

Martial Unity 1001

Chapter 1001: Strong

He was not a dummy who would simply spam Forestep to its absolute maximum in every single fight. In this case, he had already figured out that there was little point in trying to fight a symmetrical battle against Kane centered around maneuvering. The fact that Kane had more maneuvering techniques, a Martial body whose spec configuration was centered around motion, and the original and superior version of the Forestep technique meant that he was most certainly going to dominate Rui in a maneuvering battle where they both capitalized on speed and agility.

Thus, Rui ruled out such a battle. This was the kind of logic that he had included in the VOID algorithm when he created it, however, he himself didn't need to follow the protocols of the VOID algorithm that were meant to dumb down the process for fighters. He could produce a better result with his own critical thinking.

Although it sounded fun to challenge himself against Kane's strong suit, he didn't want to when it came to a duel. He didn't mind losing spars in such fashions, but not duels. Duels were competitions where both sides were doing their best to win, and he did not want to diverge from that premise and norm.

Thus rather than mirroring Kane's own stance, he chose a stance that was most adapted to Kane's style of fighting.

Kane fought counter-offensively. He normally did not launch speedy offenses in most cases. He preferred to let his opponent attack him and counter by attacking through the chinks in his armor.

That was why Rui chose a closed stance.

A closed stance minimized the number of openings that Kane could exploit to land an attack. It also meant that Kane needed to move a greater distance to try and exploit the holes in Rui's defense, which gave Rui extra time to avoid his strikes.

However, even with the incredibly robust predictive model that he had on Kane. He did not think that alone would be enough to keep up with Kane.

He had no choice.

"Fuuuuu!" He exhaled heavily, activating his Void Forestep technique partially.

Kane grinned, proceeding to do the same. "Let's see which one is superior. Your Void Forestep... or my Fulminata!"

Rui wondered if Kane timed that, or if it was just a perfect coincidence, but a bolt of lightning struck him the very moment he uttered those words!

BOOM!

CRACKLE CRACKLE CRACKLE!

His body took on a mild light glow while it began producing the sound of electricity crackling.

At that moment, Rui's eyes widened as he experienced something new.

A new sensation.

A depth of peril that was unlike anything he had ever felt from a Martial Squire!

The battle had already begun.

Rui narrowed his eyes as his expression steeled.

From this moment on, victory was his only consideration.

His concentration sharpened.

He was ready.

DASH!

He lashed out forward at top speed with Gale Force Breathing, Outer Convergence, and his quasi-Forestep.

In just a moment, he had arrived. The two of them exchanged a sharp glance for just the briefest of moments.

A powerful flying knee kick amplified by the momentum of his approach flew towards Kane's solar plexus.

Right off the bat, Rui threw his most powerful Flowing Canon!

However, he wasn't pleased.

He threw it knowing that it would be dodged effortlessly.

WHOOSH!

Kane casually side-stepped as he did a light twirl, completely evading the attack. He bent forward as his right leg flew up in a swift high kick aimed at Rui's head!

POW!

SWOOSH!

Kane crouched as he evaded a simple punch from an unperturbed Rui while launching a swift kick aimed at Rui's crotch.

THUD!

Rui squeezed his knees together, barricading Kane's kick while crouched a little.

The stance was unshakable to Kane.

This was the Sanchin kata. A stance from a branch of karate that was meant to make the practitioner immovable. It was one that wasn't practiced in MMA, since strikes to the gonads were illegal in the UFC and kickboxing.

Rui hadn't expected that he would find a use for it in this life.

However, Kane was hardly done. He blurred in Rui's vision, almost disappearing with sheer speed. His leg retreated before flashing forward at Rui's face in a high kick to the jaw, hoping to knock him out.

He knew that he couldn't batter Rui with damage over time. Rui's defense was too solid, while Kane's offense, until very recently, was only at the grade-one level.

Godspeed was primarily a speed supplementary technique rather than an offensive supplementary technique, the fact that his body mass reduced negated most of the boost in energy.

Against Rui's powerful passive and active defenses, he didn't really stand a chance. That was why his targets were limited to places that he could inflict damage on. He had no intention of touching any other part of Rui's well-honed and conditioned muscular body.

POW!

Kane's eyes widened as he felt the power of his strike disappear into thin air as Rui employed Flux Earther to dispel his impact into Gaia.

WHOOSH!

He crouched backward as Rui launched a sweeping elbow attack.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH!

Kane evaded a barrage of swift and crisp blows as he look for an opening.

BOOM!

The two of them leaped backward as a lightning bolt converged on their very location!

Thus far, the battle had been a slow balance. Neither side had revved up to their top performance as the battle steadily proceeded with both sides testing the other's capabilities.

It had been quite some time since the two of them had dueled each other. Several years, even. The last time they had dueled each other properly was in the final battle of the preliminary competition of the Martial Academy.

Rui strangely recalled the time that Kane had made him promise that he would win. A promise that Rui had ended up fulfilling that day by winning.

Something that he intended to do again.

So far, he had been impressed with Kane's new prowess. Anyone who knew him might have suspected that he was still holding back his core Martial Art.

But this wasn't true.

Kane was just that strong.

Chapter 1002: Sub-optimal

Rui had underestimated just how greatly the Fulminata technique amplified his reflexes. It was an entire order of magnitude above his baseline reflexes. His baseline reflexes were not unimpressive either, far from it. Even his baseline reflexes were significantly superior to Rui's.

That was what the VOID algorithm was competing against. It was true that Rui had an incredibly robust predictive model, but the fact of the matter is, much of the power of the VOID algorithm went into bridging the gap between their reflexes.

('This is the power of two grade-ten techniques working together with high synergy,') Rui couldn't help but feel awed.

He didn't doubt for a second that the Fulminata technique was a grade-ten technique. There was no question. The sheer boost to his reflexes that it granted easily put it in the same Realm as Godspeed.

Furthermore, the two techniques had an immense amount of synergy with each other and covered each other's weaknesses with their strengths.

Kane could use Godspeed without relying on pre-determined movements or muscle memory thanks to his reflexes being able to keep up with his movement speed. While his reflexes could accomplish more with Godspeed being able to execute his reactions in time.

Rui had recognized that there was a shift in the dynamics between them.

It was no longer impressive for Kane to keep up with the Void Forestep technique, the reverse was not true. It was truly impressive that despite being slower in movement speed, and exponentially slower in reaction speed, he was still able to keep up with Kane with the power of Void Forestep.

The VOID algorithm showed him what Kane was about to do ahead of time, he began moving the second he predicted Kane. He wouldn't be able to make it in time for the counter if he waited any later!

The hardest moves to counter were the attacks where Kane changed his trajectory mid-air to counter Rui's movements. That was quite the pain in the ass for Rui to handle even if he was able to predict them.

Kane on the other hand was not surprised. He always knew that Rui's ability to somehow make the right move at the right time was inexplicable. He recalled how effective Rui was when he helped him train his Void Forestep technique.

It was as though he didn't even need to react.

And he didn't, Kane knew well enough that Rui was solely keeping up, despite his slow reactions, because of his predictions. That was mortifying, to a certain extent. It meant that Rui was able to see him coming from a mile away, literally. Therefore even with his ability to cross a mile in an instant, Rui would be able to at least defend whatever he threw against Kane.

However, that did not mean the battle was entirely equal. To the layman, the clash between the two of them may seem like it was equal as the two of them threw roughly an equal number of strikes, but that didn't mean they were fighting equally with each other.

It actually meant the opposite.

Rui was an evasive maneuverer, he was not someone who took an active offense, as opposed to a counter-offense. Rui, on the other hand, had begun the battle with an aggressive approach, yet he ended up being forced to defend against Kane's swift barrages to his vitals.

The fact that he was forced to be less offensive, giving Kane the opportunity to be more aggressive than he normally was, meant that Kane had a mild advantage!

"Tsk," Rui tutted with irritation as he closed off his body even more. ('The VOID algorithm's predictive power isn't able to do more than bridge the gigantic reaction speed gap. He reacts so absurdly quickly defensively and offensively that even the sheer depth of predictions cannot overwhelm him. But the gap in our movement speed isn't nearly as much...')

He was compensating for the gap in their movement speed in two different ways. First, he relied on passive defenses to defend against Kane's weaker attacks. Adamant Reforging was a solid passive defense. It meant Rui could tank Kane's attacks to most of his body without any guard or block whatsoever.

This wasn't true for his crotch, neck, and several places on his face.

These places required active defenses. He used Flux Earther to completely dispel more powerful attacks while using simple blocks to intercept normal attacks.

One thing that was annoying was the mild electric shock that he felt every time came into contact with Kane, even if he had predicted that that would happen. The issue was that there was no way to avoid it realistically.

The good news was that it wasn't debilitating.

Regardless, he was defensively able to compensate for the movement speed gap by moving lesser than Kane had to.

However, that became difficult when Rui went on the offensive, putting Kane back in his element of counter-offense.

Rui had yet to land a single attack on Kane. The problem was whenever he attacked, Kane easily dodged, however, even when he countered the dodge by having predicted it, Kane's reflexes allowed him to negate whatever adapted counter Rui had by moving out of the way easily.

The sheer reflexes he possessed at the moment meant that it was extraordinarily difficult to land a single clean blow on the man.

('This is sub-optimal,') Rui's eyes narrowed.

Both sides were unable to hurt each other, and the battle drew into a stalemate, one that slightly favored Kane, but not enough to grant him any meaningful path to victory.

BOOM!

The two of them broke apart as a lightning bolt struck the spit that they were at just a moment prior.

Rui's mind furiously processed his circumstances as he came up with a means to victory. ('There are a few routes to go through.')

The first route was to leverage his stamina advantage. Kane did not have great stamina. However, the issue was that he wasn't fighting with just his stamina this time.

Chapter 1003: Strategies

Under normal circumstances, Rui would most certainly have gone for the stamina victory. Not only did he possess better stamina due to having a more balanced spec configuration as far as his Martial body went, thereby placing a greater weight on stamina, but he also possessed the Final Breathing technique that would allow him to preserve much more energy in the long run.

Furthermore, Rui's Forestep technique, which he was now forced to use at a maximum was less energy-consumptive than Kane's Godspeed technique due to it being imperfect.

That meant that the battle would normally turn in his favor as time passed and Kane tired until he exploited an inevitable opening to end the fight.

It wasn't glamorous, or flashy. But it was a surgically ruthless path to victory.

The issue was that they were no longer fighting under normal circumstances. They were fighting under special circumstances.

('Under these circumstances, his Fulminata technique is essentially endless,') Rui narrowed his eyes.

The source of the Fulminata technique was not his own energy, but energy harnessed from lightning, stimulating all nerves and neurons in his body. There was endless lightning around them, thus Rui suspected that Kane could use Fulminata for as long as he was conscious.

('That's extremely troublesome,') Rui tutted.

Rui could not make use of the VOID algorithm forever. It was an extremely mentally intensive technique of the highest order of difficulty that he had ever seen. Asking him to use it continuously indefinitely was like asking someone to write high-pressure high-difficulty exams indefinitely.

He could not do it.

Of course, it was possible that the Fulminata technique stressed and strained his brain and nerves too much, causing him to be unable to use the technique for as long as Rui could use the VOID algorithm.

However, that was a gamble at best. Rui did not enjoy gambling, he enjoyed certainty. ('For starters, I need to optimize my defenses even more,')

Kane's lacking power was something he could exploit even further to simplify his defenses. There were very few things Kane could do to hurt Rui in any meaningful manner, which meant that there were very few things that Rui had to do to prevent Kane from hurting him in any meaningful manner, he wasn't being as efficient as he could be.

He planted himself in one spot as he shifted all his weight on his right leg, freeing his left leg for defensive and offensive measures.

He took a tilted stance against Kane, with his torso facing away from Kane while he turned his head to watch Kane. His arms were brought really close to his body.

Rui had already realized the futility of an active frontal assault. It was the most difficult thing for him in this fight, and it was not something that he could easily overcome. He knew that there were just far too few ways to go about it in a successful manner, worst of all, it allowed Kane to fall back into his element.

Thus Rui was content adopting a more defensive stance for the time being. If he could not reach victory by slowly inflicting damage on Kane, then there wasn't any point in continuously attacking.

WHOOSH

Kane appeared before him throwing a palm jab to Rui's throat.

THWACK!

Rui shifted his guard just a little, deflecting the attack off course.

POW POW POW!

Kane swerved to the side, squeezing into his striking range as he launched a swift flurry of strikes to Rui's vital points.

Rui barely managed to deflect them in time as he shifted his body and arms just the bare minimum amount of distance needed to defend against the attacks.

Yet that created an opening. Kane launched a blindingly fast attack upwards to Rui's throat once more. This time, Rui's guard was too slow to make it.

POW!

Kane's eyes widened as Rui swiftly lowered his head, blocking the attack with his chin!

Ordinarily, this would be a bad of defending and a good way to get knocked out. However, due to Kane's weak offense and Rui's passive durability, he could get away with pulling off such a tactic against Kane.

Had he not done that, there was a good chance that Kane's sharp attack would have pierced through his Adam's apple, inflicting a serious wound.

Kane grew frustrated at his inability to go around Rui's defense!

Rui on the other hand, was relieved, yet concerned.

Kane was just an inch away from gaining a decisive advantage in this battle. Rui needed to quickly adopt a strategy that would put him on a path to victory.

The frontal assault had already proven to be ineffective against Kane due to the sheer difficulty of even touching him. The stamina strategy was a gamble that Rui was not willing to take. The optimized defense evened the playing field, but it wasn't enough, and if it failed, it would give Kane a dominant upper hand.

('The biggest issue is getting my attack to connect. This is the fundamental issue,') Rui's eyes narrowed. ('I possess the power to one-shot him, but touching him seems impossible. The fact that the predictive and adaptive evolution models are unable to allow me to even touch him shows how absurdly overpowered Fulminata is in this environment of the Thundering Valley.')

Within the Thundering Valley, Rui wondered how many Martial Artists could beat him. For one, most Martial Artists would not be able to ignore or handle lightning as easily as Kane did. Rui was able to do so thanks to his Eye of Thunder which allowed him to avoid them as easily as avoiding obstacles.

But on top of that, the same lightning empowered Kane to a degree that surpassed any prediction Rui could have ever made regarding the matter.

Was there any Martial Squire that could defeat Kane when they were fighting inside the Thundering Valley?

He highly doubted that. In fact, Rui knew that if not for his deep familiarity with Kane, he would have long lost this fight.

Chapter 1004: Awareness

That realization gave him even deeper respect for Kane, yet it also drove him deeper into considering his paths to victory.

One possibility that sprung to mind was altering the variables of combat, such as range.

He had powerful long-range capabilities that he could leverage. The ODA System allowed him to accurately target his opponents from great distances away. It was particularly effective against close-range fighters as he could use it to barricade them from reaching him.

Furthermore, he also had Transverse Resonance that allowed him to hit up to four times the power he normally could with a single attack, allowing him to inflict critical damage on his opponents.

However, he quickly dismissed this strategy against Kane. Kane was far too quick and would close the distance between them extremely rapidly. As an evasive maneuverer, this was right up his alley, and ultimately a futile effort.

It did not solve the fundamental challenge that was contacting Kane's body with an attack.

He considered trying to turn the battle into a grappling match, but he could tell that Kane was wary about being caught by Rui. Rui had used that exact same strategy against Kane far too many times in the past, it was simply not going to work when he was that cautious about it.

('Tsk, no long-term battle strategy will slowly lead me to victory. His reflexes negate such plans and refuse to give them the opportunity to make slow progress against him,') Rui knew that a more ordinary standard long-term battle approach would likely be unable to hurt him. ('What I need is a tactic, rather than a strategy.')

The two words were used interchangeably, but there were nuances that distinguished them. Strategies were over-arching and long-term. A tactic was a more acute plan that yielded outcomes sooner.

Rui needed a tactic to catch him off-guard, allowing him to beat Kane due to landing a single blow in a critical moment.

That was all he needed with Kane's weak constitution.

Of course, the first question was how he ought to overcome the reflexes problem.

('Surpassing his reflexes with raw speed is out of the question. But reflexes aren't the only relevant variable,') Rui's eyes narrowed as he came up with a possible way out. ('He can't react to what escapes his awareness.')

The human mind received a ton of information every second from all senses, information that it could not entirely process. Thus it often ignored large chunks of the information that came in, focusing on certain parts of it at any given moment.

That was something Rui could exploit.

WHOOSH

Appeared to Rui's side, his finger flung forward as he aimed at Rui's eyes.

POW!

Rui countered by shifting his head at the right moment, causing Kane's attack to harmlessly bounce off his skull.

Rui threw a short and swift jab, avoiding any wind-up movements to ensure that it could hit Kane straightforwardly, yet Kane casually evaded the blow.

POW POW POW!

Rui blocked three swift strikes, yet Kane switched up to a powerful blow to the throat, exploiting a gap in Rui's guard caused by the previous three strikes. His palm jab shot forward unperturbed as Kane finally saw an opportunity to land a critical blow. Rui jerked back in a desperate attempt to avoid the attack.

Yet he couldn't!

SPLAT!

Kane's finger punctured a hole in his throat, much to the former's ecstasy. Yet, at that very moment, Kane felt a sharp pain in his foot.

POW!

"Rgh!" He grimaced as he glanced down.

His eyes widened as he saw Rui's foot crushing his own, pushing it deeply.

At the moment that Kane had struck Rui, Rui had crushed his foot with his own, holding him in place.

Kane struggled like a horse as he did his very best to wrangle his foot.

And he did.

For the rock beneath his foot could not hold a Martial Squire.

But not before it was too late.

BOOM!!!

Rui landed the first strike of their fight!

A powerful blow amplified with Outer Convergence with the impact permeated deeper into his body with Reverberating Lance.

CRACK!

The sheer force of the blow broke Kane's ribs as it launched flying back.

Rui, on the other hand, cradled his throat.

He had come to the conclusion that the best way to distract Kane's awareness in these circumstances was to give him what he wanted.

Then, and only then, would he truly give Rui the opportunity to trap and land a blow on him.

However, he had to pay a price nonetheless. Although Kane's piercing technique was highly primitive and would not have done any damage to Rui nearly anywhere else on his body, Kane had aimed for the one spot where he knew it would do damage.

Yet he wasn't too concerned. It was true that it was serious, but the injuries that he had inflicted on Kane were just as bad, if not worse.

His body was not meant to endure great stress. Rui had not only struck him with his full power, but he had also used Reverberating Lance to make sure that Kane wouldn't be able to get away with just a bad bruise.

"Cough!" Kane spat out some blood on his knees, he turned towards Rui who was covering his throat but was otherwise fine for the most part.

Just one look at him and Kane could tell that the man could fight quite well even in his state. In fact, if this was a real fight, Rui would have already rushed over and kicked him in the head. The only reason that he hadn't was because he knew that the fight was over. Kane had suffered far more damage and was far more debilitated than Rui, who was not that far from his peak even with a hole in his throat. His healing factor and Final Breathing meant that he could continue fighting for quite some time.

"Damn... Cough!" Kane cursed. "I really thought I had a good shot this time."

"You actually did," Rui nodded. "Frankly, I was at a little bit of a loss as to how to beat you."

He offered Kane a hand, pulling him up.

Chapter 1005: Mindset

The two of them quickly left the valley, heading toward a safer space, before quickly consuming potions. Rui found it hard to talk with a hole in his throat, after all.

"Damn," Kane sat back down. "That's a shame."

"It could have gone either way Kane," Rui shook his head. "This is different from when I win because I am simply stronger. In this case, I was using my Flowing Void Style to the absolute maximum, and I still was unable to even gain an advantage. Furthermore, there were times when you were the one with the upper hand. That was what surprised me."

"Yeah, but I still lost," Kane murmured, dissatisfied. "You just feel invincible."

"I'm far from it," Rui chuckled. "The only reason I won this time was because of a clever trick. I simply applied my power a little better than you, at the end of the day. I suspect had you fought with a more open and flexible mind, you might have won."

"Flexible?"

Rui nodded. "Tell me, what was your plan to win after you saw that I was able to handle your swift jabs to my vital spots?"

"..." Kane considered the question as he understood what Rui was trying to convey. "I just kept swiftly moving around hoping to catch an opening."

"I could see that," Rui noted. "In other words, you seemed to hope for victory, rather than doing everything you could to get it."

"Hey, I wasn't holding back!" Kane protested.

"I'm not insinuating that you did buddy," Rui assured him. "I'm saying that going physically all out isn't enough. In this instance, you continued going down the same old set of movements even when you knew that they weren't going to work. Do you think that was the best decision you could have made in those circumstances?"

"..."

"For instance, you could have identified why you weren't able to hit my vitals and tried getting rid of or bypassing one of those reasons," Rui pointed out. "For example, you know that my reaction speed is very slow compared to yours, especially when compared to you in your Fulminata state. You know that I compensate for those with predictions, right?"

Kane nodded, having known that for many years now.

"It means that my predictions were the only reason I didn't instantly lose the fight," Rui pointed out. "What would happen if you get my predictions to fail? After all, predictions are just that; predictions. They're not absolute. They're not a superpower where I am actually looking into the actual future."

"I hadn't even considered that," Kane's eyes widened as he fell deep in thought. "The more I think about it though, the more stupid I feel for not considering this."

"Although it certainly is far from easy to disrupt my predictions, it is still an avenue of exploration that you didn't even consider," Rui told him.

What he didn't mention was that even if Kane tried a simplistic way to disrupt his predictions, it would almost certainly be useless against Rui's predictive model. His model was based on most subconscious active and passive patterns, meaning that his targets were not even aware of these patterns.

That was why any conscious efforts to throw Rui off failed unless his opponent gained an immense amount of self-awareness abruptly.

This was essentially impossible.

However, what Rui was trying to instill in Kane was strategic considerations. Had Kane possessed a strategic mindset, which was different from strategic intelligence, Rui was sure that he would have had a far harder time winning against him had he possessed strategic considerations in mind.

However, Kane stuck to a very static approach, hoping to rely on the power of his two grade-ten techniques side-by-side in order to overwhelm Rui with sheer speed and agility.

That was, in Rui's opinion, a fatal error.

"But what if my strategic considerations lead me to fight in a manner that deviates from my Martial Path?" Kane asked with furrowed brows. "Like, my Martial Path is evasive maneuvering, right? But if it's ineffective in a particular fight, and offensive maneuvering happens to be preferable to evasive maneuvering in that, should I abandon my Martial Path entirely in pursuit of what is the best strategic outlook?"

This was not a simple question. In fact, what Kane was asking was something every Martial Artist asked themselves. And it was a question that was extremely difficult to resolve.

If one's Martial Path was sub-optimal in a given situation, should one abandon it and go for the more preferable approach?

But wasn't abandoning one's Martial Path in a fight bad? How could one reach the higher Realms if one did that?

It was quite the dilemma that plagued the Martial Art community.

Except Rui. He had long thought about it and had instantly arrived at an answer the very first time he did.

The first reason was that this problem was not a problem for him. There was absolutely no contradiction whatsoever between his Martial Path and the principle of going for the most suited strategy and approach for a battle.

In fact, the latter was part of the former!

Part of Adaptive Evolution was choosing the best strategic approach to his opponent, no matter what it was. So in a way, Rui was simply bypassing this dilemma altogether. It was a non-problem to him.

However, he also had deep insight into what the solution to the dilemma was even for others.

He didn't know if it was entirely the best decision to tell Kane about it, but ultimately, he relented. His friend was troubled, and he wanted to help him out.

"The answer to your question is not objective," Rui replied. "The answer to your question is just another question. What is more important to you? Your Martial Path, or your life?"

Kane's eyes widened as he processed Rui's words, understanding what he meant.

"You're torn about choosing between your Martial Path and the most strategically sound approach, but you have it all wrong. What you're choosing between is your Martial Path and your life."

Chapter 1006: Age

"This was a simple duel between friends," Rui reminded him. "So your life was not in the line. But what if I was your enemy? What if I was trying to kill you?"

Kane winced at the thought of it. He had always thought this, but especially so after their fight, Rui was not someone that he wanted to have as an enemy ever!

He had the gut feeling that not even a Martial Senior would be able to protect him from Rui, should he ever decide to kill him.

"I see what you mean... If I stick to my Martial Path in a situation where my life is on the line, and where it isn't most fit. I might die... I definitely don't want to die for my Martial Path, my Martial Path serves me, not the other way. It is my strongest suit, and both my brain and body are entirely centered and revolved around my Martial Path thus it will always be my preferred path in general," He felt a remarkable amount of clarity on the subject after just a few words from Rui, which astonished him.

This wasn't the first time that he had considered the matter, so he had to admit, that he was quite surprised when Rui was able to dispel the fog of uncertainty that had clouded his mind with this much ease.

Once more, his friend diverged from the norm in ways that he couldn't even imagine.

"I'm guessing..." Kane towards Rui with an intrigued expression. "...that you don't feel the same way."

Kane knew his friend enough to have a deep understanding of how he viewed Martial Art. He knew that his friend truly loved Martial Art unlike almost anything else, especially his own Martial Art. He already had a good idea of how Rui felt about the issue.

"You're right," Rui replied. "My Martial Path and Martial Art are the two most important things to me. I would rather die than forsake them."

His voice was crystal clear. There wasn't even the slightest hint of hesitation in it.

Kane couldn't help but feel even greater admiration for Rui, his resolve and conviction for his Martial Art and Path were truly worthy of respect. He couldn't help but feel cowardly when he compared himself to Rui.

"Everyone is different," Rui remarked, keenly noticing his reaction. "Everyone pursues their Martial Path for their own reasons. There is no better or worse reason, as long as you have fulfilled what you wanted by pursuing your Martial Path and obtaining it via your Martial Art, you have won."

"That is a fascinating outlook," Kane couldn't help but murmur. "That's not how most people would judge who 'won'. Shouldn't the Martial Artist that managed to go further down their Martial Path and reach higher Realms have 'won' compared to others?"

"I don't believe so, no. We aren't talking about who would win a fight," Rui nonchalantly replied. "A Martial Senior whose goal of pursuing their Martial Path happens to only be achievable with the Sage Realm is not necessarily better than a person who has accomplished what they sought with the help of the power of the Squire Realm.

Kane looked unconvinced. The fact that a Martial Senior could be said to have 'won' less than a Martial Squire sounded extremely unintuitive.

"Let's say we had a man A who lived with his family in a forest infested with Apprentice-level beasts, and a man B who lived with his family in a forest infested with Master-level beasts," Rui began with an analogy, seeing that Kane was unconvinced. "Man A pursues his Martial Path to the Squire Realm to gain the power to protect his family from the Apprentice-level beasts. He successfully protects his family and lives a life happily ever after. Man B, however, reaches the Senior Realm, and is still unable to protect his family from the Master level predators, and lives in grief for the rest of his life."

He turned towards Kane. "Which man would you rather be? Man A or Man B?"

That wasn't even a choice.

"Man A for sure..." Kane murmured, understanding Rui's point.

"Ah, but you have chosen becoming a Martial Squire over a Martial Senior," Rui smiled.

Kane was flummoxed once more. It was irrefutable logic.

"There are many circumstances that aren't too dissimilar to the one I gave you," Rui elaborated with a calm tone. "Those Martial Artists who reach the higher Realms only do so because whatever they desire is so difficult and out of hand that they can only obtain what they want with extraordinary Martial Art. Rather than envying their power, it is best to establish what it is you want, and what it is you pursue

your Martial Path for. Simple as that. Nothing more, and nothing else. Do not pursue power you neither want nor need, that is a recipe for an empty life that you'll regret as an old man."

Kane nodded, turning to Rui with an awed expression. "Man, this might sound weird but... Sometimes I feel you're not even my age."

"Huh?"

"How do I put it in words? It feels like you're a sage who's already gone through life, who knows all the answers," Kane murmured. "Either that or you're just good at talking a good game. I really don't know which one it is."

"Well, I'm obviously a young man, just like yourself," Rui reasoned. "Thus, it is most certainly the latter."

"So I can dismiss everything you just said?"

"I wouldn't recommend that,"

The two of them chatted lightly as they headed back to their inn. They had already completed everything that they wanted to, after all. Not just in the acute sense, but also in a broader sense as far as their purpose of stay in the Thundering Valley went.

The two of them had already made immense strides as far as their ability to deal with lightning went. Rui made smaller and highly specific gains, while Kane made, literally, thundering gains that he was anxious to retain.

Chapter 1007: Trust

"I know we're more or less done in the Thundering Valley, but..." Kane sighed as he looked out the window to the glowing storm of lightning pouring down from the clouds to the land. "I really don't want to leave this place."

Rui didn't respond immediately.

He understood Kane's sentiment very well, of course. Perhaps more than even Kane understood it himself.

Rui tried imagining what he would do if he came across a valley where his Flowing Void Style and the VOID algorithm were both ten times stronger than they normally were.

Of course, such a location could not possibly exist. The VOID algorithm was information in its purest form, there was no way there were esoteric substances that could affect something so abstract.

However, if there was such a location, would he truly have the willpower to separate himself from that location? Forcefully abandon that place and return to his, now, painfully weak ordinary VOID algorithm?

He liked to think he would have such willpower, but in reality, he simply didn't know.

Those were the circumstances that Kane was in at the moment. He didn't want to grandstand about discipline or other virtues to try and dispel such sentiments. Kane was already aware of them, and simply virtue signaling would irritate him.

Instead, he wanted to offer Kane a real solution.

"I think it is possible for you to retain the Fulminata technique even without the Thundering Valley," Rui told him.

"You said that before as well..." Kane raised an eyebrow. "But how? The technique requires lightning, and the only source of lightning is the heavens."

Rui did not want to get into the technical details of explaining the distinctions between electricity and lightning, and how the former was what his technique was actually based on. It required far too much of a scientific explanation involving concepts that Kane had never even heard of before.

"Trust me," Rui replied. "It's possible. If you're willing to put some faith in me, I think there's a good chance that I can help you find a way."

Kane stared at Rui before heaving an exaggerated sigh. "You make a hard case. What do you even have in mind?"

"Even if your body does not have the ability to generate lightning, there are definitely materials that can," Rui informed him, turning towards the Thundering Valley. "Why do you think the Thundering Valleys thunders so much? It isn't just the weather, I promise you."

"And you want me to, what, carry this material around with me in a punch everywhere I go?" Kan raised an eyebrow in skepticism. "That sound sounds incredibly impractical, and outside my Martial Art and Path."

"I'm not asking you to carry it outside your body," Rui calmly replied. "I'm telling you you can carry it inside your body."

"Huh?"

"I never did tell you how I created the Riemannian Echo technique, did I?" Rui remarked, murmuring. "Sensing the curvature of space isn't something my body or any Martial Squire's body for that matter is good at."

"You're telling me you inserted substances in your body that allowed you to use Riemannian Echo?" Kane's eyes widened. "That's... wow. Huh. I didn't expect that."

He looked uncertain about the whole idea. "Are you sure that's safe?"

"Very," Rui nodded. "Martial bodies are immune to a certain degree of toxicity that would be instantly lethal to normal human beings. I made sure that the toxicity of the substances I inserted into my body is too little to be able to harm me."

Kane looked more intrigued by this option at this point. How could he not? He knew how effective the Riemannian Echo technique was. It was one of the two elements that were responsible for the titanic success that they had achieved in the Shionel Dungeon and was also the means through which Rui mapped the entirety of the Shionel Dungeon.

Denying that the technique was anything but a resounding success was disingenuous. Kane even grew hopeful that Rui would be able to follow up on his words, considering that Riemannian Echo was also a grade-ten technique just like his Fulminata.

"I can only show you the way though," Rui informed him. "You're going to have to put in the hard work once it's time."

"Try me," Kane's eyes narrowed as they burned with determination.

If it was just a matter of effort, then he would put in as much and then some more effort as needed. Whatever it took to get his hands on the Fulminata technique away from the Thundering Valley!

"So what do we have to do?" Kane asked with a serious tone. "Can it be done here?"

"No..." Rui shook his head. "It can't. This place doesn't have what I need in order to do this. We're going to have to travel to a place where I can get access to what you need."

"Which is?"

"Information on esoteric substances, and a certain degree of Martial Art training resources," Rui murmured. "Their esoteric medical technology also needs to be above a certain level."

Rui closed his eyes as he pulled out the locations related to Martial Art that he purchased from Chairman from his Mind Palace. "Hmmm... There aren't all that many. We may need to interact with a state to obtain what we need, but that is too improbable and also dangerous."

Rui had no intentions of interacting with any sovereign states, at the moment. He knew that there were simply far too many risks associated with trading with a sovereign state. They were too strong, and this

time, Rui and Kane would not have the protective veil of being untraceable, or the Martial Union to save him.

Most importantly, Rui was perhaps just a tad bit traumatized by the fiasco at the end of his time in the Shionel Confederation, thus he did not want to get involved in any kind of business that stood to make him powerful enemies that could crush him if he made them mad. He was content fighting in his weight class for now.

Chapter 1008: Options

"That is a good idea," Kane nodded when Rui explained his thoughts regarding interacting with states to him. "Frankly, let's not put ourselves in such a stressful situation again. We can grow stronger even without resorting to such extreme measures."

Rui couldn't help but agree wholeheartedly.

"What else?" Kane turned towards Rui.

"There are multiple options," Rui murmured.

The continent was vast, and Guildmaster Bradt's information was decently vast. Rui had hundreds of places that they could visit on their journey to the West. He had already begun searching for those with the means to give them what they wanted, and places where the difficulty of obtaining what they wanted wasn't too difficult.

That narrowed his search down tremendously.

Only three places were left!

"Damn, guess things aren't that easy," Rui murmured.

He had hoped that they would have a buffet of locations from where Rui could pick a place where he could help Kane achieve the Fulminata technique permanently by inserting the necessary esoteric substances into his body.

"What are our options?" Kane asked with directed interest.

"We have three spots, I'll let you pick," Rui offered. "The first one is a Martial Artist Church that is specifically meant for Martial Squires."

"A Church?" Kane frowned.

"Yep," Rui nodded, "A Virodha Church, a church of the Virodhabhasa Faith, said to be a place of refuge for Martial Artists."

Rui was a firm atheist and secularist, thus he had always turned away from religion across both of his lives.

He just didn't care. If there was proof of a God, then he wouldn't even need anybody to show him the evidence, he would have run into it himself. Until then, he had no interest in mingling with it.

The same was true in his second life. In fact, it was even easier to avoid religion in his second life. The Kandrian Empire was a secularist nation, something he was quite grateful for. Thus, he had seldom ever encountered religion.

He recalled running into Martial missions in the Martial Academy's and Union's mission libraries, but he had always steered clear of them.

"But, if they can give us what we want, then it is worth considering it," Rui murmured.

The Virodhabhasa Faith was one of the most prominent religions across the entirety of the continent.

It was dominant, so much so that even Rui had heard of it, and was cognizant of its popularity, although he had no idea what the religion was all about besides from the fact that it was a religion related to some Martial Artist.

He wasn't too surprised by this.

The origin of religion was one that was rooted in fear and hope for powers that surpassed what people could muster. That was why religions on Earth frequently deified the elements. These were entities that they feared, for they could unleash great suffering, but were also entities that could make life a paradise.

In a world where Martial Artists were feared more than natural disasters, why wouldn't there be religions centered around Martial Artists, particularly the powerful ones of higher Realms?

In fact, he was willing to bet that every Martial Transcendent had a religion dedicated to them just due to how abysmal their power was. Martial Sages to a lesser extent were also in the same country, he could easily see a small nation deifying a Martial Artist like Kane's father.

Perhaps Martial Masters and Martial Seniors could feign as divine in insular and isolated places.

As for Martial Squires like himself... He would be lucky if he was treated as a god even in a small village.

The Virodhabhasa Faith was also a faith that was centered around a Martial Artist, that he knew, though he didn't know who, and didn't care.

What he was interested in was the fact that perhaps this one church could offer them as far as their short-term goal of allowing Kane to use Fulminata at any point.

The Virodha Church that he was referring to in particular was something that he brought up because he very clearly remembered the data that Guildmaster Bradt had shown him. It was a church that considerably aided Martial Artists in their growth, in exchange for joining the Virodhabhasa Faith.

"You considered that to be not difficult?" Kane stared at Rui with a strange look.

Rui grimaced. "Listen, it's your choice, your technique. I'm just providing you with all options without rooting them away because of my bias. If you're willing, this place can help you get what you want."

"No question," Kane shook his head, much to Rui's delight. "I am not becoming a part of the Virodhabhasa Faith. Next."

"A development facility offering resources and services in exchange for Martial Squires serving as test subjects to experiments-" "Nope, next."

Kane looked nervous as they came across the final option.

"A small sovereign town dedicated to research on Martial Art offering training and growth resources and services in exchange for protection,"

Kane paused for a moment, before nodding. "What's the town's name?"

"Crexeet," Rui replied. "Crexeet; the town dedicated to Martial Artists."

"Will we be able to find what I need?" Kane asked.

"Without a doubt," Rui nodded as he recalled the basic data that he had purchased from Guildmaster Bradt. "The town was founded by a senior researcher who set-up up an institute in an extremely remote location. Furthermore, the research that the town does is mostly at the Squire level."

That was why Rui had the confidence that this town could provide Kane with what he needed.

"Alright, it's a done deal," Kane nodded with a determined expression. "We'll head to the town of Crexeet."

He turned towards Rui. "How far, where, and in what direction?"

"It's about seven thousand kilometers from here, which is very close all things considered. In a remote region known as the Hiokin Plateau, and it's South-west from here."

Kane got up. "Let's get going."

Rui smiled, nodding. He was quite pleased to see Kane taking charge and striving for something that he truly wanted. The dynamic was usually the opposite between them.

Chapter 1009: Arrival

"You boys finally leaving, hm?" The innkeeper asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes, Grandma," Rui smiled.

They had grown close to her over the several months of their stay here.

She sighed melancholically. "The Martial world is dangerous, stay safe."

Rui raised an eyebrow.

They had never disclosed their statuses as Martial Artists to the elderly lady.

"Huhu, I may have grown old but I have lived a long life. I can see a Martial Artist from a mile away," She gently chuckled.

Rui had a complicated expression. "Er, about that... Could please keep our identity as Martial Artists a secret if anyone comes around asking?"

She smiled warmly. "What Martial Artists? I haven't seen any around here."

Kane smirked. "Thanks, Grandma, see you again someday!"

The two of them left the inn after bidding her goodbye.

"Alright, let's go!" Kane immediately dashed away, leaving Rui behind.

"Er... Which way is West again?" He sheepishly asked after coming back with his tail in between his legs.

Rui sighed, chuckling. "I get that you're hyped, but follow the guy who actually knows where it is."

"After you, navigator sir," Kane gestured dramatically. "And don't hold me back. I tolerate your slowpoke travel speed wordlessly under normal circumstances. But this time I'm in a hurry!"

"I'll do my best," Rui mirthlessly laughed as he activated Gale Force Breathing, Outer Convergence, and a quasi-Forestep.

By his calculations, they would be moving fast enough that the technique would last until they reached there as long as he consumed some potions.

He truly did not want to be deadweight to Kane.

And he was right.

The two of them dashed through the wind at a riveting speed.

It wasn't two hours later that they reached their destination!

Such was the speed of Martial Squires. Thousands of kilometers could be crossed in a matter of hours. It was only when they traveled across a portion of the continent could the journey take weeks, or even a month of travel even for Martial Squires like Rui and Kane.

Relative to that, the town of Crexeet wasn't that far, in fact, it could even be said to be in the geographic neighborhood of the Thundering Valley!

It showed Rui how absolutely gigantic this continent and planet was!

('Just based on the size of the continent that I've come to understand this planet is much larger than even Jupiter!')

It was hard for Rui to imagine how life bloomed so vigorously on such a gigantic planet and spread so far. The conditions for life were fragile, and there were a ton of constraints that planets were subject to in order for them to be able to host life.

It was surely harder for larger planets to do that compared to smaller planets, given the harsh gravitational acceleration that larger and more massive planets tended to have.

He had already verified that gravity worked the way he knew it because his Riemannian Echo technique functioned the way it would if gravity worked the way it did.

Yet this begged the question, why did the gravity on this planet seem identical to that of Earth's?

Rui had never considered it before, but it didn't make sense. Things fell at the same speed as they normally did on Earth. Thus, Rui had come to the conclusion that the acceleration due to gravity was the same here as it was on Earth.

('Unless all humans here are stronger than their Earth counterparts and their perception of time is slower than that of the humans of Earth,') Rui mused.

"Hey!" Kane snapped in front of his face. "We're here. Stop dazing out."

"Cut me some slack," Rui grumbled. "I've been running with Forestep continuously, I'm tired."

Kane ignored him as he turned back ahead, peering into the distance. "So that's Crexeet town, huh? Looks... disappointing."

"It looks exactly like how towns are supposed to look," Rui grumbled. "You're just spoiled by the excitement of the Thundering Valley and the Umiana Trench."

Kane couldn't deny that. Those two locations were special and fantastically exotic. Everything else came off as mundane compared to a hole in the ocean, and lightning for rain!

"Oh, looks like we have company," The two of them detected a Martial Squire along with some Martial Apprentices tagging along.

This was immediately odd.

Martial Apprentices had no place in a confrontation between Martial Squires. Which is what this undoubtedly was. Rui could sense that the Martial Squire wasn't there to have small talk with the two of them.

"Who are you, and what is your purpose here?" The man gruffly spoke with a voice that matched his gargantuan body.

The first impression one would get from the Martial Path was that he was almost certainly centered around power, offense, or defense. His incredibly buff and developed body simply got rid of a number of other possibilities such as a Martial Path centered around maneuvering or stamina or something like that.

Rui analyzed the muscle spec configuration of his body, trying to gauge what his Martial Path was.

('The muscles of his forearms are the largest,') Rui noted.

That wasn't necessarily anything of not by itself, however, stronger forearm muscles corresponded with more powerful hands and fingers.

And his hands were menacingly large, large enough to wrap around the entirety of Rui's skull.

Despite that, Rui didn't feel too much of a threat from the man. He was at most a high-grade Martial Squire. If a fight broke out, Rui was confident that he would be able to take him down himself.

"We're traveling Martial Squires, and we wish to enter the town of Crexeet. We're here to get stronger," Kane resolutely replied.

The man furrowed his eyebrows. "So you aren't from the Ferendel Duchy, or the Senten Kingdom?"

The two of them exchanged a glance before turning back to the man.

"Uh, no?"

The man stared at them for a few more seconds before huffing lightly. "If you make a mess, you'll be disposed of. Don't forget that while you're here. And welcome to the town of Crexeet."

Chapter 1010: Introduction

Rui and Kane immediately followed him, relieved that they didn't get caught in a new mess. Rui, however, was a little concerned by his lack of awareness of the circumstances of their new destination.

Normally, whenever he reached a new location for a new endeavor, he was well-prepared ahead of time and knew everything that he needed to know.

However, their previous encounter showed that this was most certainly not the case with Crexeet town.

For instance, he mentioned the Frenten Duchy, and the Senten Kingdom when inquiring about who they were. Why bring that up? He wouldn't have done so if the two nations weren't relevant to the town of Crexeet.

If they were relevant, then what was their relationship with the town of Crexeet?

The intelligence supplied by Chairman Deacon most certainly mentioned that it was a sovereign town.

('That almost certainly means that the relationship between the aforementioned states and the town of Crexeet is not good,') Rui sighed.

Given that a sovereign town was far weaker than a kingdom or a duchy, the power differential naturally meant that the latter would be in a dominant position over the other, and look to control and exploit.

This was just the way things were, generally. The weaker submitted.

The fact that the town of Crexeet hadn't was something that Rui had found interesting but also was the reason that he was worried that the town that they were stepping into and looking to exchange with, in a mutually beneficial relationship. He had managed to deduce the rough circumstances that of the town of Crexeet with just a few words from the Martial Squire who guided them into the town personally.

Rui carefully observed the town once they entered it, taking note of all significant observations.

What surprised him was that the town had a particular vibe to it, one that he was familiar with not in this life, but in his previous one.

('It has the air of academia,') Rui mused.

He had been bright enough in his previous life to finish his degree in reputed institutions with large campuses that felt like their own little society. The vibe that he got from this town was quite similar to that.

Most of the inhabitants wore attire or garbs that one would expect to see from those involved in fields of purely intellectual pursuit.

Rui frowned.

That was quite strange. Why was there a town like this in the middle of nowhere? Why did so many people who were clearly in the research fields flock to this remote region in order to be in this place?

Rui felt as though he could gain a lot of insights surrounding this town, but he wasn't able to see through the core of it all.

Another interesting observation he made was the fact that almost all of the Martial Artists he saw were Martial Apprentices.

He saw very few Martial Squires, and he could not sense a single Martial Artist above the Squire Realm across the entire town.

It was quite likely that the town did not have any such Martial Artists. That coupled with the fact that the town had managed to retain its sovereignty meant a lot of things. It meant that this paltry level of power was enough to assure the independence of the town.

('That automatically means that the power of the surrounding kingdoms isn't all that much.,') Rui mused.

"We're here, the Crexeet Institute" The man paused as they stopped before the largest array of buildings in the town. "Wait in the reception down straight ahead, and the mayor will see you in time."

Rui recalled that the town was founded by a researcher, of all people. He found that quite strange, why would a researcher go through all that effort to found a single measly town?

The fact that he was inside what looked like a research facility rather than a governmental office was quite strange too.

The moment the two of them entered the gates and started walking down, they immediately attracted the eyes of various people. They had put on their Martial uniforms since they needed to reveal their status as Martial Squires, thus it was quite evident that the two of them were Martial Artists.

That drew a lot of attention from the students and professors on campus for some reason.

('It is because this institute is apparently a research institute for Martial Art?') Rui furrowed his eyebrows.

Even the more ordinary employees showed them an excessive amount of deference.

The two of them waited in the reception for nearly half an hour before an employee finally addressed them.

"Sir Derr is ready to receive you," She informed them with a smile. "Please follow me while I guide you to his office."

It wasn't long before they had finally arrived, she gestured them in before walking away while they opened the door.

"Ah! I'm sorry to keep you Martial Squires waiting! Please come in, have a seat," Derr greeted them cheerily. "I'm the Mayor of the town and also the head researcher and professor of the the head institute to the town! Haha."

He was not what Rui expected from the leader and founder of the Crexeet town. He was short and plump with circled spectacles. He had a light and nonchalant attitude despite meeting with stranger Martial Squires for the first time.

"Now then, I heard you traveling Martial Squires were interested in Crexeet town?" He glanced between them with interested eyes. "What are your names."

"I am Squire Norman, and he's Squire Falken, and yes," Kane nodded. "We heard that the town contracts Martial Squires for defense and security, in exchange for training and growth resources."

"Right you are!" The man pointed at Kane emphatically. "Are the two of you perhaps interested?"

Rui couldn't help but feel strange. This did not feel like a conversation between the leader of a town and two Martial Artists who were potentially able to become powerful assets of the town.

"We're interested," Rui replied this time. "We seek rather specific training resources and information, along with other basic necessities. In exchange, we are willing to lend you our Martial Art services."

"Oh?" The man's eyebrow rose. "Interested in specific training resources and information, hm? Just what might that be?"