.

"Sorry master." Yuan Reese lowered his head and apologized. "I was being capricious." He hadn't really wanted to join the White Cloud Gate. At first, he just wanted to have fun and take it as a leisurely hobby. He didn't expect to be targeted by Simon when they were having a conversation.

Even Simon agreed to let him become his disciple without a second doubt.

He wasn't even sure how important was the relationship between a master and a disciple in the martial art world. Yuan Reese didn't hold this relationship in high regard as well, and both of them confusingly went through the process of learning the Mammoth Secret Technique.

It was too late when Yuan Reese realized that something was not right. He wasn't able to break off this relationship since he had learnt and experienced the secret techniques of the White Cloud Gate. Not to mention, he even consumed the body quenching pill.

Garen had already made a name for himself here when he decided to break off the relationship with Simon.

The relationship between a master and disciple had become a complicated situation.

As Yuan Reese thought of this, he raised his head and looked at Simon. Both of them were speechless.

It would be considered a rebellion if Yuan Reese leave the sects now. Simon, who knew of Rosetta's outcome started to fear for Yuan Reese, who also knew Rosetta's situation as well. This was one of the reason why he wanted to meet Garen through Simon.

Garen smiled as if he was not concerned with the situation.

"Regarding your question, I can tell you the answer. However, every martial artist has their own answer to this question."

"Please enlighten me, Grandmaster." Yuan Reese collected himself and replied.

"In my opinion, there are two key elements to a martial artist." Garen slowly said.

"Number one: Talent. To be more precise, physical talent. You'll learn faster and save more time if you're physically stronger. This allows you to go to the higher level."

Everyone nodded as they agreed with the explanation.

"Second: Spirit." Garen raised one of his fingers to emphasize on this point.

"No matter if you're a hobbyist, martial artist, or even Grandmaster of Combat. Spirit is very important." Garen was slightly emotional, "Take those who fights on the street for example. If one were spiritually threatened before the fight, will it determine the outcome of the battle?"

Garen continued his explanation as they seemed to be confused.

"If two commoners with the same physical attribute, strength and speed fight, the one with weaker spirit would have less confidence in himself and try to defend and avoid more. The one with a stronger spirit would continuously attack. If there are no major unexpectations, the winner will always be the one with stronger spirit."

"I'm starting to understand." Yuan Reese frowned.

d

Garen looked at Karina, who seemed to understand the idea as well. Both children had a strong sense of understanding. Corinne obviously understood the answer. However, Simon was the only one who didn't get it.

"What about the tier of the martial artist?" Yuan Reese followed up with another question.

"Martial artists want to be stronger so that they can showcase their courage and challenge the limits of the human body. so that they could become the Grandmaster of Combat." Garen calmly explained. "The spirit of martial art is formed from the courage and spirit of the user, which will show the personality of the martial artist. The effects differ from everyone. Some use courage to oppress the enemy, some use it to disrupt the enemy's spirit. Since I have not met many Grandmasters of Combat, my knowledge here is limited."

"What's the importance of spirit to a Grandmaster of Combat then?" Yuan Reese asked another question again.

"It's too early for you to ask such a question." Garen sat down firmly as he looked at Yuan Reese, who was a youngster not older than fifteen years old. He was indeed a good seedling as he was able to converse with him without feeling pressured.

"However, I can tell you a little bit."

Garen answered him with some admiration.

"If you have a weak spirit, you will not be able to react fast enough to the enemy's attack and the sudden change in the situation. If you have a weak spirit, you'll hesitate, and slow down when it comes to making a decision. One mistake leads to another, and this causes the fighter to lose confidence in his decision, which then delays his actions even further. The chances of winning will definitely lessen, no matter how strong you are."

He added on: "If your spirit isn't strong enough, you'll not be able to react in time due to your hesitation. Most of the time it will be that crucial moment that decides the outcome of the battle. This is the importance of spirit and courage."

"This is why a lot professionals would try to break the opponent before battle. If they succeed, the opponent's chances of winning will greatly diminish." Garen looked at Yuan Reese and continued, "Professionals who do not have a strong spirit will use other methods to attack their opponent. For example, they would use words to agitate, or hidden schemes to fight their opponent,"

"I understand." Yuan Reese nodded his head. "In short, one has a higher chance of losing a battle of equals, if one's spirit is disturbed. This is because one is unable to bring out his true strength as the spirit, hence the chances of winning will decrease."

"How do we increase our spirit then?"

"This depends on the individual itself. There are a lot of methods in strengthening one's spirit. All you need to do is find a method that suits you best." Garen didn't give him any indication. He couldn't help but to smile as he looked at the four of them who was pondering on what he just said.

"You can ask me any questions now since both of you, namely Simon and Corinne, will be managing the White Cloud Gate in the future."

Simon and Corinne looked at each other and stood up.

"Please teach us more master."

Both of them started to put out the White Cloud Gate's pose as they were ready to fight.

Seeing the situation, both Yuan Reese and Karina got up and moved back.

"Come at me both at once. Let me see how much you have improved." Garen sat firmly and didn't move at all.

Chapter 172: The Day Before 2

After correcting Corinne's and Simon's mistakes as well as answering their questions, Garen started cleaning up the mess that was White Cloud Gate after his departure.

His sister's exams were already over. Garen visited his family for a bit, asked a little about his sister's result. Ying Er scored normally, one subject wasn't that great, another she did wonderfully, cancelling each other out.

Ying Er planned to apply to Shengying University, which is the direct pathway from Shengying Academy.

Under the influence of Golden Hoop, Huaishan and other surrounding districts were like metal buckets, safe and secure. The only thing Golden Hoop lacks was the presence of a high-powered individual, otherwise they were equally matched to other influences in the world. They can even take care of his sister slightly under the name of Shengying University.

Garen also arranged for Second Senior Brother Joshua to take care of most of the properties of White Cloud Gate.

Garen also modified some misconceptions in the Mammoth Secret Technique, choosing nuggets of better fleshed out methods in other secret martial arts and modifying it. Even though, at the highest level, other people will still not be able to use the secret technique like he does, it was much better than the regular third-rate secret technique, approaching a second-rate secret technique like the Red Jade Palm.

He also asked Corinne to talk to Ying Er as a fellow woman to gauge if she's willing to join White Cloud Gate to learn secret martial arts.

Ying Er's talent in learning secret martial arts was average, however, she does have a great understanding of bowmanship, so she's not willing to waste time on secret martial arts.

She had enough training to protect herself without a weapon. To raise her level, she'll need to spend her time mainly on martial arts, which she's not willing to do. After all, no one can be like Garen with his abnormal special abilities.

Any discipline will need focus to allow oneself to achieve better results. Stronger secret martial arts would mean one would need to spend more time in maintaining their training, otherwise it would be like rowing a boat against the current, the boat would reverse even if one doesn't move.

The adaptability of human body would make any fighter forget their training.

Garen, however, is different. His special ability has completely eliminated his body's ability to forget, solidifying his physical attributes. In other words, he would not have bad days, but he would also not be able to perform beyond his standard. That's because his progression and regression of power all depend on his physical attributes.

With sloth and self-indulgence, the body will naturally think it doesn't need to maintain the physical conditions anymore, and will slowly decrease nutritional supply and finally degenerate,

With high pressure, the body will keep requiring more power to adapt to the situation and solve the threat from the outside world.

This is Darwin's Theory of Evolution*, it is a natural instinct of every living being.

Garen have always known that. Hence, his special ability is his biggest secret, no one else other than him knew about it. Ever since his attributes grew stronger, he can no longer improve his physique with just training, it's as if he was in a perfectly stable condition.

For every gain, there will be a loss. He knew that. His special ability disabled his ability to forget, making him stronger, but at the same time losing his adapting mechanism.

He finally realized, this special ability takes root in the world view and the limitless knowledge he had access to from Earth. His subconscious used these knowledge to create a reflection of his special ability in a way that's most suitable for him, by becoming a game-esque status bar.

After tying up loose ends, he left Huaishan City with going to University as an excuse, and took the train straight to Harmony City, planning to go to Skylark Mountain Waterfall from there.

The Confederation and Weisman's conflict has already started, as reflected by the small clashes at the border. The newspaper from both ends had already evolved into a medium for the war of words.

Even on the train he would see Confederate soldiers being mobilized to conduct training exercises.

The normal train service in Confederate was not luxurious, there were no beds in those. Only special trains will have this service. Garen was on normal trains the last few times he took them, but as of now, he managed to get on a special train, utilizing Golden Hoop's special power. The train had only five compartments for a dozen people to rest in.

There were food, drinks, magazines, and newspapers, all available for free. As a special train, it takes priority over other trains, hence it was fast traveling in it. The whole trip to Harmony City spent only about a day.

By now, his fame has already spread past the whole of the South, even Northerners have heard about him.

During the battle at Crimson Sand Sword Gate main branch, he single-handedly defended a joint attack from Behemoth Gate and Black Mark Association, which included the hunting team from Weisman. Compared to the battle with Andrela, this battle is far more dangerous.

Alighting the train, Garen led Cynthia and Jack into a special passage, and exited the train station under the protection of marshals.

The sky was still dim.

The street was littered with a few cars and carriages. There was a silver car in the midst of it, doors wide open, a young girl holding the door with a smile.

The girl was dressed in a purple gown and wore a black crystal earring, looking graceful and delicate.

"Hi master, it's been a while."

Garen walked onto the street and saw this girl waving at him, smiling.

"Aris, how are you here?"

Su Lin's sister Aris approached him with a cheeky smile, her arms wrapping around Garen naturally.

"Why can't I be here? Let's go, rest for a bit at my place. When you're in Harmony City, you've got to let me be a good host! I have already booked a large room at Rose's Whisper, a lot of my girlfriends couldn't wait to meet you!"

"Stop that, I have business to attend to, I won't be here for long." Garen felt a slight helplessness.

"But all my friends really wanted to meet you, master, come with Rissy~~~" Aris immediately pressed her bust against Garen's arm in a coquettish way, her aristocratic elegance completely missing from her behavior.

"I really do have things to do. Maybe next time. Tell your dad I said hello." Garen declined decisively.

The battle with White Bird Holy Fist Palosa is what he have been looking forward to. Even now, he's slightly excited just thinking about it, not wanting to do anything else.

Aris' intention of introducing him to her friends may not be that simple. Her resorting to acting coquettishly, it must be some other reasons.

Garen gave it a thought, "Let's do it this way. Vanhatten."

A man in black stepped forward.

"Yes sir, is there anything I can do?"

"Help Aris with whatever she needs help with." Garen didn't hesitate utilizing this subordinate Golden Hoop has assigned him.

"Consider it done." Vanhatten smiled gently, "Miss Aris, you need not trouble Master Garen with the issue with Felicia Sisterhood, your brother could've solved it himself."

"You knew?" Aris was slightly taken aback, and looked at the black haired youth.

Aris herself banded together with a few friends to found a sisterhood and gained some influence in the Eliza Province. Recently, they got into a row with some other groups with some other princelings and princesslings*. She wanted to get Garen to show up at her party so she could take advantage of his fame to suppress their arrogance.

From her father, she found out about the extent of Garen's influence. The authorities were also shocked at Garen's battle record. He was almost like a humanoid beast. Even the Weisman Hunting Team barely scratched him, as if he's more durable than the armor of a tank.

Anyone who offended Garen would be hard-pressed to fight back without a cannon. Only by fleeing early on can they be safe.

"Hm, that's also fine. I only needed master's fame on my side." Aris grinned this time.

"What's the matter?" Garen was slightly curious.

The black haired youth Vanhatten started explaining.

The Felicia Sisterhood hosted an underground fighting tournament in Harmony City. It was pretty prominent, and had recruited a batch of underground boxers to fight in a death match, at the same time, they opened bets to earn a huge profit. Recently however, an outsider organization from another area brought their boxers to fight in the tournament. The boxers were so strong, Felicia Sisterhood's boxers kept losing, almost to the point of them losing all their money. It is then that Aris wanted to borrow Garen's fame to warn the other party.

"Underground boxers? Are they strong?" Garen's interest was piqued.

"It's hard to say, some of them have some martial arts experience, some are descendents of fallen martial arts family. Some of them were even martial artists who led a poor life, you can find any kind of people in there. Some fighters also did that before their breakthrough." Vanhatten explained.

The three people stood in front of the car but didn't get in. Garen shifted, holding the car door for support.

"Leo should be nearby, isn't he? How is he?" He looked at Cynthia behind him.

Cynthia was attempting to blow bubble with her bubblegum. Hearing the question, she sucked the bubblegum back in.

"He's alright. He injured his opponent quite badly. His opponent struggled a little, so he got slightly injured as well."

Garen nodded satisfactorily. To shrug off his past, King of Fist Leo attacked another King of Fist from Black Mark Association, heavily injuring him from the back. The only other King of Fist was not hurt, so he drove off Leo as he tended to the injured one and damaged Leo a little.

"You got their location?"

"Yeah, we're following them, but there were people obstructing."

Kings of Fist from Black Mark Association were also Grandmasters of Combat. They were also looking forward to Garen's challenge against White Bird Holy Fist Palosa before they were surprised by Leo.

It was also a pledge of Leo's loyalty toward Garen. That man is a fanatic who would disregard everything for his ideals.

"Let's check him out. We can let Leo do something about Aris' problems."

Garen also wanted to whittle down the power of Black Mark Association. Their interference with White Cloud Gate was still fresh in his mind.

"What are you talking about?" Aris was confused, "Is this Leo strong?"

There are so many Leos on this world, it isn't strange that she doesn't know.

"Stop worrying, someone will take care of your problems really soon." Garen smiled, "Let's go. I need to borrow your car. Jack, you'll drive."

"Of course!" Jack opened the door from the driver seat like a pro.

Translator's Thoughts

J_Squared J_Squared

1. It's actually Classical Conditioning by Pavlov. Author has not done his research.

2. 太子党 lit. Party's Crown Princes, are the descendants of prominent and influential senior officials in the country. It is not a political party, but an informal, and often derogatory, categorization to signify those benefiting from nepotism and cronyism, by analogy with crown princes in hereditary monarchies. "Princesslings" is the female variant.

Chapter 173: Disappointment 1

In a forest between Harmony City and Vilmahn City.

The evening sun showered its golden rays ornamented with vermillion ribbons, painting the trees and hills with a reddish-orange.

At the peak of a hillock surrounded by pine trees, white buildings stood.

The buildings looked like individual cubes and rectangular prisms huddling up together under a blanket of artichoke green roofs.

From its side, at the exit of the buildings, two people in black supported each other by the arm and walked out, drenched in sweat. They walked warily, as if trying to avoid something.

They were a man and a woman, both of them had blonde hair.

The man was ugly. He had a crooked mouth pointing upward to the right, he looked as strange as strange can be.

The woman was pleasant looking, but pale. Her blonde hair was damp with sweat and sticking to her forehead.

Both of them descended the stone stairs leading away from the monastery in quick steps.

"Be strong! He couldn't find us, by now he should have left!" The man helped the woman descend in quick but cautious steps.

"Leo, that traitor! I'm sorry, Manila, if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't be hurt." Blonde woman said in sorrow.

"That's okay, I'm willing to do that for you." The ugly man Manila didn't hesitate to answer her.

The woman eyes glimmered, moved by his words.

"Tsk ts... how touching."

At the stone stairs behind them, a fit man wearing black followed them. The handsome man had a hooked nose with bluish-black eyes. He's wearing a smirk on his face.

"Leo!" Manila glared at the man behind, as if he wanted to kill him right there and then. He turned around, shielding the woman behind him. "As Kings of Fist of Black Mark Association, how could you betray us? Why!"

"Why?" Leo scoffed.

"There's a saying in the far East, 'you can't explain snow to a worm in the summer.' Do you know what that means?" His face contorted to show a sense of fanatic enthusiasm. "I'm chasing after my dream. My justice, my determination, these are what I base my actions on. As a fellow King of Fist, as a fellow Grandmaster of Combat, I can't stand how you two are always so naive."

He lowered his right fist which was covered with a black leather glove. His knuckles were layered with scale-like silvery white metal plates.

He waved his arm, producing a sound similar to an eagle's scream.

"Manila, Ankh, for the sake of my dreams," Leo held his arms up in preparation to attack, "Please die."

"You think you can take on the both of us at the same time?" The blonde woman Ankh stepped up, "Leo, you know that if we fight back with all our might, you would get badly injured or even die," She paused, "I don't know what your goal is, but you have already forced us into a corner, you've pretty much succeeded in your goal, didn't you? There is no need to have a lose-lose situation."

"Lose-lose situation?" Leo's sneered at them even more. "No, no, that won't happen. You see, no amount of struggle could mean anything in front of Lord Garen."

Stunned, Manila and Ankh slowly turned to look behind. On the stone step below them, a huge figure stood, observing them. They didn't know when he arrived.

"Garen!"

Shivers crept up on their skins.

The strongest elite from the Southern Martial Arts community! An undefeatable man seconded only to Palosa!

They stared at Garen's still silhouette, feeling a strong pressure encasing them like an enormous shadow.

Garen stared back at both of the Kings of Fist of Black Mark Association, completely blocking the road downhill.

As one of the strongest fighters in the Martial Arts community, Garen's presence itself was a serious impact toward the both of them.

He stood there, allowing his massive Bravery fill the air around him. The Bravery was thick, as though it's going to solidify at any time. It was like a mountain, even though it's lower than the both of them, it felt as if they can only look up to it.

"Black Mark Association... is finished..." Manila paled completely. As soon as Garen appeared, he knew this whole saga was going to arrive at its final act. They should have thought about the retribution when Black Mark Association sprang that attack on White Cloud Gate.

Ankh's smile was one of sadness. "Let Manila go, I will ensure mother give everything to White Cloud Gate!"

Garen shook his head slowly. "You don't have the authority to discuss conditions with me. Don't you realize? The Confederation had been chaotic recently. A new age will come. Between Weisman and the Confederation, Confederation had been weak."

He looked at them in a composed manner.

"A war will break out. The stronger your individual power is, the safer you are on the battlefield. King of Fist Ankh, your father realized that. That was why he founded Black Mark Association. That was also why Celestial Circle Gate and Crimson Sand Sword Gate want a unified power."

Silence fell upon everyone like a blanket. The surrounded two were almost desperate enough to try and charge past their enemies.

The golden afternoon rays poured past the leaves and the branches, and finally found their spot on Garen's figure.

His squinted slightly, his gaze still fixed on the Kings of Fist who huddled together.

"Killing you does not benefit me in any way."

The two finally loosened up, understanding the undertones of his speech.

"We will tell you about the Grandmaster of Combat who hurt Master Fei! Black Mark Association will also be appertained to Lord Garen." A voice belonging to an old lady beseeched from behind Garen.

The old lady approached with several masked men with cold eyes.

"We will surrender all the people who joined the operation." She said, in her low voice.

Garen was waiting for her, the proprietor of Black Mark Association, the mother of King of Fist Ankh, Vivian-Rita.

"Go arrange the necessary. That will be all today." Garen said, aloof. He turned around to look at the old lady. Black Mark Association no longer has any threat after the battle at Crimson Sand Sword Gate.

On the other hand, there was still no news about Behemoth Gate. Their power were too individualized, difficult to track through the grapevines.

Garen didn't say anything more. He strolled down the stone stairs with Leo following behind, eventually disappearing from the long winding staircase.

Vivian-Rita and the two Kings of Fist stared at their leaving silhouettes. They understood Garen will definitely attack Black Mark Association if they decided to go back on their words. From the moment Garen appeared, it wouldn't have mattered if the Kings of Fist were healthy anyway,

It was already 9 p.m. when they returned to Vilmahn City.

After witnessing the power Garen amassed through his strength alone, Black Mark Association announced their intention to be appertained under White Cloud Gate.

A negotiation like this can't be settled within a day, of course. Black Mark Association was delaying it until the battle between Garen and White Bird Holy Fist is over.

All of Garen's influence is based on the absoluteness of his strength. If the battle between him and White Bird Holy Fist went awry, the deal would be called off immediately.

Not only them, every organization with influences were focusing on that battle that signifies the replacement of the strongest force between two generations of fighters.

Fighters from every sect swarmed into the city in which Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate was stationed, even some unpopular fighters gathered in the dark.

Celestial Circle Gate, Crimson Sand Sword Gate, The Northern Martial Arts Union, as well as sects Garen haven't even heard of all flocked into the city, some of them wanting to witness the higher realms of Martial Arts, some others with their own ulterior motives.

The government mobilized the army to take care of the orderliness, but there were still fights happening all over the city, dragging the whole of Vilmahn City into chaos.

During the time which people gathered in Vilmahn City, several people dressed in white led Garen, Leo and others toward the depth of Skylark Mountain.

The sky was dimly lit.

At the edge of a large still lake, the three people in white hastily led Garen and the other three, looking like a line of black and white ants beside a moss green mirror.

Greenish-yellow trees and bushes littered around the lakeside. Some of them were bent toward the water, some even had their leaves and branches dipped into it.

Garen stepped on the damp muddy road, following the people in white, as he looked toward the right at the lake.

Somewhere in front was a pier covered with undergrowths and trees. It looked just like a roll of green threads floating on the water from afar.

Garen turned his attention back onto himself and moved his neck a little. A thumb-sized red-and-black mosquito wobbled out of his collar and fell to the ground before squashed by Garen with a stomp.

Aside from him and Leo, the people in white as well as Cynthia and Jack were fully wrapped up, reproducing the effect of a hazmat suit.

A man in white saw the scene and a trace of worry flashed through his eyes.

Gwarr!

A sudden roar came from the bank of a river in front.

A black bear stood beside the bank, watching over two little ones which are playing in the water, learning to catch a fish.

The black bear glared at the group and slowly moved its strong paws to face them. It growled in warning to the intruders. The two little bears stopped as well, staring at the group in curiosity.

A taller man in white stepped forward. He took out a small vial and gently opened the stopper.

Smelling something, the black bear shrank and growled. It took its cubs and left the vicinity of the lake, disappearing into the woods.

"Let's go." One of the people in white murmured.

Garen and the others followed. "We're almost there, please cover your nose and mouth with that thing and be patient just a little more." He added.

Garen and the team didn't reply, instead they took out a small wooden white bottle and placed it under their noses.

A faint smell of green grass permeated the air around the group.

Chapter 174: Disappointment 2

"This area here is restricted to people with Sir Palosa's secret medicine. Without it, it's impossible to go deep into the mountains." The leader of the people in white explained, "There's poisonous gas all over the deeper parts of this forest. People who wandered in without the medicine died after having ulcerated." He took a glance at Garen, "Unless they have Mr. Garen's physical constitution."

Garen didn't make much of it, being a sky warrior of Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate, he was considered part of the sect. This battle can more or less be considered as an intersectional exchange.

The only thing is, at their level of fame and fighting ability, the aftermath of the battle will be colossal no matter who won. To minimize the influence this event will cause, the Gate Master of Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate sent Garen and his team in earlier than was expected.

Going to the mountains earlier doesn't necessarily mean no one would ever find out, but at least it would be concealed from a huge number of people. Through the poisonous gas, even less people would get to know about this fight.

Garen and White Bird Holy Fist's fight has already been listed as the highest priority classified information. Nobody aside from the Gate Master and Elders who are leading were allowed to watch.

Garen only brought Leo, Cynthia, and Jack. Cynthia and Jack were total outsiders, they wouldn't be able to comprehend a fight between Grandmasters of Combat like this anyway, so they're fine. With Leo, Garen brought him because he wanted to cultivate an efficient right hand man.

After warning them about things to look out for, the three in white continued marching toward the deep end of Skylark Mountain. They have been in motion since 3 a.m. of the previous night*, and even then, they were only entering the depth of Skylark Mountain, it's still a long way before arriving at the Skylark Mountain Waterfall.

On their way there, some faint green mist slowly appeared in the air in front of them. Most of it hovered just above the water surface, some escaped into the woods, as if they were semitransparent threads floating in the air.

All of them clutched their vials tightly below their noses, allowing the mild scent of freshly mown grass take over their olfactory sense, separating the misty gas.

Even so, Cynthia and Jack were having itchiness all over their bodies, making them paranoid and nervous.

Garen suddenly frowned and raised his right arm. With the speed of a snap, he pinched a jade colored string.

It came from the woods on their left, shooting at the neck of the woman in white.

Hissss...

The string struggled in Garen's hand, hissing like a snake does.

It was only then the other people noticed the furtive creature.

It looked just like a green wire without a head or a tail, squirming in Garen's hand. No one can be sure from where they produced the sound.

If it hadn't moved, no one would probably guessed it was a living thing.

"Viridian Nematode!" The leading man in white's face changed, "Karen, did you bring anything made of iron in here!" He shot an accusing look at the woman.

"I... I brought a blue iron ring... It's my birthday present from my son." Karen stuttered.

"Blue iron ring? Did you want to die?" The leader of the people in white yelled in exasperation, "Throw it away now! If it weren't for Mr. Garen, you're already dead! Viridian Nematodes love iron products, wearing it without the power to repel it, I'd have thought you have a death wish!"

"I'm sorry..." Karen fumbled to take it off, and threw it far into the bushes.

In an instant, a horde of green strings lynched at the ring, rolling it into a ball as big as a fist, and at the same time writhing around it.

Everyone felt goosebumps crawling underneath their skins seeing that.

Garen gave the one on his finger a dirty look, it's like a wire, but much stronger.

His other hand reached up to pull it apart lightly. It's unexpectedly unyielding.

Both sides of the worm kept trying to break his skin, as if they are attracted to the bloodstream. It kept drilling into the skin near his veins.

Ding! Ding!

The sound of microscopic needles hitting the surface of a metal kept ringing, spooking everyone around.

Especially the people in white, they weren't looking at the Viridian Nematode, but Garen.

They are very clear about how deadly those worms can be with its durable body and powerful piercing abilities, they can even punch a hole in a steel board as thick as a nail.

However, when dealing with Garen's skin, it only managed to produce sounds like this.

Seeing how the worm just continued attacking Garen's skin, but never succeeding, the people in white felt weak in their teeth.

"This thing..." Garen frowned, "Leo, Cynthia, Jack. Be mindful of their attacks. Have you cleared out your iron products?"

"Yes."

"None on me."

Leo nodded as well.

"I will destroy them when they strike." He wore a thick black leather gloves with a matte finish.

"Just be careful. It's a little tricky." His frown became more intense.

He pinched both ends of the Viridian Nematode and pulled.

Crack!

The Viridian Nematode were spliced into two.

The weird thing is, even though it's in two pieces, it still wiggled about as if it didn't matter. As two individuals, they attacked both of Garen's arms respectively.

"These are really tenacious." Garen clapped his hands together and started grinding. Within seconds, the Viridian Nematode was ground into green powder, and sprinkled from Garen's palms.

"Mr. Garen, there were some other troubles in front, please be careful." The leading man in white reminded them.

The woman in white, Karen, was ordered to return.

The rest continued their hike.

Soon, the group met some other rather bothersome creatures.

Black spiders as big as a washbasin. White carps with sharp teeth hanging about at the edge of the lake. Giant black ants the size of a chicken egg.

All sorts of horrific animals and bugs appeared in their path.

Cynthia and Jack were already stiff with anxiety, having their guards up constantly.

Even the King of Fist Leo had his scalp tingling and unleashed some Bravery to surround him, in attempt to turn some creatures away. If those things came near him, even if he's a Grandmaster of Combat, he would probably have problems fighting them.

Garen was amazed, but he didn't show it on his face, following the men in white closely.

The uniforms the men in white received was specially made and can prevent most of the deadly attacks from the creatures, but Garen didn't cover up fully, so there's still some bugs attacking him.

Without exceptions, the bugs would touch his skin and immediately be paralyzed and bounced away. By the time they hit the ground, they are already dead.

At Garen's level, the Counter Shockwave* as a result of the Body Hardening Technique can directly kill the bugs.

To him, as long as nothing broke his defense, nothing can threaten him.

Currently, his Spirit is always nurturing his body, even his weakest, the visceral organs, are strengthening by the minute.

The group had some jerky-filled breads for lunch, and continued hiking until late afternoon. A crescendo of the sound of flowing water came from the front.

With every step, the sound grew stronger and clearer.

After a few turns, the group finally arrived at the breakage of the lake.

The lake water flowed toward the cliff on their right, tempestuously free-falling for thirty-odd meters before crashing into the pool below, forming a huge white waterfall.

The group walked through the path on the left of the waterfall, arriving at an enormous white boulder.

The waterfall is like a white cloth tens of meters in length, hanging on a black cliff. In front of the oval greenish pool, a petite old man in white robes was fishing on the rock with a fishing pole.

The old man sat there, unmoving. Only the fishing pole swayed occasionally with the rapid water.

Garen followed the men in white behind the old man, and stood. With his eyesight, he could see there were worms so green they might as well be black swimming in the pool.

These worms are like enlarged loquat worms*. They have eight short legs and hard shells, as well as round bodies as large as a washbasin.

The old man heard the approaching guests and gently set down the fishing pole. He fixed the pole under a large rock before turning around.

"It's been a long time since you visited, little Bondi. You're such a big man now." The old man turned toward the leading man in white.

"It's all thanks to grandpa." He bowed and answered.

"You brought outsiders here?" The old man suddenly turned to Garen and his team before focusing on Garen and Leo. "Are they from our sect?"

Garen frowned slightly. The old man may have been living in seclusion for a while, he didn't care and didn't know anything from the outside world. He didn't even know what they are here for.

"White Bird Holy Fist Sir Palosa?" He asked. "My name is Garen."

The old man took a double take. "It's been so long before anyone called me by my title," He smiled, "Is there anything I can help you with? Looking at your age and your Bravery, you must have some kind of a story."

"I'm here to seek consultation about Martial Arts." Garen took a step forward in front of everybody.

The man in white retreated while giving signals to others to follow suit, giving the two space.

Garen placed his hands behind him.

"I have fought Duskdune Shura twice. He had nothing but good things to say about you, sir. He reckoned you were the strongest fighter of the contemporary, the peak of Martial Arts! As the strongest in my generation, I wish to seek advice from you."

"Duskdune Shura?" Palosa's wrinkly face was covered with nostalgia for a second. "He's a genius, even when I was younger. Our relationship was never good, I didn't think he would give me such a high praise."

He woke from his nostalgia, and his gaze fell upon Garen's hands, shaking his head.

"Too bad I already sealed my fist* a year ago. Please leave, I will not have this fight with you."

Chapter 175: Age of the Pinnacle 1

Garen's face sank. The Palosa in front of him looked like any old man on the street, kind, lovely, not a strand of the aura of a Grandmaster of Combat, and no sign of Bravery. Then again, Garen understood the ability to survive in such a grisly environment is no easy feat, not to mention he seemed to be doing quite well.

"Sealed fist a year ago? Sir Palosa, I am also a Sky Warrior of Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate. Don't you think that shouldn't apply to a friendly exchange with a fellow member of the sect?"

Palosa smiled.

"Listen, kid. My fist technique is completely different from yours. Your Secret Fist Technique is almost at the highest mastery. I can tell, your Body Hardening Technique is almost as good as Duskdune Shura's. At your age, you already achieved what Duskdune Shura can only achieve at his mid-life. With only that, you are at the top of the whole Confederation. At this stage, whatever you're trying to prove, I understand. However, I'm not the direction you're after. What you wanted to see, I want to see too."

Garen silenced, he heard the underlying meaning behind Palosa's words. He hadn't been able to step further into the Martial Arts Realm as well.

"I would still like to witness the legendary, unbeatable White Bird Holy Fist."

"White Bird Holy Fist, it's only a name my colleagues gave me. I only knew one fist technique, and that was White Bird Fist." Palosa answered with a smile. "I'm not like the prodigy Duskdune Shura or the terrifyingly talented Watson Langley. What I am good with is White Bird Fist. I spent my whole life, all my energy into this fist technique. I have sealed my fists, I will not fight you, but I can show you once."

"Show me?" Garen squinted.

"The Martial Arts community has been weaker and weaker for past generations. Garen, is it? I will show you with a tenth of my power. Don't blink an eye." Palosa smiled warmly while he slowly walked to a mossy boulder on the left.

"Watch carefully, this is where I am with fist techniques!" Palosa lifted his right arm with his index finger pointing forward.

Punch!

Everything around seemed to have stopped in time.

The air, the water, the worms, the grass, as well as all sorts of voices that came from afar.

Even the massive waterfall halted for an instant.

Everyone stopped in that very moment. No thoughts, no actions, as if they were covered with solidified amber. There weren't able to move or think, time may as well have been frozen.

Boom!

A black Bravery burst out of Palosa's body like a shapeless smoke. Black smoke congregated behind Palosa, forming a giant silhouette about ten meters tall with a formless lower body.

Garen was able to see, the upper half of that silhouette was definitely Palosa with the same features and the same age.

However, it looks different. The Palosa formed with Bravery held a twisted grin, distinguishing itself from the kind man Palosa had appeared to be.

"This is... Bravery solidified!"

Garen's mouth dropped and haven't been able to move it since. Of all the people, only he had been trembling violently, trying to break free of this frozen state.

"This is my White Bird Fist." Palosa murmured softly.

His finger pressed against the mossy boulder standing two meters tall in front of him.

With that, the alarming pressure disappeared. Everyone had recovered their ability to move.

Cracks appeared on the mossy boulder. There was no explosions, no bursting into powder, nothing superfluous.

However, as soon as cracks formed, it still gave everyone a shock seeing the crack.

Centering on where Palosa touched, cracked flared out all over the mossy boulder, forming a complex network of sort.

Cracks crossed each other and made their way to the other side of the boulder, meeting at one point on the left side of it.

All the cracks converged into a single spot, with a deep hole appearing on that spot on the boulder.

Garen looked at the spot Palosa tapped, there was only a small thumbprint on it.

He went quiet.

"Silent Redirection Punch?"

"Oh, you knew that?" Palosa turned to him, "I'm already too old, or I could have given it a hundred cracks, instead of ninety-nine."

He caressed the surface of the boulder.

"This is my White Bird Fist. I need not break people's defense to be able to redirect the strength, in order to attack the heart of my enemy from all sides."

"This is the most heinous assassination punch. Before me, all the heir for this technique were natural butchers who had felled people like woodcutters do trees. With every punch they make, another person dies. Even I couldn't contain my Bravery when I use this fist technique to fight. Do you still want to fight me?"

The solidified Bravery disappeared from Garen's senses abruptly.

When normal Grandmasters of Combat show their Bravery, it's gaseous. Stronger ones have their Bravery concentrated to a liquid state, like Duskdune Shura and his current state. This is the first time ever has he seen one with solid state, one so powerful it could almost stop time.

"Confinement Bravery, Bravery is the Spirit of a Grandmaster of Combat, compressed. To be able to achieve the solid state, the strength of your will and Spirit are hard for people to comprehend." Garen was not able to break out of the solid Bravery, but he as a Grandmaster of Combat cannot be scared away with just a few words.

Palosa represented the ultimate fighting ability of the human community, no matter what, Garen would want to try and fight him. That was his initial goal after all.

"Really?" Palosa furrowed his brows and stared at Garen.

"This is what I came for." Garen returned the stare with his own.

"Once I start, I can't guarantee I have control over myself. If I accidentally killed you..."

"Kill me?" Garen interrupted, smirking. "If you are able to do that, try." Garen was fuming by now.

"I really don't want to touch another fellow sect member's blood any more." Palosa winced in pain, "Leave. If I couldn't control myself and crippled you... I have made too many mistakes in my life."

Garen was seething in fury.

"If you crippled me, that's my fault, I'm not strong enough, I have a death wish, nothing to do with you! Stop the dilly-dally and fight me!"

The old man was still acting nice and kind, but he kept provoking Garen with his tone of voice.

"Kid, you're still young. If you are handicapped by this, it'll be a burden to your family and friends. If anything happened to you, I will not be able to face your parents." Palosa said, placing his arms behind his back.

"I will be responsible to myself! This is my choice. As a Grandmaster of Combat, I will take on all my responsibilities!" Garen's voice gets stronger and louder as he went on. "Weren't you only waiting for this?" He smirked. "If anything happens, I will take full responsibility for my actions, not you!"

"You're sure about this?" Palosa finally took him seriously.

"Of course." Garen started with White Cloud Gate's default stance, condensing a large amount of Bravery around him, preparing to fight at anytime.

Seeing they finally wanted to start the fight, everyone else stepped out of range to make space for them.

Garena and Palosa stood facing each other on the white boulder. In black and white respectively, it was almost too easy to tell them apart.

"Lemme see what sort of fist technique the legendary White Bird Holy Fist is!" Garen changed his stance, opening his arm on different height, as if ready to grapple, and sank lower from his waist, changing into the default stance of another fist technique.

After maximizing his intelligence, Garen was able to analyze the different techniques of different schools, and developed this unique improved fighting technique, he took the three forms of Mammoth

Secret Technique, as well as other techniques like Red Jade Palm, Fiery Claws, Golden Statue Technique, and combined them into his own unique battle skill.

This particular default stance referenced the Golden Statue Technique, it is, after all, the strongest technique within those he learned. The battle skills in it were very suitable for fighters focusing on physical enhancements like Garen.

"Golden Statue Technique?" Palosa recognized it. "If that really is the Golden Statue Technique, then I will find out how much of a golden statue you are!"

Before he finished his sentence, a massive amount of Bravery rushed at Garen, attempting to slam him down.

The solid Bravery became a gruesome psychological stress, stunning Garen in his tracks.

Thud!

He felt a dull pain shot through his chest. When he had come to, he was already halfway falling backwards.

Between Palosa's speech and his falling backward, the period when he was stunned was at most one second.

Palosa approached him with a charge, his palm softly pressed upon Garen's chest.

From the viewpoint of the audience, Palosa only hopped forward and lightly pressed his palm onto an unmoving Garen. They immediately separated after that, and Garen was suddenly flying backward.

"This again!" Mid-air, Garen hit the air twice with his palm in the opposite direction of his momentum.

Generating a strong counter force, Garen's body stopped falling backward and started landing immediately.

As soon as he balanced himself on a boulder, he saw Palosa leaped at him with his right palm flexed, ready to strike as if he's a lamb waiting to be butchered*.

"Double Shot Form!" Garen countered with both his arms, as if using two hammers to take on Palosa's palm strike.

"Don't blame me." Palosa looked at Garen with pity before utilizing his Bravery again.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

On the boulder, Palosa hit Garen once more, and immediately jumped behind him to hit him from the back.

He kept doing the same thing, like he's just hitting a baseball.

Garen's whole body was aching from the strikes, his body doesn't even need to be stunned by Palosa's Bravery anymore, even the strikes could disable him from counterattacking. Every single hit from Palosa landed exactly where he wanted to block.

Luckily, after the Body Hardening Technique fused with his Spirit, it had evolved further. When hit by Palosa's palm strikes, his body will naturally filter out most of the Hidden Power, allowing only a tiny part of it to enter the body wreaking havoc.

However, Garen's body and visceral organs were far too strong from normal humans, the Hidden Power didn't hurt him much at all.

Chapter 176: Age of the Pinnacle 2

Garen was still in his normal state. When Palosa's initial attack hit him, he already understood the destructibility of it. It was strong, but Garen would still be fine without transforming.

Using his minimum power to fight the Holy Fist was one of his wishes before he departed to hone his skills.

Strike by strike, Palosa's palm pressed on his torso. As Garen observed his fighting style, he noticed something.

Every time Palosa did a straight palm strike, he would push it upward slightly, his fist would be slightly crooked, that was so it would fit the way he uses his power. However, this would leave him with a slight opening beneath his palm.

Garen squinted, using conserving his full power waiting for the moment to counter his attack.

"Give up!" Palosa charged to the side and raised his arm, before striking the incoming Garen.

"There's my chance!" Garen flipped aside mid-air and whipped his right arm toward Palosa's underarm.

This strike is definitely Palosa's weak spot. With Garen's strength and Palosa's age, if this strike connected, it would've been a decisive point for the battle!

At the same time, Palosa's palm was quickly approaching Garen's forehead.

Both of them were attacking each other's underarm and head, respectively. Garen's attack was clearly faster.

Right at that moment.

Fwoosh!

A solid state Bravery washed over Garen's body, stunning him.

Thud!

A palm struck Garen's forehead.

Garen's legs stomped on the boulder and was shot backward. His feet slid over it, leaving two black lines on the boulder.

Everyone from afar was shocked.

"Gate Master is fine, right?" Jack swallowed out of concern. He saw Garen being hit on his head. That's his head! Not any other body part!* Combined with Palosa's incredible control over his Hidden Power...

"I'm not sure, but Gate Master is really strong too, how would he be hurt with only one strike?" Cynthia wasn't even chewing her bubble gum anymore. She said that, but her face showed a hint of worry. "Lord Leo, you're a high ranking Grandmaster of Combat, what do you think?"

Leo brows were also knitted tightly together.

"Hard to say, but since Gate Master has reached an exceptional height in his Body Hardening Technique, he might be okay."

"Might be?" Cynthia and Jack both understood, Leo was also not sure.

The Gate Master of the Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate was also closely following the happenings on the field below him. Not only him, the other man in white, the elder of his sect was stunned, like him.

From when they knew Palosa, anyone, any elites or Grandmasters of Combat, Palosa had never used a second round of attack before they were all heavily injured.

But now, Garen has already took countless hits, and they could tell Palosa was not holding back, he never would, but Garen didn't even have a scratch on him.

"This White Cloud Gate Master is terrifyingly resilient! His Body Hardening Technique is beyond belief!" Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate Master looked at Garen on the boulder, his eyes sympathetic. "Grandpa Palosa's fist technique deals damage to the inside with every attack, not even the giant alligators and giant rhinoceroses could withstand a second attack."

"Lord Palosa had apparently focused his Bravery onto Garen though," The elder said, "The situation's a little complicated now."

Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate Master nodded without a sound.

When everyone was staring at the battlefield, Garen was standing still, indicating this battle was not over.

"White Bird Holy Fist! I don't see any white birds in your fist technique." Garen waited until his breath returned to normal, and provoked. "Looks like I need to use my true power..."

Crack!

He left a crater where he stood with a stomp, charging toward Palosa as if becoming a black arrow.

"First stage!"

In mid-air, he swelled up with a fierce roar, his shirt ripped into pieces and flew away, freeing him from the hold of the solid Bravery.

A hideous dark green hand as big as a basin clawed at Palosa's face.

Palosa didn't expect his strike to not be effective toward Garen. Having the ability to take his strike at a weak point with no injury, this opponent is more accomplished in Body Hardening Technique than he thought.

Seeing Garen charging toward him like a lightning, his strength, speed, and momentum all rolled into one giant, unavoidable wave, he could only take the hit.

Thud!

Garen was hit by a whip kick on his side, his blackened torso shot into a pile of rocks.

As he was using his power, the solid Bravery appeared out of thin air, suppressing his follow-up moves. He couldn't even finish his moves before being blasted into the rock pile, crushing an uncountable number of rocks.

"Damn it, again!" Furious, Garen flipped himself back up and prepared to unleash his attacks before seeing a blur.

Thud thud thud!

A continuous string of strikes hit at the exact same spot on his chest.

Even with his first stage transformation, Garen felt his body hurt from the inside. He was being drilled further into the rock pile.

Palosa's face glowed with a slight blush, his face contorting weirdly, slowly turning into the face on his Bravery.

"So disappointing! White Cloud Gate Master Garen, how dare you speak with such extravagance with that puny strength of yours! I am so sad on behalf of your parents and siblings. No one forced you to come, yet you seek death by yourself!"

He kept on striking Garen casually, but with every strike, they had brought Garen numbness. Including the suppression from his Bravery, he was not able to move at all.

Even with the first stage transformation and its heightened defense and power surge, Garen still wasn't able to curb the incoming attacks. He could only take the hits.

As if a different person, Palosa was harsh and mean, nothing like the kind old man that he was.

Garen felt unusually smothered. Every time when he tried to attack, the Bravery would interrupt him, causing him to be hit. And the cycle repeats.

However, with every attack, Palosa would need to endure Garen's incredible Counter Shockwave, stunning him just by a little. He wasn't hurt, but the recoil was still annoying, to say the least.

Powerful strikes keep shaking up Garen's insides. Even though Body Hardening Technique has absorbed most of the blows, he was still nauseated with the constant vibration quivering throughout his body, slowing his attacks further.

"Hit me back!" Palosa's face darkened.

Both of them were still in the rock pile, their movements and strikes sputtering gravels at every direction. Their Bravery clashed with each other, causing the living beings nearby to stay away, even the worms in the pool congregated at the far end of the pool.

"You're as weak as a baby, are you sure you didn't come all the way here to be beaten up? I don't get how you managed to defeat Duskdune Shura, did you spring a surprise attack on him while he's not ready? Or did you challenge him when he's hurt? Weaklings will always be weaklings, they would never be ready for anything." Palosa sneered.

"You..." Thud!

Garen had barely replied before he was rudely interrupted, his words buried with the palm strike he got hit with. Crushed sand were blown into his eyes, forcing him to close them.

"Too weak!" Palosa struck him with his right palm.

Garen flew sideways yet again with the hit, falling into the woods nearby.

"Why are you even alive, being such a weakling!" Palosa's moved his arms in a circular motion, the darkening of his face getting more obvious as time goes by.

A sharp bird sound appeared out of nowhere. It's like a hawk's call, but at the same time similar to the cry of a crane.

Palosa blitzed forward, charging into the woods where Garen fell.

One following the other, the sound of their fist fight echoed through the woods like muted thunder.

Their audience chased after them into the woods, and saw Garen being pressed to defend against the attacks while retreating deeper into the forest.

"Skylark Finger Pierce!"

Palosa's palms glowed white, he charged toward Garen, aiming at his throat, leaving two white flashes in his trail.

"Final attack, you deserved to die if you can't block it!" Palosa's face had already warped into cruelty, his index fingers jabbing forward.

Before anything else could happen, Garen's eyes opened suddenly.

"Red Jade · Ten Thousand Mammoth Retrograde!"

His hands flared a bright scarlet to face the incoming piercing finger attack.

The fists and fingers connected.

Boom!

A liquid state Bravery broke through the suppression, forming a humongous white elephant at least a dozen meters tall behind Garen.

The elephant raised its front hooves and trumpeted. Its raised hooves correlated with Garen's arm, projecting a giant stone pillar and falling toward Palosa.

The ground rumbled with a boom.

Palosa grunted, and flew backward, crushing two trees as thick as a treehugger's arm length.

Leaves rained down by the pile.

Garen's shirt has disappeared, leaving him bare-chested in the woods. His body had grown even more, making him as tall as two meters and a half, not even the fiercest hunters in the jungle would dare to come near.

"This is my final form." Garen's calmed down, looking between the trees not far away. "Unfortunately, this world is no longer yours to dominate..."

Boom!

His figure disappeared in an instant and reappeared in front of Palosa almost immediately.

"Explosion of Heavenly Spirits*!" Garen roared and flexed, pumping his bulging arms even more, before he clawed at Palosa with an unmatched ferocity.

Slam!

Phwoosh!

A shockwave pulsed outward centering the two, fallen leaves showered them, surrounding them. It was nearly impossible to get a clear glimpse of the situation aside from gauging from the tremor.

Several trees nearby fell with crackles. These were the trees that were hit in the shockwave, countless branches poured down, causing the poisonous insects to flee their falling homes.

A dozen seconds later, only after the leaves had stopped falling that the others who were spectating the fight were able to see what happened clearly.

Garen's hands clawed at Palosa's face, but was stopped and constricted by Palosa's arms.

Both the fighters froze in place. A black human-like Bravery and a white mammoth Bravery tugged at each other, trying to gain an upper hand against the other.

A drop of blood trailed down Palosa's brow bone.

"Palosa... is hurt!"

Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate Master and the others felt a chill run up their spines.

Chapter 177: Age of the Pinnacle 3

Chi!!!!

Garen's arm took a quick turn, and his elbow went straight for Palosa's temples. His elbows were like sharp tips, stabbing Palosa's temples from both left and right.

Boom!

Palosa's upper body blocked the attacks, but his lower body was still kicked, and his body flew backwards from the impact. Before he could react, he saw a black shadow zoom past him and his lower abdomen was hit by invisible punches. These were the signs of high speed punching.

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

The both of them continued to exchange blows in the woods, every time their arms met, Palosa's body would shake, the explosive strength of his opponent continuously hit him on the body, and he could feel his arms going numb. Blow after blow of terrifying attacks and explosive shock was like a massive hammer, hammering down on him.

For a moment, Palosa's attention faltered, and his waist was hit by a silent but deadly palm technique.

With a loud bang, his whole body flew towards the left side.

Garen caught up in a few quick steps, swung his hand downwards to hit Palosa, but was blocked by Palosa's arms. At the same time, Palosa was hit by an unavoidable side whipping leg.

Pow!

The side whip leg slashed across Palosa's right shoulder.

In the woods, the crowd could only see the duo fighting, like two shadows floating about, one black one white, crisscrossing.

Suddenly, the white shadow was hit and sent flying, taking down a few trees on its way, then the black shadow quickly caught up and continued to mess with it.

On the ground, and in the trees, there would occasionally be craters or holes leftover.

With a loud rumble, Palosa was again hit back over ten plus steps. He could no longer hold it in anymore, and started puking blood.

Garen was expressionless, he gestured his arms in a circular motion, and once more positioned himself into the stance for Explosion of Heavenly Spirit.

"Ten Thousand Mammoths Retrograde!!!"

Garen suddenly disappeared from where he stood, and appeared again right in front of Palosa, with both his palms aiming at his abdomen.

In this split second, all the muscles on his body started moving like little rats under his skin, forming a way towards his palms.

White Cloud Gate's Four Major Forms' combined explosive strengths were all focused in this one attack, paired with the second Dan's powers, they all increased the effectiveness of the Explosion of Heavenly Spirit.

With this particular attack, Garen was reaching a whole new level in his abilities and strength.

This was the first time putting all of his strength into one single blow, before this he had never encountered an opponent worthy of such potency, today he finally had the chance to do so.

The force of his two palms were so great, that a strong wind formed as they got closer to Palosa's abdomen. Before they even reached Palosa's abdomen, Palosa's skin was already slightly pressed down by the wind and force.

Palosa looked at Garen calmly, a stream of blood dripped off his chin along his face.

A black air seemed to slowly appear along with the stream of blood.

"You haven't reached your limit yet," Palosa pushed both his arms forward.

Boom!!

A weird collision sound exploded from between their palms.

Palosa's body first stumbled forward, then flew backwards into the direction of some green plants behind him, drawing a flat line of crushed greens as he fell onto them.

The forest was silent once more.

Palosa coughed furiously, the black air on his face disappeared completely, only his skin was showing some weird sickening purple red.

"Cough, cough, I never knew that you could beat me out of my demonic status," The air around him was no longer of a black humanoid, but white fog again.

"Back to normal now?" Garen's arms returned to their normal shape, as he looked at the panting and obviously tired Palosa, he too took some deep breaths: this was the first time he had ever felt tired.

Ever since he started practicing secret martial arts, he had been continuously increasing his body's strength and stamina, his recovery abilities have always been way beyond mortals. Yet this time, with the continuous use of all his energy blow after blow, he actually felt tired for once.

The both of them, one sat and the other stood facing each other, stopped fighting, giving each other and themselves time to regain their energies.

"What a pity," Palosa looked at Garen with sympathy, "a pity that you walked down this path, this is a path with no future."

Seeing how Garen didn't seem to understand his statement, he smiled.

"Ever since I've started practicing White Bird Fist, I've fought thousands of battles, and not once have I lost. Yet since a year ago, I started noticing that the Fist was starting to act against me. Eventually, it sent me into a demonic state. Who knew that I would be struck awake by you."

"Acted against you?" Garen was dumbfounded.

"Many many years ago, I learned of the side effects of the Assassination Fist Techniques, so I chose to hide in the mountains in hopes of fighting and removing the side effect that gave me a constant intent to kill. However in the end the demons got better of me," Palosa's face looked incredibly serious, "now I maybe injured, but thanks to you, I am fully awake."

He stood up from the ground and stretched his body, loud cracking sounds were made as he did so.

"Be careful now, this is my true form!" Palosa's body shrank for a bit, then suddenly expanded. From a mere 160cm tall little old man, Palosa suddenly grew into a two meter tall buff fighter.

His muscles and bones made weird cracking noises, his wrinkled skin also tightened up, becoming smooth and young.

"Higher Form Hand!"

Palosa raised his right arm, and casually swung it along a nearby tree. His nails were like five sharp swords, easily etching deep marks into the tree bark.

"The pinnacle of Body Hardening Technique?" Garen squinted his eyes.

"No, this is a secret technique: 99 Acute Airholes," Palosa seemed to have completely recovered into his normal form, and smiled, "unlike Body Hardening Technique, this secret technique saves a copy of one's pinnacle body form, and seals it away. When needed, it can project that form onto the user's body, ensuring that the user would have access to his own pinnacle anytime he wants."

Palosa had suddenly become a long white haired young man, looking at Garen and talking smoothly without pause.

"I self made 178 different types of secret techniques, each one of them are individually unique and each took years of research and perfecting to complete. 99 Acute Airholes, ranks number 67 out of them all."

The air and aura around him turned completely white, but unlike other fighters, his white aura made people around him feel peaceful.

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you earlier," Palosa's face turned serious, "your strength far exceeds the world of Fist Techniques, one could even regard you as the undisputed Ruler of All Fists! This path of pure strength and energy of yours is a first amongst the many fighters I've encountered in my life."

"Cut the crap, let's do this," Garen placed himself into the stance of Explosion of Heavenly Spirit. This was a technique he had acquired from a trade with the Tenth Loop, its side effects were nothing to him, its powers however, were formidable.

Just that he had not expect to be forced to use it by Palosa's demonic form.

"You're right," Palosa smiled, and turned into a white shadow.

Garen turned into a black shadow at the same time.

The both of them dashed into each other with a loud blast.

This was unlike anything before!!

The both of them exchanged blows, neither was giving the other any openings, each hit was a solid and serious one. Muscle on muscle, fist on fist, sounded like metal hitting metal.

"Three Blows Arm Technique!" both of Palosa's arms took a quick turn and suddenly became three times of their original size, their speeds increased rapidly too as they headed straight downwards for Garen's shoulders.

A sharp shrill tore through the sky, a white air wave appeared behind Palosa's arms, like two silk straps were flying towards Garen's shoulders.

This is the effect of air being torn through by excessive amount of speed.

Palosa's eyes glowed with anticipation, Three Blows Arm Technique was the last of his 178 Secret Techniques. With his current pinnacle status combined with this secret technique, he once sliced a master of Body Hardening Technique in half.

This was a multiplication of his current strength by the factor of 3, this level of terrifying speed far exceeded the limits of the human body, instead it reached an inhuman level. Yet amongst all of his secret techniques, this was considered one of the most mundane ones.

"Let me see, how will you defend against this?" Palosa glared at Garen.

The both of them were dangerously close to each other, the Three Blows Arms was about to hit Garen in a split second. The shrill in the air caused by the two white waves of air caused Garen's ears to totally lose their hearing.

He squinted his eyes, to avoid the massive air pressure from causing a him to lose his sight too.

As a fellow human at the limit of human physique, Garen knew the threat of such an attack. In a split second, a dozen different techniques crossed his head, but his body instinctively positioned into a specific stance welcoming the attack.

Whooooosh

The powerful White Mammoth Aura gathered around his body, and bellowed with its trunk, then it charged towards Palosa's Three Blows Arms.

"Ten Thousand Mammoth Trample!!" this was one of three major techniques that Garen invented out of mixing many others. Just like Ten Thousand Mammoth Retrograde, it was based off the Mammoth

secret techniques combined with other techniques like the Golden Statue Technique, to become an incredibly powerful standalone still.

Clang!

Looking from far away, one would be able to see two white lines violently striking Garen's shoulders.

The both of their faces glowed a slight red, the explosive energy brought with it a violent shock and vibration, these were vibrations that neither of them were able to control so both of them immediately sustained internal injuries at the same time.

Palosa's joints made the weird cracking noise again, but this time it sounded like trouble.

Garen's shoulders on the other hand were left with two visible wounds, except that there wasn't any blood, and the wounds seemed to close up as soon as they opened up.

At the same time, the both of backed away from each other.

"Secret Technique, Sealing Sun Arm!" A small cube suddenly appeared under the skin of Palosa's abdomen, like he had installed a wooden cube under his skin.

The cube moved from his abdomen upwards to his chest, then it disappeared.

What was weird, was that Palosa's originally swollen shoulders and broken bones, they were instantaneously healed, and his skin returned to its original unscathed state.

Garen sucked up the pain from his shoulders, as he watched Palosa heal himself in front of him. At this moment he realized how truly terrifying Palosa's self made 178 Secret Techniques were.

Palosa wasn't even a pinnacle practitioner of the Body Hardening Technique, and yet he could achieve such frightening results with his own abilities.

"I haven't felt this pumped in a long while! Come, let's do it again!" Palosa laughed and dashed towards Garen again with another strike of Three Blows Arm Technique.

At this moment, the white shirt man and Cynthia arrived to witness this scene.

The effects of Palosa's Secret Techniques left everyone speechless.

"Grandfather Palosa's 99 Acute Airholes can save the body of his absolute pinnacle state, and the most terrifying ability isn't even that," the white shirt man and the leader of the Southern Heavenly Fist Gate said softly.

"This is already insane!" King of Fist Leo felt his hair stand on their edges as he watched this inhuman fight. The two monsters kept clashing into each other like giant beasts wrestling.

What was different was that Garen had metal-like skin while Palosa had his 178 Secret Techniques!

Heavenly Fist Gate's Gate Master said, "We never knew that this was Palosa Grandfather's true state. Who knew that the legendary Assassination Fist Technique could affect the mentality of the user too. No wonder all these years our grandfather forbade us from seeing him."

"You haven't said what the most terrifying ability he possesses?" Cynthia's eyes were fixed on the battlefield, while she spoke.

This was also what Jack and King of Fist Leo wanted to know.

Chapter 178: Age of the Pinnacle 4

"The most terrifying part of 99 Acute Airholes is when it is used alongside his 10th Secret Technique, and that is the most famous Secret Technique of them all: 99 Regressions!" The Heavenly Fist Gate Master said with a deep voice, "that technique is the reason why Grandfather Palosa is undefeated and unmatched across the board."

"99 Regressions?" King of Fist Leo's face fell, "Do you mean the legendary esoteric?!"

The Gate Master nodded proudly.

"That is the legendary esoteric! 99 Lives!!"

Rumble!!

It was at this moment, the both of them collided against each other again.

Their hands were continuously striking and slashing each other. Garen made a low 'hmp' and took a few steps back, the wounds on his shoulders wouldn't close up anymore now, and were bleeding profusely.

Palosa's shoulders were cracked beyond recognition as well, his arms hung without life on his body.

"Secret Technique, Sealing Sun Arm!" the small cube appeared under his skin again.

"Still trying to cure yourself?!"

Garen made low grunt and dashed towards him, his arm formed into a claw ready to gnash.

At this point, despite the fact that his shoulders were injured, which would in turn affect his speed, but he still had a solid 80% of his usual speed. His claw glowed a slight red and released some heat around it.

Palosa smiled at sight of this, the cube under his skin sped up magically until it disappeared under his chest. When it did, his chest recovered to a state like it had never been injured before, with two loud sounds he grabbed Garen's claw in two moves.

The two of them moved backwards rapidly.

A weird dark energy moved from Palosa's body into Garen's, compared to the demonic Palosa earlier, this was much stronger and was headed straight for Garen's heart.

"I have met many pinnacle practitioners of Body Hardening Technique, but you are definitely the strongest I have ever met. You are able to not just face my three techniques built based on the White Bird Fist, but still stay standing, ready to fight. I take back my words earlier," Palosa's calm voice seemed to drill into Garen's ears, "it is actually possible now that you defeated Duskdune Shura."

Palosa lifted his knee and kneed Garen in the abdomen, evading his attack. The both of them backed away from each other.

"It ends here!" Palosa's face was suddenly covered in pale white jade colour.

"White Bird, Unrivaled Skyfall!"

The white aura around him suddenly concentrated into a form and created a massive white crane, its beak sharper than the sharpest swords and its claws, stacked on top of each other, were lifted up and slashed downwards.

The sharp beak pecked on Garen like an awl.

The same threatening aura appeared again, crushing Garen under its intimidating weight, causing his bones to vibrate slightly.

"You think I wouldn't be able to fight back like this? Garen's face suddenly turned sly, his arms expanded in a wide motion.

"Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement!!!!!"

He put both his palms together like he was about to clamp onto the beak of the crane. As his palms traveled rapidly through the air, the already filled with poison arms were now forming a lot of friction against the air and was suddenly on fire!

Garen's palms drew a red line as they both met in a prayer-like gesture.

At this moment, both of their abilities met each other. The forest fell silent once more.

The two large auras collided with each other and blurred everything around them. No living organism could tell for sure what was going on in there.

After a few seconds, both auras retreated away from each other and stood facing each other with a few meters of distance in between.

Palosa's palms were charred black like they had been burned and he was sweating profusely like he had just expended all of his energy in his last attack. Especially his chest, it seemed to sink in the middle, obviously his ribs were broken and he was heavily injured.

He stared at Garen who stood across him.

Garen didn't move from his spot, just that there was now a small cut on the middle of his chest and a small stream of blood was pouring out of it. From where he stood, there was a half circle line burned into the ground, the frightening after effect of his Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement.

"It is over," Garen looked at Palosa, "you've taken a direct hit from my Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement, that paired with the hot poison....." This was nothing like the time Garen defeated Duskdune Shura, this particular strike was at least twice as powerful as that one. Even if Palosa was stronger than Duskdune Shura, he could not possibly survive a direct hit.

He squinted his eyes and looked at Palosa.

The small cube popped up underneath Palosa's chest again!

"Secret Technique: 99 Regressions!"

Palosa's face was calm, the cube dissolved into countless beams that shot across his nerves to every part of his body.

After a series of weird bone cracks and muscle cracks, Palosa recovered from all his injuries, like had never been hit at all!

"My 99 Regressions, paired with 99 Acute Airholes, is the ultimate ability invented from the White Bird Fist Technique. I can heal myself 99 times within a hundred days from any injury."

Palosa tore off whatever broken fabric was left on his top, leaving on only his bottom long pants.

"99 Regressions...." Garen's face was expressionless, but his heart was stirring. This kind of insane secret technique can only be invented by someone as good as Palosa.

"I'll see how many times you can recover then!" Garen's heart was set on defeating Palosa, he pushed from his feet and dashed towards Palosa.

Boom, boom, boom!

The sounds of collision continued. White Bird Aura and the Giant Mammoth Aura twist and turned over each other. The White Bird flew up and crashed down on the Giant Mammoth over and over again, while the Giant Mammoth whipped the White Bird with its trunk.

The two frighteningly large auras continuously exchanged blows.

"Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement!!!" Garen bellowed, his palms once against on fire, colliding again with Palosa's Unrivaled Skyfall.

Palosa jumped away and when he landed, he had recovered from his injuries.

"Again!!" Garen jumped towards Palosa aggressively.

The onlookers watched as the both of them repeatedly fought each other with all their might. As they continued to fight, Palosa was actually able to continuously recover from all his injuries, everywhere he was hit, he would heal within ten seconds.

With the combined use of Sealing Sun Arm and 99 Regressions, Palosa looked like he was never injured from beginning to end. His aura was as fresh as it gets, unaffected at all by the constant attacks.

Whereas for Garen, he was getting bloodied from the continuous pecking by the White Bird Fist. His eyes were bloodshot, but he didn't seem to know anything about feeling tired, and just kept throwing blow after blow of his most powerful attack: Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement!

The Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement was delivered with Fiery Claws and each time it hit Palosa, it would leave him heavily injured. Yet every single time Palosa would recover completely from it, like the attack meant nothing.

One, twice, four times....ten times....twenty times! Garen's body started wearing out, but he still stood straight like a pencil, aggressively attacking his opponent.

Finally, not sure after how long, the forest was silent once more.

King of First Leo, Cynthia and Jack clenched their jaws, their faces a mixed expression as they stared at Garen. Like them, the Gate Master too was looking at Garen with respect.

"There's no point to continue fighting," Palosa stood silently by the side of a few collapsed trees.

All the trees in a ten meter radius around them were either torn in half or completely collapsed, some were even on fire due to Garen's Fiery Claws.

The forest seemed to have become a plateau.

Streams of blood flowed down Garen's chin, arms, legs.

He panted and gasped for air, his eyes were still glowing red, staring at Palosa with resentment. Garen's shoulders, waist, back and chest were filled with wounds, lines of lines of bright red cuts filled his entire upper body.

"99 Regressions!" Garen panted, "there really...isn't any point on fighting anymore."

Surely by now, they were both violently aware of each other's limits and abilities.

99 Regressions paired with Sealing Sun Arm sure is a terrifying combo, but that's an ability made for the Palosa at his peak. The Palosa now, if he continued using the same techniques, would put such a strong burden on his body that he would not die from his injuries but instead from a total lack of energy. After all, he wasn't the same Palosa as he was when he was younger.

As for Garen, using Ten Thousand Mammoth Sky Encirclement was also a great burden on his body. After using it so many times, he had exhausted all of his energy, and could faint anytime soon.

But he knew he cannot be defeated like this!

Too much depended on him, as he was the main foundation holding up White Cloud Gate. If he falls, not only will White Cloud Gate fall, so will his family and friends, everyone will disappear like a house of cards.

White Cloud Gate and his family have been able to stay safe all these years because of the intimidation of his strength. If he falls, not only will his enemies seize the opportunity to strike, but so will the people who surrendered to him purely because of his strength betray him and his family.

At this point, both them knew very well that if they continued, they would both end up dead. Perhaps Garen would die first, but Palosa would follow after very soon too.

"I lost," Palosa laughed, his body shrinking back to his real age, turning back into the small old man he was earlier. His face now was so pale it was terrifying, "I used 99 Acute Airholes to retain my prime till now, but I never expected you to be able to force me to use 99 Regressions more than ten times."

Realistically, the both of them were almost equal in strength, just that Garen was at a disadvantage due to Palosa's Secret Techniques.

"You didn't lose," Garen said coldly, and stood up, his body shook for a second, and all his wounds instantly opened and shut with a large spout of blood.

He reached out his hand towards Leo.

Leo threw over a black cloak to Garen, which he used to instantly cover up himself.

"Let's go, we've achieved our objective for this time," Garen turned around and took big steps away, as if he was never injured before, "next time, next time I will defeat you!"

King of Fist Leo was the first to catch up to Garen, followed by Cynthia and Jack.

"A year ago, a man named Sylphalan showed up here once. We ended our battle with heavy injuries on both sides. If you meet this man, be careful," Palosa's yelled from behind him.

"Sylphalan...." Garen stopped in his steps for a moment, then he continued walking.

Chapter 179: Closer 1

A year ago, Sylphalan was here, and he fought with Palosa.

A year ago, Palosa sealed himself away as he fell into his demonic tendencies.

Garen suddenly understood the correlation.

The reason why Sylphalan showed up coincidentally in Galantia and Eliza Province, was because he was motivated by some other objective. Perhaps that objective was to seek Palosa out for battle.

Since the White Bird now said that the both of them sustained heavy injuries from the fight, that means Sylphalan should still be recovering from his injuries, unless he has some sort of special recovery method.

Whereas for Palosa, his injuries were mostly mental, especially since he would later fall into his demonic form. Sylphalan must have sustained some bad injuries as well.

On the way out from the big waterfall, Garen kept thinking of that possibility.

As the four of them walked back, nobody spoke.

Garen's body was covered from head to toe in the black cloak, nobody, not even the other three could tell how injured he was.

"Gate Master Garen, are you alright?" King of Fist Leo frowned and asked.

"Not too good not too bad either, I'll be fine," Garen looked at him briefly, and answered.

"That's good," Leo's face relaxed, "Since we've achieved our objective in this journey, what shall we do next?"

Garen stopped in his steps, "We'll talk about that once we get back to Galantia. This fight with Palosa made me realize some very important things, but first I need to recover. The rest of the things just play by ear, if you hear anything about Black Mark Association you are to inform me immediately."

"Yessir,"

Leo nodded.

As Cynthia and Jack heard Garen say that his injuries weren't too serious, they were relieved. Now their fates were tied to Garen's, if Garen fell, they wouldn't be spared from the ensuing consequences either.

"I've arranged a carriage near the city, I'll lead the way once we're out of here," Cynthia said.

"Alright,"

Garen didn't want to say anything else, so he just agreed.

While he might have told the others that he wasn't badly injured, but he knew himself that his status right now was not your average injury.

When fighting with Palosa, the true killing force isn't sheer strength or overwhelming force. Instead, it is the small but potent beak attacks. Where the beak bit Garen, he could not heal completely, the only reason why they stopped bleeding was because of his muscle expansions covering the wounds.

Aside from this, the beak attacks were unlike any other pierces. The moment the dark energy pierced his skin, a large part around it went numb, and he couldn't even feel if he was bleeding.

"3 spots on my abdomen, 12 on my back, 8 on my limbs....out of those 5 are bleeding internally, 3 are just surface cuts, the rest are completely numb."

Garen checked his own body as he walked. Under his Attribute Pane, his vitality had dropped a staggering 5 points. Obviously due to the overwhelming injury, even his Body Hardening Technique's efficiency was lowered.

"And then there's my innards, all major organs seemed to have moved in different directions, my heart is slightly cracked, which means my recovery abilities are suppressed as well. I wonder what secret techniques Palosa used to do that."

Garen looked at his palm under the cloak, it was pale, terrifyingly pale.

"Let's try and see if there's any effect if I use the attribute points,"

He tried to expense his unused potential points into the vitality section.

Disappointingly to no effect. His vitality went blur for a second, then it returned to the original amount, his body didn't change the slightest.

"Looks like this time I will have to slowly recover," he frowned, "an injury like this has suppressed my recovery abilities, even if it doesn't get worst I will still need a whole month to fully recover."

His issue with Behemoth's Gate wasn't even settled yet, but for now he could only return home to recover.

Garen's fought a lot of opponents before, and has always won right out with everyone. He thought that once he reached this level, he would never end up in a horrible condition like so anymore, but little did he expect himself to be reduced to this after a simple exchange with Palosa.

Sylphalan, Palosa, even though he was still slighter weaker than them, but on the bright side it meant that he had stepped into the highest level of fighters.

Now whenever someone were to bring him up in a conversation, they would compare him to the two of them as equals, sometimes even as superior.

As he recalled Palosa's fighting style, Garen continued to shake slightly, as he tried to fix his internal injuries.

Ten days later...

The fight between White Cloud Gate's Gate Master and White Bird Fist's Palosa, ended without anyone knowing about it.

But after a few days, news of it had spread throughout the entire southern martial arts world.

The fact that the both of them ended it in a draw was beyond everyone's wildest expectations. Garen, as a new age Master of Combat, was able to actually fight the great Fist Master to a draw, was unbelievable for most. Overnight, the news spread via telegram to every corner of the martial arts world.

Garen's position as a regional leader was also cemented by this battle's outcome. White Cloud Gate's Territory of Galantia became a place of attention for every sect.

As for White Cloud Gate's ranking, it rose up to stand equal with the Southern Holy Fist Gate and the Celestial Circle Gate.

As for the Black Mark Association and Crimson Sand Sword Gate:

Black Mark association was discussing surrender and possible merger of elements with White Cloud Gate, especially since amongst their three King of Fists, one betrayed the sect, one was heavily injured and the remaining one was no longer able to hold the entire organisation up by himself. Black Mark association was alive by name, but dead in reality.

Crimson Sand Sword Gate disappeared into the shadows since the day the Hunter Killer Squad fought Garen. In an instance they disappeared from public eye and sold most of their assets to nearby sects like White Cloud Gate or the Celestial Circle Gate.

The entire southside of the Confederation was now split between three major sects.

Namely they were: Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate, Celestial Circle Gate and White Cloud Gate. Amongst the three, White Cloud Gate was the weakest, they had zero plans to expand beyond Galantia. All they were interested in was to continue consolidating their power in Galantia and they even turned away ex-members of the Black Mark Association trying to join them.

Southern Sky Holy Fist Gate expanded aggressively, they absorbed many small sects and formed their own alliance.

Celestial Circle Gate also started to consolidate their power after Garen fought Palosa, rumors even tell of a possibility that Andrela had left self-confinement.

Galantia, Hubo City.

In a white manor surrounded by various maple trees.

Outside the manor, in the maplewood forest.

Two young men sat by a stone table playing Go.

Maple leaves would occasionally fall on the stone table, along with what looked like dandelion seeds, both of which would be expertly flung away by the duo each time they fell.

One of the men was buff and tall, his body wrapped all over with black bandage. The other one was handsome, with black hair that fell on his shoulders, and an eye patch that covered one of his eyes.

The setup on the table was filled with black pieces. Instead of white and black to distinguish the factions, they were differentiated by squared and circular ones. The stronger buffer man's was playing the squared pieces while the one-eyed man was playing the circular pieces.

"I heard you challenged Palosa, I came as soon as I left my self-confinement. Who knew that even someone with your abilities would end up in a state like this," the one-eyed man was Andrela who had just rushed from Celestial Circle Gate. He donned a long sleeve and long pants with a black robe that had constellations etched in beautiful silver thread on the end of the sleeves.

"If you don't believe it then you're always welcomed to go try," Garen was covered in black bandage, wearing only black long pants and boots. He sat on the stool with his back straight and his eyes slightly squinting, still looking intimidating in this state. His hair was short now, and his right arm was still being supported by a wooden board.

"I can't even defeat you, if I go wouldn't I just be asking for death?" Andrela laughed, "But Palosa has always been someone I wish to overtake one day. Now there's you too. What if I kill you now with my sword? Would that earn me the title of Number One Combat Master in the Southern World?"

"Looks like this self-confinement session of yours was really rewarding," Garen couldn't help but laugh, as he lifted up his hand and placed a piece onto the playing field, "sadly, I've killed you already."

The game was set, Andrela's circular pieces were all surrounded by Garen's square pieces, he only had one piece left to place, and one spot for him to do so. Once he does, he would seal his own fate.

"The medicine you gave me was really good," Garen moved his body about, "I can already feel the effects, the spots where the pus infected have also stopped worsening. Thank you so much."

Ever since the day he got back, his body's only been getting worst. Every spot that was hit by Palosa's Unrivalled Skyfall ability was infected by pus. Had it not been for the rare medicine, he wouldn't have been able to stop it at all.

But that's as much progress as he was able to make, he simply couldn't recover.

In over ten days, he only recovered some parts of his organs, but his energy and abilities were still deterred.

"Pair it up with edible medication, you should be able to completely rid yourself of the infections." Andrela unwillingly let go of the chesspiece on his hand, "consider that I've lost. Looks like other than being good at martial arts, you're a monster even at Go."

He stood up and revealed a small red medicine bottle from his sleeve, then he threw it at Garen, "this is a special medicine prepared for me by Celestial Circle Gate members, it should have some effect. You seem to have a guest, I shall go practice my swordsmanship, if you need anything you can find me at our usual spot."

With the sound of loud wind, Andrela disappeared from where he stood, only a few maple leaves were left in his wake.

Garen sat on the bench, this rock bench had obvious eastern influences, as it was custom made by a skilled craftsman based on Garen's memory. It was perhaps a small memento to remind him of his origins from Earth.

He kept the pieces back into the box one by one, and left the box on the table. He picked up the red medicine bottle, gave it a curious look and put it straight into his pocket.

The maplewood forest was a bright red everywhere, even the floors were filled with red leaves like a carpet.

As he watched Andrela leave, Garen felt a sense of gratefulness.

Andrela had grown stronger again, not just a small bit, but by a large margin compared to the first time they met. No wonder he was so confident and wanted to challenge Garen. What used to be a big feat like Blink was now being casted by him like an everyday trick.

Garen took a wild guess, and estimated that Andrela's abilities were now very close to Crimson Sand Sword Gate's evil genius Lord Clark, but what other secret techniques he hid under that sleeve, nobody knew.

Beyond the maplewood forest, light footsteps could be heard.

"Gate Master, I've brought the guest," Jack's voice could be heard as well.

"Come over then," Garen replied peacefully.

Chapter 180: Closer 2

Jack was clothed in a full set of black robes while he was followed by three others.

Two out of the three were people familiar with Garen, they were two King of Fists of the Black Mark Association, Ankh and Manila. Neither of them were wearing their Black Mark Association uniforms anymore, instead they both donned a white cloak contrasting a pair of black boxing globes with silver linings.

As for the other one, it was White Cloud Gate's Corrine.

The two King of Fists stood in attention, and greeted Garen respectfully.

"Black Mark Association's surrender is complete. From today onwards, we are King of Fists serving White Cloud Gate. Gate Master Garen, you possess great knowledge and great skill in martial arts, we dare not defy you; however, we have one request: please don't put us in the same team as that traitor Leo!" Manila said calmly.

Garen turned around to face the group.

"Considering the conflict putting you all together might raise, I will be wary to not put you two and Leo in one group. You will each lead your own groups respectively, with your own respective names. In fact, you can just use your old names from your Black Mark Association days. Black Group and Mark Group was it?"

"Yes sir, that will be great."

Garen nodded in agreement.

"Leo will also set up his own group called the Lightning Group. Jack and Corrine, you will both lead the rest and form a group called Cloud Group in charge of gathering intelligence. Then there's another group, that I will manage myself."

In a few simple sentences, Garen summarized and made order out of the complicated structure of White Cloud Gate.

In total there would be five groups, three of the masters of combats will lead three of their own groups, then there will be a fourth group made out of White Cloud Gate's original followers. The remainder will be made out of freelancers and fighters from various groups in Galantia, these will form a group and be led by Garen himself.

This arrangement provided a clear distinction between the major powers within White Cloud Gate. Amongst all of them, the ones that were most loyal to Garen were Leo and the ones from the original body of White Cloud Gate. As for the rest, they were only submissive for now because they had been defeated.

However during such times, Garen could use all the help he could get, so the more power the better.

"Anything interesting lately?" Garen looked at Corrine.

Corrine nodded, "News from Cynthia, the first is about Mr. Su Lin and Celine. The two of them were collecting rare materials until they were caught in some conflict happening by the border. We still don't know what's their situation right now."

"Conflict?" Garen frowned, "Conflict related to the borders?"

"Only two states in the borders, the Confederation has already sent its army that way. Soon it will be dissolved," Corrine nodded, "then there's a second piece of news: A cruise ship carrying Confederation students was boarded by members of the Weisman navy, they're holding the passengers hostage and have already killed 13 students. Right now there are demonstrations all over the major cities condemning the Weisman government's inhumane actions...."

"Please get straight to the point," Garen cut her short.

"Oh, the Confederation and Weisman have dispatched their respective fleets, a big fight's is going to break out," Corrine summarized, "this came from Mr. Sulin and little sister."

Garen noticed that Corrine used 'immediately' instead of 'is going to' instead of 'possibly', which meant that Corrine was 100% sure about it.

"Su Lin's father should have his own arrangements in mind for a situation like this. Manila, please make trip to the western border and see if they need any help while gathering any information you can about the country behind these conflicts."

"Alright," Manila nodded, he softly squeezed Ankh's hand and turned around to leave.

Now all of Black Mark Association's power was divided into three parts, one was the 'Mark Group' led by Manila. All of these groups were disciplined and well organised individually, collectively they were the elites of the Black Mark Association.

If it wasn't for the Golden Hoop's influence combined with Garen's sheer power, the Black Mark Association would not have gone down so easily.

However, with the way things are now, if they did not surrender to Garen's side, they would only be met with certain death should he decide to pursue revenge for what they did to him back then.

Manila and Ankh were sure about one thing, if Garen were to sent them to their deaths on some one way mission, they will not hesitate to run away. Lucky for them, Garen seemed to treat everyone the same, like there had been no conflict between them to begin with, maybe even nicer than before.

Garen watched as Manila left.

Each of Black Mark Association's groups consisted of at least a few hundred, maybe even a few thousand fighters. On top of that, there was their wide real estate portfolio, intelligence gathering bodies, mercenaries, freelance fighters and even assassins etc.

Garen didn't need to know too much of the details, as long as they served him with their abilities and influence, it was enough. There was still the support of the Golden Hoop, White Cloud Gate and Leo all watching his back and ready to serve at a moment's notice.

"Ankh, once you're done with moving your people you can begin taking over Galantia's security. Can you assign guards for key influential people in the city?"

Ankh nodded, and turned to leave as well.

Corrine and Jack were left, awaiting Garen's orders.

"Jack, what's the situation like now with Leo? Have they found Duskdune Shura's remaining Royal Generals?" Garen turned his gaze to Jack now.

Jack and Cynthia were still substantially capable in intelligence gathering. While they weren't professionals, they were still better than most people since they were elites that underwent training with some of the world's best mercenaries.

"Leo's group sent back a telegram. They found traces of Duskdune Shura and Charlotte by the Sand River. Looks like the news we put out earlier worked," Jack responded immediately, "Duskdune Shura is still recovering from his injuries. The same injuries caused him to lose a majority of his power and along with it, his membership in the Immortal Palace Alliance. Right now he's being chased by his enemies alongside Charlotte. Once we released the news, they responded pretty soon. Looks like they can't take it anymore."

Garen nodded.

"There is no hatred between Duskdune Shura and I that can't be settled. He should've heard the news about my fight with Palosa now, not to mention we even have the Blood of Eternal Life that was originally stolen by Behemoth's Gate. All this must be incredibly tempting to him. Now let's see what he has to offer to trade with us. Last time we were begging him, but now look at how the sides have shifted."

Jack nodded, "Lastly, we found out who it was that hurt Gate Master Fei."

"Oh?" Garen was intrigued.

"The martial artist is called Sicilian Saldin, with him was his only follower and son Chukufa Saldin. They boarded a long distance cruise towards the east half a month ago, we found them on the guest list."

Garen stood up, a maple leaf fell onto his palm, and he rubbed it between his fingers.

"The east again....."

He has always wanted to venture east, but he had his family here, his sister, parents, uncle and his friends. Should he head out to sea, it would take more than a year even with the stable routes. If something went wrong during this period of time....

"We'll set this aside for now. We can't do much in a short period of time anyways. Oh right, do we know anything about what's going on with Dale Quicksilver's side of things?" He suddenly remembered that a few days ago he had dispatched Jack to look into that famous detective.

Jack's face suddenly turned into a quizzing expression.

"Gate Master, that detective is still in the Evenia Province. We don't know what he's doing exactly but it seems like he's being watched by some others because he knows some secrets about the Immortal Palace."

"He actually hung around there for this long," Garen rubbed the stubs on his chin, his face filled with thought.

He had only two objectives for now: First, is to kill the man responsible for his master's death. Second, is to kill Sylphalan who did not just kill the Elder but also injured him severely once.

The mysterious Immortal Palace Alliance seemed to be hiding some other big secret as well.

"Pity that my injuries still haven't recovered completely," Garen pressed his chest softly, a great deal of pain reverberated from where he placed his hand.

"You all may retreat back to your work, if you hear anything about Dale Quicksilver, report back to me immediately."

"Alright,"

"Take care and rest well Gate Master."

Corrine and Jack both turned to leave together.

Garen sat back on his stool.

"Immortal Palace's secret...", for now, Garen's only enemy is the elusive Immortal Palace Alliance. Soon he will settle his score with Sylphalan.

"Sylphalan... I bet you can hear me huh?" Garen looked up into the endless sky beyond the maple trees.

Somewhere in the middle of the ocean between the three continents.

On a small white sand island.

The island was oval, like a green spot with white borders etched into the endless sea.

In the middle of the island was a thick plot of trees, on the top of a certain high ledge, was a massive marble hall sitting on white circular pillars.

The white marble hall stood alone at the end of the black colored rock ledge with no growth about it at all.

The marble hall was like a triangle stacked on top of a rectangle. It had a simple structure, with only a slight air of complication shown through the carvings on the wall that reflected an air of eternity.

By the entrance of the hall, was four rock pillars, each with a radius of 4 meters. Around these pillars were white snakes with pointy ears.

By the ledge right outside of the entrance was a shorter pillar with a square bowl on top of it. It looked like it was made to hold something important.

As the sunset, a short haired man with a cold expression stood by the square bowl. The wind made waves out of his blood red hair.

The man reached his hand into the square bowl and took a quick swipe, then his hand was instantly stained with a hint of blood, he flicked his fingers and drops of blood flew off the ledge to the bottom.

"Sylphalan, we need an immediate replacement for Duskdune Shura."

A weak old man covered in black robes appeared from the back of the short haired man. This old man's whole body was hidden under a black cloak, none of his body was exposed, one could only hear his voice from under the cloak.

"When do you plan to take action?"

"I do not feel like leaving now." The short haired man smiled, "if you want, you can go yourself. Trash will always be trash, he couldn't even take a hit and he even lost the precious Blood of Eternal Life."

Sylphalan turned around and looked to his right. Suddenly there was a friendly lady standing right beside him, she had eyes that were as blue as the ocean and skin as white as snow.

"Big sister! When did you come here? Ever since I killed our older brother, you've been showing up more often! I knew I was right!" Sylphalan was suddenly happy, he stopped doing what he was doing with his hand earlier and rubbed his fingers clean, "Big sister, do you think I should go out this time? I haven't even recovered from my past injuries, and this trip will be incredibly tiring. But if I don't go, our plan has reached a key point...."