

Martial Unity 1211

Chapter 1211: Divide

The battle unfolded in a direction that not a single person had expected it to, especially to those partaking in the battle.

Squire Isin Keelia and her Whispering Winter Style.

Squire Draxel and his Hurricane Shredder Style.

Squire Varay Meenia and his Breathing Marionette Style.

Each of them had expected to face the other two in the end for the title of the Seonmun Champion.

That was why they were shocked when they realized that they were not the prime candidates for that title.

Once that moment of realization came, they made their decisions quickly.

They circled around Rui, drawing in close towards him to finish him off quickly with a numeric advantage.

It was humiliating, yes, but there was too much at stake for each of them. Unlike Rui, they had been eying the Virodhabhasa Martial Contest for a lot longer than just a year. They had even participated multiple times before.

Although they despised the fact that they had to employ the same cowardly strategy that had been employed against them, it couldn't be helped.

Even as they surrounded Rui, their expressions were ashen.

And yet, their opponent did not seem displeased in the slightest. Not only was he not displeased, they could even pick up hints of ecstasy. They couldn't help but frown when they saw him grin.

His mouth opened, and a single word escaped it.

"Hypocrites."

It pierced through all the noise their techniques, reaching not just their ears, but also their hearts. It made their expressions deteriorate. It was hard for them to deny the accusation. They had shamelessly resorted to a strategy that they had looked down upon from a moral high ground just minutes prior.

Yet something about the way he said it was off. The sensation he gave off was strange. It was almost as if he wasn't condemning them. They didn't sense resentment or rage.

No.

He was conveying a different emotion.

Their eyes widened as they understood. They understood what he was conveying.

It was gratitude.

He was thanking them.

In the middle of a battle. Despite being targeted by them collectively, Rui had the audacity to express gratitude.

('Thank you for pushing me to my limits!') Rui exhaled as he completed his Metabody transition to a half Hypertrophic Surge and Void Forestep body.

His body shifted before lashing out.

The battle had begun in earnest.

A maelstrom of pressure crashed into them as Rui rushed forward, racing towards Squire Varay at blinding speeds!

BAM!!!

The very land beneath them shook as Rui dished out a powerful Flowing Canon.

Squire Varay gritted his teeth as he exerted himself to the limit blocking the attack. The very act strained his joints, threatening to snap them. Yet Rui did not let up even as the powerful impact blasted the man away.

The expressions of the other two grew grim as they pursued Rui aggressively, and for good reason.

They already knew.

They knew that Rui could not be allowed to face any one of them alone. With the sheer amount of peril they felt from his monstrous physique, it would be game over if one of them fell, leaving the other two to face him alone.

They rushed forward, hoping to get within close quarters where their Martial Art were effective within.

Yet Rui did not stop moving, ever. Even as he chased after the retreating Squire Varay who was reeling from his attack, he never paused in his steps.

There was good reason for that.

('I can't engage in close-quarters combat with the other two.') His eyes narrowed.

It was frustrating, but it was the truth. Squire Isin in particular was the biggest problem. He had already determined that both Nemean Blossom and Weaving Blood were entirely ineffective against her. That was why he didn't even bother using them, sticking to Hypertrophic Surge and Void Forestep. If she ever entered striking range of him, it was already over.

And because he was forced to abandon Nemean Blossom and Weaving Blood was the match, it also meant that it was unwise to combat Squire Draxel at close quarters as well. Because only through Nemean Blossom's defense, or Weaving Blood's recovery would he be confident of handling his torque-centered counter-offense. The two techniques he wasn't using due to the ice lady.

It was frustrating to be that vulnerable, but it was a good reminder that he wasn't yet at the stage where he could flawlessly adapt to all techniques and Martial Art. He was certain that there would come a day when he would be able to directly negate her freezing head-on.

But today wasn't that day.

If he couldn't let her enter striking range, then that logically left only two solutions.

The first solution was to move away faster than she approached.

The second solution was to barricade her from reaching him, from a distance.

Rui could do both.

('I'll fight this one in hand-to-hand combat.') Rui stared deeply at Squire Varay even as he pummeled him with incredibly powerful and swift blows. ('While constantly moving around chasing him to ensure that the other two cannot even reach me.')

A simple, yet effective plan. Both Squire Isin and Draxel were hyper-specialized in offense and counter-offense respectively. They did not excel in maneuvering, catching up with the much faster and motion-inclined Squire Varay and Rui was a challenge in and of itself. They would waste energy trying to hit him with their Martial Art, while Rui happily took down Squire Varay with the predictive model he had on the man on top of Hypertrophic Surge and Void Forestep.

Yet it appeared that his opponent was not as strategically incompetent as Rui hoped.

Squire Varay took a sharp turn as he rushed in the direction of the two Martial Squires who had been looking to reach and pressure Rui.

His impromptu teammates were trying to reach Rui, but Rui was avoiding them while chasing and beating him down. He realized that all he had to do was constantly move the battle in the direction of his slower peers and regroup, allowing them to fight him as a group once more. As long as he maneuvered correctly, he could always ensure that Rui would not be able to ignore the other two.

Chapter 1212: Targets

"Tsk." Rui frowned. ('Not incompetent, are you?')

His eyes narrowed as the three of them managed to regroup. Their eyes turned towards him, flashing with a predatory glint.

They immediately began moving in his direction with Squire Draxel and Isin in the lead and Varay trailing a little behind. This slowed them down quite a bit. Rui was fast enough to outpace them as long as they tried moving as a group, but that was a strategy that would not lead to his victory.

He was the one who was on a time limit, not them. That strategy would simply lead to him tiring out, and them taking their time to take him down.

Squire Isin and Draxel had cleverly inferred that Rui did not want to engage with them in close quarters, which is why they chose to lead the charge, hoping to try and confront him while Squire Varay trailed behind to make sure that Rui couldn't use the strategy he did before.

Rui had hoped to take them down with a divide-and-conquer strategy, but it appeared that the three of them were smart enough to not fall for that.

Unfortunately, they were underestimating him if they thought that such simple measures were enough to curb his strategy.

('If I cannot divide you by with tactics, then I will divide you with technique.') Rui inhaled deeply, pursing his lips.

When his mouth opened, two powerful sonic bullets flew out, flying straight toward Squire Isin and Squire Draxel. The two of them froze in their tracks in surprise as the two attacks forced them to use all their defensive measures to block it. Squire Draxel employed his technique to dispel as much of the power as he could, Squire Isin merely blocked, skidding back.

Yet Rui was not done, he continued firing sonic bullets at only the two of them, and not Squire Varay. Everybody watching furrowed their eyebrows as they witnessed Rui switching his target from Squire Varay to the two Martial Squires that he had been trying to avoid. The two targeted Martial Squire gritted their teeth at the onslaught.

Even if it was only to half the full potency of the technique, Rui was using Hypertrophic Surge, which meant that the sheer amount of offensive power that every individual attack contained was enormous. Squire Isin was a pure lethal offensive Martial Squire, she did not have a particularly strong defense.

Her defense was her offense. She was accustomed to killing many Martial Squires in an instant by freezing all the water in their bodies to extremely low temperatures. Yet this lethality could not be applied defensively to aid in a situation where she was being pummeled from a distance.

Both she and Squire Draxel retreated a bit. Accuracy of aim reduced exponentially over distance, this was a known principle that could be employed against mid-range Martial Squires. As long as they could make Rui waste enough energy by making him relentlessly attack and miss in an attempt to keep them away, they would win in the long run.

They were like sharks, looming in the distance, waiting for an opportunity to swoop in for the kill once Rui no longer had the energy to keep them at bay while most of his attacks would fail to reach them due to the greater distance that opened between them.

It was a fine strategy in theory, Rui even commended them for half-decent strategic considerations.

There was just one issue.

Every single attack reached them.

It didn't matter how far they went, or how much they moved around. Every single attack that Rui launched crashed into them, no matter the position, direction, and inclination they were at relative to him. They hoped that he would have to waste a lot of energy to ensure that the two of them didn't reach close quarters and kill him, either through freezing or through the torque twister.

Yet Rui did not waste any energy at all.

No.

His attacks were not desperate barrages from a man who was cornered. Instead, they were surgically precise and accurate actions performed with the bare minimum amount of energy.

The entire audience realized that they were witnessing something unprecedented.

Squire Isin and Draxel had already distanced themselves by more than a kilometer from Rui.

Yet every single attack continuously struck them!

It didn't seem to matter how and where they moved. It was as though Rui's attacks were destined to strike them!

How on Earth was Rui striking them so perfectly from such a distance without even looking at them?!

Only one man understood what was happening.

('This... This is his Pathfinder.') Master Deivon's eyes widened in amazement. He only knew because Rui had sold them the technique.

However, there was something off.

('The Pathfinder technique is meant for static and stationary targets. Yet he's sniping them perfectly despite their rapid and sharp movements to throw him off.') His eyes narrowed. ('The only way he could do that is if...')

The deep insight that came with being a Martial Master led him to the answer that befuddled all other spectators.

It was only then that he understood the profound depth of his Martial Art.

('No... I'm just barely uncovering the surface... I don't understand. Just how...?') His thoughts trailed off as he watched in rapt attention as Rui displayed astounding prowess.

Squire Draxel and Isin rapidly began suffering greater wounds as their dodging and distancing measures miserably failed against the Void Pathfinder technique. At this point, even if they wanted to step forward and close the distance, they couldn't. Rui pushed them back with stronger attacks every time they attempted to close the distance.

Yet, he only enjoyed this advantage for no more than a few seconds in real-time.

Squire Varay appeared behind him in his blind spot with a furious expression and a charged attack.

('I won't let you have things your way!')

He launched a blindingly fast attack at Rui's back, hoping to disrupt him just enough to allow the other two to close the distance and kill him in that timeframe.

Chapter 1213: Underestimated

Alas, he too underestimated Rui.

WHOOSH!

Where Rui was a moment ago, was nothing besides an empty image. His eyes widened in shock as he realized that Rui had side-stepped him with ease.

('He dodged me despite attacking them?') He gritted his teeth. "Damn you!"

He launched a barrage of powerful and swift blows, breathing deeply as he manipulated the entirety of the air behind to push his body forward, increasing his speed and power tremendously.

Yet all of them failed to reach Rui. He evaded them with a degree of proficiency that only Kane could surpass.

Yet it wasn't the failure of the attacks that hurt Squire Varay the most.

It was the fact that Rui wasn't even looking at him.

Everyone could see that he had firmly turned his attention back to the two Martial Squires that he had been targeting.

That was a statement.

A statement that Squire Varay wasn't even worth acknowledging.

Hardly anyone could believe what they were seeing. Two grade-ten Martial Squires were being surgically bullied by powerful attacks from a ridiculous distance away, while the third couldn't even touch him despite being right in front of his face.

He couldn't even get Rui to acknowledge his existence.

His eyes grew bloodshot as an expression of pure rage covered his face. He prided himself as someone who stood at the very epitome of the Squire Realm. While there were Martial Squires stronger than him, he was not weak by any means.

Yet standing before Rui's gargantuan figure that refused to even meet his eyes, he felt as though he had gone back twenty years ago when he fought a Martial Squire for the first time after breaking through to the Squire Realm.

"YOU WILL NOT DISRESPECT ME!" He bellowed as he went all-out.

He used every limb to launch attacks at Rui, hoping to simply overcome him with effort, making it untenable for the young man to ignore him or continue dodging him with ease.

It was then that something changed.

Rui's movements began growing slower and lesser.

Yet his dodges became cleaner and smoother.

His movement speed began reducing as his muscles began growing even bigger and denser compared to before.

Squire Varay's eyes widened. He didn't fully understand what was happening, but he managed to grasp the gist.

('He's sacrificing speed for power...!')

For a moment, he was just speechless.

Here he was doing everything in his power to actually land a hit on Rui, yet the man had the audacity to not only ignore him but also lower his speed as though evading him wasn't challenging at all.

The fact of the matter was that Rui didn't need the speed of Void Forestep anymore. His predictive model on Squire Varay had already reached a point where he could avoid the man without enhanced speed. Instead, he turned on Hypertrophic Surge to the maximum, doubling his offensive power, and causing even more damage as he accurately struck both Squire Isin and Draxel with even more powerful attacks.

Squire Varay on the other hand, felt and looked like a fool as Rui effortlessly dodged attacks that he predicted via the many passive and active patterns that he had spotted in Squire Varay's movements.

At that moment, Squire Varay snapped.

"RARGH!" He abandoned all wariness and defense as he simply rushed forward, determined to strike Rui no matter what. His fist moved so abysmally fast, that the friction with the atmosphere caused the air around it to ignite!

Yet not even that reached Rui.

WHOOSH!

Rui evaded a hook with a step forward, closing the distance with a charge.

He was looking straight at the shocked man with a smirk, meeting his gaze for the first time.

He had been waiting for that moment.

It was then that Squire Varay realized that the entire time, he had been the real target, not the other two Martial Squires.

Unfortunately, it was the last thought that flashed through his mind before the world went dark.

BOOM!!!

A powerful Flowing Canon amplified with the full power of the Hypertrophic Surge technique, as well as Outer Convergence and Reverberating Lance, crashed into the man's ribcage.

CRACK CRACK CRACK!

The attack left a deep dent in the man's chest even as it launched him across the entire colosseum.

BOOM!!!

A giant crater was formed at the end with Squire Varay's mangled body at its epicenter.

For a moment, everything was silent.

Nobody moved.

Nobody could move.

It took a moment for them to understand what had happened. But once that moment passed, all hell broke loose amongst the spectators. The gravity of what happened fully dawned on all those who bore witness

Not only was Rui fighting three grade-ten Martial Squires simultaneously, each of whom formed a temporary coalition against him, but he pushed back, resisted, and was decisively winning, going so far as to take down one of them despite fighting all three at the same time!

Squire Isin and Squire Draxel gritted their teeth with grim expressions on their wounded faces. Their entire body was slowly healing, but it wasn't fast enough.

Rui's mouth had already pursed, ready to continue bombarding them with even more powerful attacks.

Just the sight of him sent shivers crawling up their skin.

"I FORFEIT!" Squire Isin screeched just before Rui launched his attacks.

Rui's eyes flashed towards Squire Draxel, his final remaining opponent before launching his attack.

THWOOM!

('You bitch!') Squire Draxel cursed with venomous hatred. "Wait! I forfe-!"

Unfortunately, it was too late.

BOOM!!!

The very land hoisting the entire colosseum shook as Rui's tier five Transverse Resonance crashed into Squire Draxel.

The man gritted his teeth, activating his most powerful Hurricane Jab to minimize the damage as much as possible.

Yet he was swept away by the attack nonetheless.

The Squire-level barriers beneath the spectator stands broke as the attack blasted through them, leaving the colosseum entirely along with Squire Draxel's corpse.

The attack generated tremors that reverberated across the entire town.

Just enough to be noticed, not enough to do any harm.

The battle ended as everybody witnessed what was nothing less than a shadow of the power of the Senior Realm within the Seonmun Champion.

Chapter 1214: Afterword

The entirety of the colosseum was shell-shocked.

The outcome of the final fight within the preliminary contest was nothing short of absurd. Initially, everybody had expected that all four of the final Martial Squires would be matched roughly equally. After all, their performances up until that point had all matched roughly equally.

However, it turned out that this rather easy and expected prediction could not be further away from the truth. A single Martial Squire was able to not only match but also overcome all opposition all by himself.

Furthermore, the power he displayed at the end. Many people did not even know that Martial Squires were capable of such things. That alone changed people's perception of what was possible in the Squire Realm. And that in turn made other Martial Squires feel weaker and less accomplished.

Regardless, the outcome was so surprising that even the commentator forgot to end the match and declare the winner for several seconds.

"And this exciting and shocking contest has come to an end, ladies and gentlemen! The seventy-second Seonmun Champion is none other than Squire Falken!"

...

There were no cheers for a second. It appeared that people still needed some time to process what had happened.

However, eventually, reality set in.

"Wooooooo! Go win the main contest too!"

"GOOD LUCK! YOU WERE AMAZING!"

"Damn, now I just have to go witness the Martial Contest that will be held in the town of Li."

Although Rui would have liked nothing more than to leave now that the contest was over, he still endured enough to make sure that he received his little prize and cup. Though even he was coming to regret that decision when they asked him to give a speech.

There he stood before tens of thousands of people. He was glad that the mask that he commissioned from Master Deivon also altered his voice to ensure that nobody could possibly track his voice to Rui Quarrier.

"I appreciate the support from all the spectators, as well as my patron." Rui began. "I do not have much to say, so I will keep this crisp and short. This contest was challenging to win, however, it was far from the limit of what I was going to achieve. I will achieve victory even at the main Martial Contest, and I will bring glory to this town."

As he predicted, that earned him a huge round of cheers and applause despite how short and crisp it was. He figured nobody wanted to hear a long boring speech after an exciting battle. He himself would loathe to give a long boring speech.

He had a Martial Contest to prepare for.

At the end of the match, he was greeted by his final two surviving competitors. Squire Isin and Varay stood in a corridor that he walked down once he left the colosseum.

"Congratulations on your victory," Squire Isin offered with an impassive tone.

"Likewise, congratulations," Squire Varay added.

"Thank you, it was difficult to achieve," Rui replied graciously.

"Really?" Squire Varay regarded him with dismay. "I don't think we pushed you to your limit at all."

Rui sighed. "What's this about? Is this some sort of intimidation tactic"

"Is it possible for us to intimidate you?" Squire Isin asked with a bitter smile, shaking her head. "We just want to wish you luck. You defeated us, so you must not lose easily in the Martial Contest. It will besmirch our honor."

Rui shrugged. "I will do my best not to."

It was an odd request, and one Rui would not make himself. However, he could tell that they really cared about it. This was almost concerning because the odds that the two of them were from some high Martial family were actually not low. People from prestigious backgrounds tended to care about stuff like that.

A hint of wariness entered his eyes. He could only hope that this wouldn't become something annoying in the future. Thankfully he had a particularly powerful patron, so he was not too worried.

Speaking of which, he was almost certainly going to have a word with him after this, so he directly headed to the man's office in the church.

"Master Deivon is not in the office right now," The bishop Master's secretary informed him. "He is currently training in the Virodha cathedral."

"Ah, never mind then, I'll visit him later," Rui shook his head. "He knew better than to disrupt the training of a Martial Artist, one of the Master Realm, that too."

"He expressed interest in meeting you nonetheless," The lady informed him. "You may visit him if you are so inclined."

Rui furrowed his eyebrow. "In the middle of training?"

That was odd.

Then again, it would be worthwhile to witness a Martial Master training. Who knew? He may very well gain information that he didn't know otherwise.

He wondered what kind of training a Martial Master of all people could possibly do in a cathedral. Any Master-level technique would annihilate any ordinary infrastructure after all.

Regardless, the cathedral was gigantic, with a capacity to hold tens of thousands of people.

And yet it was devoid of people barring one person.

Master Deivon sat cross-legged at one end, under a section of artistic architecture with many religious connotations. His eyes were closed.

He was immersed deep in meditation.

He paused, furrowing his eyebrows.

The pressure that he felt was more than anything he had ever felt in his entire life. Master Deivon was not just a Martial Master, but a particularly powerful one. Unlike always, he donned simpler and humble Martial Artist attire compared to his more officious religious attire. He presented a different picture of himself until now.

"You're here," He spoke to Rui from the other side of the cathedral, opening his eyes.

"You called for me, sir?"

"Indeed," The man smiled. "Congratulations on your victory, it was well-earned. You are the most powerful Champion in the history of this town. I have no doubt about that."

Chapter 1215: Involved

"Thank you, Master Deivon," Rui nodded. "However, you didn't need to disrupt your training just to thank me. You could have summoned me later."

"That's not entirely appropriate, given the fact that I am your patron," Master Deivon spoke. "Besides, training at the Master level is not always intensive like you might expect. As you can see, I am able to train in such a location as well."

He gestured around him.

Rui frowned, furrowing his eyebrows.

His words implied that this wasn't something that was strictly limited to him.

"Does this have something to do with the Master or Sage Realm?" Rui asked with burning curiosity.

It had been a long time since he came across someone who actually knew anything about these high-end Martial Art matters.

"The answer to that question is something you are far too young to know," Master Deivon replied with a smirk. "The Upper Realms are quite different from the Lower Realms. The means by which you gain more power are different."

Rui already expected that he would not receive the answer to his question. "I see. Honestly, I didn't expect to see you training. It seems as though you were too preoccupied with your position as bishop."

"I restrict myself to overlooking all the broad decision-making," Master Deivon replied. "I delegate all the smaller matters to reliable subordinates who have the necessary qualifications to execute them well. Outside of decisions that require the input of high-level authorities within the church like myself, it is ultimately unnecessary for me to be personally involved in the bureaucratic and management workload and protocols. I am a Martial Artist before I am a bishop. Martial Artists must fight, it's as simple as that. Regardless of why you fight, or what you pursue power for, we cannot grow stronger without dedicating ourselves to our Martial Art in training and combat."

Rui agreed with this sentiment. The paradigms that he was talking about were also not unheard of to Rui. Senior Ceeran had conveyed something similar to Rui as well. Within the Martial Union, he was actually quite important and powerful. But he did not waste the entirety of his day working and fulfilling his duties as a deputy director. His work was limited to handling oversight at most, aside from that he simply trained in a manner that contributed to the research and development of Martial Artists.

One of the things that Rui needed to keep in mind was the fact that the only reason these mighty Martial Artists were in places of power was to ensure that organizations and groups that were centered around Martial Art remained centered around Martial Art. It was to ensure that the power they had gathered as Martial Artists would never leave their hands just because they were too distant from it.

That was why even the Martial Sages of the Martial Union were involved in the organization. If all Martial Artists only trained solitarily and distantly while leaving all the legislative and executive power of the organization in the hands of humans, then it was only a matter of time before an organization that was created for Martial Artists would cease to fulfill that role.

The interests of ordinary people and Martial Artists not only diverged but often clashed, thus leaving Martial organizations in the hands of the former was not a good idea.

This was true of both the Martial Union and the Virodhabhasa Faith.

"Regardless, that's not particularly why I wished to speak to you," Master Deivon told Rui. "The format of the main Martial Contest is out."

Master Deivon gestured to a simple sheet of paper on a nearby table in the church.

Rui raised his eyebrows when he read through it. "Hm..."

"The format changes every contest simply to switch things up and ensure that extremely targeted preparation is not a factor in what decides the victor. We want this to be a contest of power and not a contest of preparation."

That was quite wise of the higher-ups. The Martial Contest was too prestigious and high-profile for there to not be a huge number of people who would spend a lot of time engaging in hyper-specific training meant solely to overcome the tribulation of the contest. If the format was revealed well ahead of time or constant and never-changing, then that would undoubtedly happen.

Thus, changing the format every year and revealing it only shortly after it actually happened was a prudent decision.

"What do you think?" Master Deivon asked him as he read through it.

"It's a more accurate measure of the strongest compared to the crude format of the preliminary contest that I have just won," Rui replied. "The preliminary contest was simply too chaotic and allowed for too many variables that could potentially ensure that someone who wasn't the strongest would win. Just the fact that the weak can group together and fight the strong makes it an unreliable manner of measuring the strongest. Not that the participants are actually weak, given that everybody was a high-grade Martial Artist."

"And yet, the strongest did prevail, didn't he?" Master Deivon smirked at Rui.

"Because he fought smartly, not strongly," Rui replied. "If I had gone out guns blazing from the very start, I would have attracted all the heat in the stead of the three top-tier Martial Squires. Every single Martial Squire would jump on me simultaneously and I would be forced to go all out to overcome them while my three opponents could simply wait for me to exhaust myself and conserve their own strength for when they would fight me. There's a very good chance I would have lost had I done so."

His Hypertrophic Surge timed out very shortly after he won, almost before he deactivated himself. It showed that although his victory appeared to be dominant and unshakeable, he was cutting it a bit close. Even he couldn't say what would have happened if he decided not to hide his strength at the start.

Chapter 1216: Format

His eyes turned back to the format at hand.

He definitely liked it more than the preliminary contest.

It actually consisted of many rounds. A total of six rounds would determine who the strongest Martial Squire was. Each round actually served as a way to filter a fraction of the Martial Squires in the contest.

The first three rounds each filtered out eighty percent of the contestants, leaving only twenty percent of the contestants to move on to the next round. By the time the fourth round is finished, only zero-point-two-five percent of the contestants would remain. A total of eight individuals would remain after the third round.

From there on, an elimination tournament of three rounds would go on to decide the next Virodha Champion.

Because of the multi-layered filtering, Rui found that it was definitely much better than throwing all one thousand into a rumble where the last man standing wins.

"What kind of competition are the first three rounds going to be?" Rui asked.

He noticed that that hadn't been specified. It was particularly important too, since the first three rounds would eliminate more than ninety percent of the contestants.

"You will find that out just as you're about to take on the competition," Master Deivon informed him. "It's not something I can divulge. Still, you're smart enough to gain deeper insight."

Rui narrowed his eyes. He already had plenty of ideas of what they could be. It was easy for him to make inferences and deductions once he looked into what the goal of the first three rounds was.

The goal of the first three rounds was to eliminate and filter out all the contestants who definitely had zero chances of winning the Martial Contest regardless of the format simply because they weren't strong enough.

This did not mean that they were weak in a general sense. They weren't, since they could be considered the top one percent of the Squire Realm. However, when it came to grabbing the title of the strongest, ninety-nine percent of them were simply insufficient.

The first three rounds sought to eliminate all those who simply weren't worthy of even being considered as a candidate of the strongest.

With that goal in mind, there were several inferences and deductions that could be made. There were bare minimum standards that one could expect from anybody who was worthy of the title of the strongest. Bare minimum as far as basic parameters such as offense, defense, and maneuvering. Even if the truly strongest Martial Squire, regardless of who that was, was a specialist, that person would still need to be above a certain level in these parameters.

An offensive Martial Artist could never be considered the strongest if they were pathetically fragile as far as their defense went. Because a single attack would be able to take them down, and there would almost certainly be faster Martial Artists that would take them down by capitalizing on their weakness.

The same could be said for other kinds of Martial Artists. Specialist or not, there was a bare minimum in every category that one needed to be above in order to even possibly be the strongest.

Given how strong the strongest would need to be, that bare minimum was actually quite high and could serve as a good criterion to knock out many people from consideration, leaving behind only those who were truly worthy of being considered the strongest.

Thus it was quite likely that the the first three rounds would serve as a basic parameter test, among other things.

He wasn't entirely sure but he did look forward to facing each challenge and overcoming it. He hoped it wouldn't be like the preliminary contest with mass competition which he wasn't the most compatible with.

"You should also pack up and get ready. You will be headed to the town of Li in the Virodha Theocracy, the only state that operates in the name of the Virodhabhasa Faith." Master Deivon informed him. "All one thousand representatives will be gathered there before the main contest commences."

Rui nodded. "I'll do that. By the way..."

"Hm?"

"About our agreement, we didn't have the format when we made our agreement, but we do now," Rui told him.

"Ah..." Master Deivon immediately understood. "You're concerned about the clause of performing well enough to earn enough credit to purchase the medical treatment that you seek."

Rui nodded.

Their agreement had been that Rui did well in the Martial Contest as someone patroned by Master Deivon, earning the latter some credit as officially being the one to scout Rui.

"If you get to the final tournament of the Martial Contest, you be able to redeem the highest quality of medical treatment guaranteeing a full recovery with no complications," Master Deivon explained. "Ordinarily, you'd have to go further. But you're patroned by me which lowers the barrier as I'd mentioned when we first signed our agreement. Furthermore, you have been designated a Virodhabhasa Seed."

Rui furrowed his eyebrows.

It was not that he didn't expect that to happen. He actually did. His Martial Art matched with the description of the Martial Art of the Virodhabhasa; the Antithesis, far too well.

The two of them simply stared at each other in silence.

"To be honest..." Master Deivon began. "While I suspected you might be a Virodhobhasa Seed as I mentioned a year ago, it was a solid possibility that I was willing to bet on because it was a win-win regardless. However, today I got to witness you fight for the first time..."

The man stared deeply into Rui's eyes.

The very action caused Rui to experience a tremendous amount of pressure.

"Out of all the so-called seeds that I have ever come across in the past, half of them were questionable. Many people in authority hand out the title a little too easily because they stand to gain by contributing by finding seeds," Master Deivon candidly explained. "Yet you..."

The atmosphere intensified.

Rui's eyes sharpened as the air chilled a few degrees.

Master Deivon's expression grew more severe.

"Your very existence makes me wonder if the Divine Revelation isn't entirely full of shit."

Chapter 1217: Return

Rui grew nervous for a second.

It was one thing to become a Virodhabhasa Seed, a title that had been bestowed to many before him. It was another thing altogether to be suspected of being the Antithesis himself.

The fact of the matter was that if people found out the truth about Rui, it would be very easy for powerful religious leaders within the Virodhabhasa Faith to prop him up as their figurehead for their personal and religious agendas.

He had reached a bit of an important juncture. He needed to navigate this with greater care and caution.

He considered activating a Mind Mask technique to help him present himself in exactly the way he wanted to but ultimately decided not to.

Martial Masters had already demonstrated an immense amount of insight when it came to Martial Art. There was a good chance that Master Deivon possessed the ability to detect the activation of the Mind Mask technique.

If that were the case, using the technique would be counterproductive at this juncture. It was best to avoid it.

Thankfully, Rui had received some pretty in-depth training for about half a year on non-verbal communication when he was preparing for his diplomatic outreach mission to the G'ak'arkan Tribe.

A minute amused smirk cracked on his face, just enough to be detected, but small enough to be considered a slip. A tick that looked quite authentic and genuine instead of an exaggerated expression.

"So you're saying that you're genuinely considering the possibility that I waltzed over to this world from another world, and am patiently waiting and growing stronger for the Great Cataclysm?" Rui asked with a hint of amused incredulity.

"I'm saying that your Martial Art, from what I've observed, is shockingly in line with what one would expect from the Martial Art of a being touted to be the Antithesis," Master Deivon explained with an impassive expression.

"I mean, hey, feel free to consider me to be the Virodhabhasa," Rui shrugged nonchalantly. "As long as that means that the powerful religion will serve my every beck and call, it doesn't sound so bad."

He jested in a humorous fashion.

People tended not to engage in humor around topics that they were highly sensitive, anxious, and concerned about. Rui was essentially trying to manipulate him into believing that he considered the matter to be so absurd that it was nothing short of hilarious to him.

It wouldn't disqualify Rui from being the Virodhabhasa, no. But it would intuitively make it harder to believe that Rui was aware of any deeper connection between himself and the Virodhabhasa Faith.

"Would being considered the deity of this religion make me able to command Martial Masters like yourself?" Rui wondered with a hint of a mischievous grin. "If so, where do I sign up?"

Master Deivon snorted. "Don't get ahead of yourself, young man. I only said that your Martial Art bore remarkable resemblances to what one would expect from the main deity of this faith."

"I see, shame."

In reality, Rui was pleased with how the conversation was going.

Master Deivon shook his head with a little bit of exasperation. "Regardless, start getting prepared, we will head to Virodha Theocracy as soon as possible."

"That's closer to the center of the human domain, right?" Rui asked, recalling the location of the place on the continental map that he had seen and memorized during the trip to Vilun Island.

"Indeed, we'll be traveling there in a high-speed airborne carriage that will take us there in a day." Master Deivon said. "Normally, I could reach there much faster on foot myself, but you're unable to do that, and I need to be there with you when you arrive."

"And why's that?" Rui asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Because I am your patron," Master Deivon simply replied. "This is already known, and it will send the wrong message if you arrive without me. You will only become a target."

Rui sighed, furrowing his eyebrows in resignation. "That sounds fun. Will they really attack me out in the streets if you're not there with me?"

"Well, no, you're not going to become a target of physical violence. But they will try to intimidate you," Master Deivon explained. "Especially when they find out what you're capable of."

"But how will they know that ahead of time before the Martial Contest begins?" Rui wondered.

"They need only take one look at you at you," Master Deivon explained. "At our level, we see with more than just eyes. Martial Squires may as well be transparent. The fact that you are not transparent will only draw more attention. This is something you should be aware of when dealing with Martial Artists of the Master Realm in the future."

"Right..." Rui narrowed his eyes as he gathered more clues on what the secret to the Master Realm was. It would become relevant to him once he became a Martial Senior. "I'm glad I got this mask ahead of time. You're sure it will be effective, correct?"

"Do not worry," Master Deivon reassured him. "The mask is comprised of Master-level anti-sensory esoteric substances that I have procured from the Beast Domain myself."

Rui's eyes widened. "You didn't have to go that far..."

The man chuckled. "I didn't procure it to fulfill your request specifically, they were sitting in our inventory part of a harvest that I had done myself a few years ago."

Rui raised an eyebrow. The value of such esoteric substances was extremely high. He highly doubted he would have been able to procure this mask if not for the patronage of Master Deivon.

"I appreciate your generosity," Rui bowed his head lightly.

"Hmph, it isn't a donation. Remember, I expect you to perform quite well in the Martial Contest, got it?"

"I intend to excel," Rui confidently replied.

He had regained the feeling of power and domination that he felt long ago when he was at the end of his time as a Martial Apprentice. He was almost entirely peerless within the Apprentice Realm, and it appeared that that would soon be the case from here on out as well.

Chapter 1218: Concerns

Their conversation soon ended as Master Deivon returned to his meditation while left to prepare for the journey to the Virodha Theocracy.

Which actually was remarkably brief.

He had very few belongings in the first place and had packed lightly to make traveling easier and more convenient.

He had to get some identification in order, even if it only was limited to an alias, in order to take part in the main contest.

Fortunately, he found that the administration was remarkably cooperative and helpful, providing him with an identity card that bore his alias and even his mask. It appeared that the Virodhabhasa Faith was remarkably practical about allowing Martial Squires to hide their identities.

It couldn't be helped.

There were plenty of reasons to be concerned about doxing one's self on such an incredibly high-profile stage. There were bound to be powerful Martial Squires who were not just powerful in their Martial Art but also happened to have powerful connections or backgrounds that made them really scary to mess with.

The possibility of drawing the ire of powerful third parties backing certain representatives was very real. Nobody wanted to be assassinated after the Martial Contest simply because they defeated the grandson of a Martial Sage or something like that.

In addition, the concept of patrons also made the matter even messier. Martial Artists of the higher Realms generally tended not to meddle with matters pertaining to lower Realms. It was not worth their attention and was usually too low for them.

However, that changed when they had personal interests vested in matters pertaining to the lower Realms.

Rui was not naive enough to believe that Martial Artists of the Upper Realms were all benevolent and gracious.

No.

All of them sought power to an extreme degree. After all, one could not break through to the Upper Realms unless one truly chased after power with an intense desire. Such a desire was not particularly conducive to a gracious attitude that promoted generosity to their juniors. It was simply too much to expect all Martial Masters to be like Headmaster Aronian.

That was why the choice to hide one's identity was instated, it was the only way to ensure that the Martial Contest would not be tainted by implicit threat and manipulation beyond an acceptable degree.

Thankfully, unlike his previous Martial Contest, he was not without powerful backing.

He wasn't entirely clear on how powerful Master Deivon was within the religion, but given that he was the religious leader of one of the church towns established by the Virodhabhasa Faith, it was quite likely that, at the very least, he was not low on the totem pole.

That, along with the powerful mask that Rui had gotten, was good enough.

The only thing Rui was concerned about was whether his performance would actually reveal his identity to certain people.

Given how high-profile the event was going to be, Rui had no doubts that both the Kandrian Empire and the Shionel Confederation would most certainly not be aware of it, but may very well be involved in it as

well. After all, it was entirely possible for any of the thousand representatives that had been gathered across the entire continent to have connections with both states.

Even if that wasn't the case, Rui knew for a fact that the event would most certainly be documented by both states, as well as the Martial Union.

Was it possible that they would recognize him?

Unfortunately, he could not guarantee that it wouldn't happen.

This was especially true for the Martial Union. Much of his Martial Art was constructed from building blocks that came from techniques that the Martial Union sold. Furthermore, the Martial Union had the most information on his Martial Art out of all the parties.

He would be naive to think that they would not notice a remarkable statistical overlap between himself now and the profile that they had on Rui Quarrier. They were too competent to not at least do that much.

However, he was not concerned about that. The Martial Union was firmly on his side. He was the most promising rising star of the Kandrian Empire, and they had offered to fully suppress any and all intent of retaliation from Chairman Deacon. Furthermore, he had already established an understanding with the Martial Union that there would be a firm lockdown on any and all intelligence gathered on possible spotting of Rui Quarrier outside of the Kandrian Empire.

They were currently maintaining false information that served as a red herring for Rui being in the Kandrian Empire hiding from Chairman Deacon. Any real information on Rui was firmly buried deep beyond where spies or other forms of information infiltration could reach. Thus even if they did learn that he was Rui Quarrier, no one could ever possibly learn of it.

In fact, it wouldn't even be that bad if they did identify him. The fact of the matter was that they were in charge of absolutely protecting every individual member of his family from Senior-level threats. This was an extremely expensive form of protection that would guarantee Senior-level protection to all of them even if they all individually split up every second of every day for an entire decade straight. That was why he had essentially gone broke despite being a billionaire.

The Martial Union did not offer this kind of protection easily. Money alone couldn't purchase such services. After all, as an organization centered around Martial Art, money was not the most important goal of this organization.

Yet Rui had been able to purchase it nonetheless. That was an implicit statement from the Martial Union that they valued him.

By performing well in the Martial Contest, he was giving them even more reason to value him for the first time in three years. If nothing else but to ensure that his family got the protection that they deserved, he was determined to show that he was worth going to great lengths to earn the favor of.

Chapter 1219: Departure

That was why, after careful consideration, he was not concerned about the Martial Union finding out.

The truly bad outcome would be other parties finding out.

Specifically, the Shionel Confederation.

Specifically, Chairman Deacon.

Thankfully, it was almost entirely impossible for such an outcome to occur when he logically and rationally evaluated the probability of such a thing happening. Firstly, his Martial Art past the Squire Realm was not public. The reason for this was that he actually hadn't done many public missions before being assigned as a lead diplomat in the diplomatic expedition to Vilun Island. Soon after he headed to the Shionel Confederation to partake in the dungeon raids.

The latest truly public information on him was his performance during the Serevian Dungeon War. However, not only was that information outdated by about seven years, but it was actually misinformation when it came to extrapolating what his Martial Art was like now. Many of the prominent techniques that he used back then were no longer things he used today.

Things like the Stinger, Mirage Step, or Tempestuous Ripple. These were techniques that he used to use all the time back then, but had long abandoned once he reached the Squire Realm.

Most of the techniques that he used these days did not even exist back then. Pathfinder, Flux Earther, Gale Force Breathing, Lightning Tap, Thundercoil.

These were techniques that he had created, many of which he created from scratch. Furthermore, with the addition of the Metabody System to the VOID algorithm, his Martial Art bore absolutely no resemblance to his old Martial Art in the Apprentice Realm because it was just so different fundamentally. It was easy to mistake the Metabody System being the core of his Martial Art. This was a mistake that even someone as insightful as Master Deivon made.

It was just too easy to assume that his Martial Art and Path were fundamentally centered around some form of body modification. And since that would be the prevailing theory on what his Martial Path was, he was actually quite safe for the most part.

Of course, he had a bit of a paranoia when it came to Chairman Deacon discovering nonetheless since he had already managed to discover Rui's identity before when he didn't expect it to happen. Even if it happened because of dumb luck for the most part as opposed to merit, it was still something that left an impression on him and made him analyze the situation over and over again.

However, he was still quite sure even after all that his precautions were more than adequate.

It wasn't even several hours later before he was summoned to the main church for departure. He carried a bag that contained everything that he needed when it came to traveling elsewhere.

"Ready?" Master Deivon asked him.

He had servants carrying all his belongings for him into a strange-looking carriage.

"Yeah, I packed everything I need, so I'm good." Rui nodded.

"I meant whether you were ready to fight in the Martial Contest," Master Deivon smiled. "Frankly, even if you tossed that bag away right now you would be fine, you know? Each representative will be assigned luxurious quarters and will have access to the finest services and commodities."

Rui shrugged. "That's all well and good, but I am attached to my belongings."

"Suit yourself. Let's get going then."

The two of them boarded the strange yet remarkably large carriage. The luxurious vehicle was divided into multiple sections, two of which were personal quarters for Rui and Master Deivon. It was almost like a single train bogey but shaped like a carriage.

"I've never been in such a fancy carriage," Rui remarked.

"It's a form of transportation we use for fast and effective travel over long distances. This carriage is going to accelerate at remarkably extreme speeds by relying on some particularly potent esoteric technology. It will move far faster than what even Martial Squires like yourself can achieve. It's only because of technology like this that travel over long distances is feasible for non-Martial Artists." Master Deivon explained.

Rui knew that carriage technology was quite developed and ubiquitous among the upper class of society.

He recalled the Shionel Confederation where the carriages were also empowered with esoteric technology that allowed them to cross the many thousands of kilometers between the Shionel Confederation and the Kandrian Empire in less than half a day. The average long-distance carriage was capable of that level of speed and distance, let alone specialized carriages meant to carry VIPs like Master Deivon.

Rui got to enjoy a rare luxury as he had servants tending to his every need. This was something that he would never go out of his way to get, he simply found it too pretentious to have a staff of people do basic tasks like pouring him a glass of water. However, it appeared that Master Deivon was entirely accustomed to such treatment that he didn't even think twice.

"Nervous?" Master Deivon asked while he was reading through some documents.

"Right now I'm just bored," Rui replied once the carriage reached its top speed, zipping through the land. "Hopefully I'll feel excited by the time we reach our destination and run into my opponents. I have high expectations from the champions of other towns."

"There will be a banquet one day prior to the Martial Contest that will feature all contestants, patrons, and other sponsors and investors." The Master explained. "You'll get a chance to interact with all of them, including the current reigning champion."

Rui groaned. "This is a Martial Contest, not a party. Why bother with such things?"

Master Deivon smiled, amused. "I agree with the sentiment, but it is an important event for the Virodhahasa Faith. This religion does not and cannot exist in a vacuum. Events like these are not for the contestants but for our various partners, benefactors, and dependants. At the end of the day, we exist in an ecosystem that helps us sustain ourselves, and measures like this are necessary to maintain it."

Chapter 1220: Arrival

Rui whiled away his time in various ways. He appreciated how smooth the carriage moved despite moving at incredibly high speeds, even faster than what he could accomplish by himself on foot. His senses told him that the carriage had actually begun levitating off the ground in order to maintain its high velocity.

Not only could they not feel the motion, but even the acceleration to top speed had been incredibly smooth and painless as though there were inertial stabilizers that allowed them to not experience the adverse effects of such extreme acceleration. While he and Master Deivon would have been just fine due to their Martial Bodies, the human staff would certainly die due to the sheer amount of stress this would ordinarily cause.

"This carriage sure is incredible," Rui admitted at one point. "The Virodhahasa Faith is quite adept at esoteric technology if it is able to develop such fantastic solutions."

"These were not developed by us," Master Deivos shook his head. "The only forms of technology that the church has invested in is technology that is relevant to Martial Art. We generally are not bothered with other forms of technology."

"Then...?"

"This class of carriage technology that we are in right now is actually acquired through our partnership with our various partners. Veline Motor Co., the Esocline Institute of Technology, Bradt Distribution Services, and other international powerhouses with specialization in this sector."

Rui exercised perfect control over his non-verbal expression at the mention of Bradt Distribution Services.

It turned out that the man truly was an extremely well-connected business magnate. It certainly made sense that his company possessed a great foundation in regards to carriage technology. Since the sole point of his company was to distribute information, commodities, products, and services to incredibly distant destinations, it was no surprise whatsoever that the man had invested immensely in developing powerful and viable auto-carriages that could reliably transport things over large distances.

Suddenly, a thought entered Rui's mind.

('Wait, he just mentioned that the Bradt Distribution Services was a partner of the religion,) Rui narrowed his eyes. ('Earlier he said that the banquet that would be held would include not only the contestants and their various patrons, but also the partners, benefactors, and sponsors of the Martial Festival. Doesn't that mean...?')

There was a non-zero chance that Rui might run into an old acquaintance there at the banquet. That was something he hadn't considered before.

('Actually, no, it's too frivolous of a reason for Guildmaster Bradt to personally come over to the Virodha Theocracy.')

Rui shook his head.

Guildmaster Bradt was the head of state and the head of government of the Shionel Confederation. It was an incredibly powerful and important position, it also meant that he could not lightly attend these

kinds of functions, away from his duties, unless there were strong reasons to. Considering how many business partners the man had, he would be drowning in such events if he chose to attend each of them personally.

This was especially the case when the business deal was with the Bradt Distribution Services and not the Shionel Confederation as a whole.

Thus it was most likely that he would send an envoy, or a high-level executive or director to the banquet instead.

That was more relieving. Not that it was bad if he got recognized by Guildmaster Bradt, since the two of them currently had a working understanding with each other. He just did not like the idea of getting recognized when he had gone to such great lengths to hide himself.

However, he knew he was just being a little paranoid about this. Even if Guildmaster Bradt was personally arriving, and was not someone that was aligned with Rui, he did not possess the qualifications to identify Rui based on his Martial Art.

He was not a Martial Artist. He did not possess the ability to gain deep insight into a Martial Art just by looking at it, he was not a Martial Master or anything like that.

That was why Rui put aside these concerns.

Half a day passed, and Rui was mesmerized by the view that came with such incredibly rapid travel that he didn't even realize that they had arrived at their destination.

"This is your first time here, correct?" Master Deivon asked when the two of them got out of their carriage.

Rui nodded as he took his first look at the Virodha Theocracy.

He immediately felt the need to adjust his standards. He had previously thought that the Seonmun Church town was a particularly religious place in so far as its architecture and people. But it appeared that it was only a pale imitation of the Virodha Theocracy.

The town practically radiated religious fervor.

At a short distance, he could see the transit port of entry that they were supposed to pass through. The officers wore uniforms with a heavy slant toward religiosity. Furthermore, Rui definitely recognized the religiosity in their eyes. It was more of the same as what he saw in Seonmun Town.

The line to enter the transit port of entry was quite long. However, Master Deivon casually walked past the line before pulling out a shiny insignia with certain symbols and showing it to the guards.

Their eyes widened as they bowed more than ninety degrees at him. "Welcome back, Bishop Master!"

"He's with me," Master Deivon gestured towards Rui even as he entered the port, not even deigning to respond to their gesture.

With every step that Master Deivon, people within the port, regardless of whether they were officers or staff members, or travelers and citizens, all bowed down, paying their respects to a Martial Artist of the Upper Realms.

Rui had to admit, he did expect to see such devotion from the regular populace to a Martial Master, still, it was a bit freaky how feverous their devotion was. Master Deivon on the other hand could not be bothered acknowledging each and every single person, he simply walked past all of them briskly, going about his business.