

Martial Unity 1271

Chapter 1271: Clash

The difference was startling.

Squire Frinjschia's eyes narrowed as she felt a profound sense of peril unlike anything she had ever felt.

She always felt the faint pressure of death from particularly powerful Martial Squires. Even if she did not mind dying, her body was still cognizant of the threat of death that particularly lethal Martial Squires and Martial Artists of a higher Realm exerted on her.

Yet, this was different.

She felt a bone-chilling terror from Rui as if death was not the worst he could inflict on her.

Her instincts could sense it clearly.

The perils the depth of his eyes conveyed were beyond her fathoming

Instantly, her wariness spiked as she honed her focus.

He took a neutral stance, just like she did. The two faced each other in close quarters, facing each other eye to eye.

"Begin!"

She did not even hesitate. Instantly, she lashed out at him with her remarkable agility, throwing a number of jabs at his vitals.

POW POW POW! WHOOSH!

Rui dispersed their impacts only to have his own blow dodged with ease.

BAM BAM BAM! WHOOSH!

He narrowly turned, managing to block and disperse the impacts of her strikes with Flux Earther yet again, only to have his own blow dodged.

He had to admit, her evasive maneuvering was splendid. Even Kane would have been quite impressed had he been here to witness it. Landing a single blow on her was quite difficult because muscle memory reflexes felt more impressive in person than when he was watching it from the contestant stands.

Yet it was far from enough to deal with him.

WHOOSH!

Her eyes widened as her blow crashed into an empty image that faded immediately.

BAM!

She gritted her teeth as a Flowing Canon immediately crashed into her, pummeling her with all of his momentum.

Rui raced in towards her, looking to build upon this momentum, yet it appeared that she was too wary of his offense.

'Strange, she was more aggressive against the Kandrian prince than against me.' Rui noted as he continued to pursue trying to find openings as the two of them exchanged.

He wondered if she had gained an inkling of what he intended to do. He thought he had hidden his intentions well behind a Mind Mask, but perhaps he had underestimated the intuition of a Martial Artist who had been training and fighting literally the entirety of the normal human lifespan.

He could sense a degree of reluctance and wariness from her movements when he compared it to the bold decisions she took in her previous fight.

'Well, if you're not going to come to me, then don't mind if I come to you.' Rui mused.

He hadn't been merely going back and forth with her. His predictive model had already made substantial progress as he gathered increasingly more data.

BAM!

His fist collided straight into her face with unerring accuracy as he launched her away.

She managed to land on her feet, skidding away with a look of surprise on her face. 'I thought I dodged at that, but he instantly altered its trajectory in the direction I was moving in even before I had begun!'

Something was off.

Rui began exerting a greater sense of threat than he did before. It was unnerving.

She had already seen his larger form against the abyssfeeder, and had seen a hint of his capability for extreme speed in the second round yesterday. She knew that his current capabilities were far from his limit.

Yet she was not resigned. Against someone like Rui, she had already determined that taking him down quickly in the short term was the most optimal course of action.

That required her to be aggressive against him, but for some reason, she found it particularly difficult to actually go ahead with the plan.

Her eyes narrowed as her fists clenched. 'Getting bogged down isn't like me.'

She made up her mind, rushing in before launching a barrage of strikes and blows. Her balled fists morphed into knuckle punches as she aimed to inflict greater damage with each strike and make it harder to disperse her attacks.

One could imagine her shock when he blocked all of them with greater ease than he did before.

CRACK!

She grimaced as Rui managed to cleanly break one of her knuckles with a well-timed counter.

Yet he was far from done.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH!

Her eyes widened as Rui effortlessly evaded her muscle-memory combinations as if he long knew how they were going to unfold. His movements began growing smoother and smoother as he grew more comfortable in dismantling her muscle memory offense.

Yet it wasn't only her offense that was compromised.

Evasive maneuvering was one avenue she was better at than the others because it paired really well with a muscle memory combat style.

Yet even that was denied.

WHOOSH!

She sharply evaded a swift blow cleanly, shifting to the side

Yet it was too late to dodge the kick that had already arrived where she had just reached.

BAM!

She grimaced as it crashed into her ribs unguarded, flinging her away. She sky-walked away, hoping to get some respite.

But Rui had no intentions of being merciful.

'Overcome this,' Rui mused as he braced himself to launch a barrage of Mighty Roar Flash Blasts, activating the ODA System of the Void Pathfinder. 'Overcome this, and you shall thank me for the rest of your life.'

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

He mercilessly shot her down from the air with perfectly well-timed and placed sonic bullets. Barrage after barrage crashed onto her.

Her ferocity began revealing itself after she realized the dire predicament she was in.

She had assumed that Rui's greatest threat came from the abysmal power and speed that he had displayed in the three elimination rounds previously, but it was only now that she fought him that she realized that that was less than half the story!

It was icing on the cake.

If she wanted to win this battle, she needed to fight with her life on the line!

Chapter 1272

Her expression intensified as she abandoned her reluctance.

She abandoned her misgivings.

She abandoned her qualms and compunctions.

She unshackled herself as she ceased treating this as a tournament match. She treated this like a life-and-death scenario.

Yet little did she realize that it was worse than that.

'His long-range offense is absurd. I need to close the distance.' Her eyes narrowed as she employed several techniques.

"Oh...?" Rui's eyes glinted with interest as several clones of Squire Frinjschia appeared. 'Interesting... A muscle memory version of Phantom Step eh?'

He had to admit that her Martial Path was potent. Potency as measured by how strong a Martial Artist comparatively was when one pitted them against another Martial Artist with the same quantity and quality of techniques.

Rui had to admit that her Martial Path was certainly potent. Their ability to enhance the technique's efficiency and effectiveness was super impressive. While the impact of her Martial Path on her strength was not as exaggerated as his own, it was not a reasonable standard to hold her to in the first place.

Rui tried his best to snipe the real one down with his Mighty Roar Flash Blasts, but even with his predictive model, the technique was too honed.

She ultimately managed to close the distance between them, even if barely.

"HYAH!" She threw her most powerful combos, hoping to overwhelm him for just a brief moment.

And yet...

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH!

Rui effortlessly weaved through her attacks like they didn't even exist.

BOOM!

She failed to dodge a powerful Flowing Canon as Rui corrected the attack trajectory to account for her predicted evasion trajectory.

"Rgh!" She grimaced, coughing blood as Reverberating Lance permeated the attack deeper into her body.

Yet, she had accomplished what she intended to.

CLASP!

Her arms and legs were firmly coiled around his arm.

'She knew that I would tag her despite her evasion.' Rui immediately engaged his whole body in the fight, lest she break his arm with the full power of her body. Grappling was a bit too different from striking, thus Rui made sure to verify his predictive model to make sure that there were no instances of failure due to that.

The two of them wrangled on the ground trying to get a more dominant position on the other.

He understood her intentions.

Timing was everything in striking. Timing could bridge differences in strength and speed. All it took was one well-timed strike to the temple or the jaw, and a smaller striker could feasibly knock out a larger striker.

The same was much less true for grappling in general. Grappling was much more a contest of effort and perseverance much more than it was a contest of timing.

Obviously, that did not mean timing didn't matter.

However, Squire Frinjschia was hoping she could diminish the spectacular all-around timing and placement that Rui had demonstrated by turning the battle into a grappling contest.

'You are also diminishing the weight of muscle memory... but if you can get rid of my predictive model by sacrificing your muscle memory, then it is worth it I suppose. Still...'

Rui's eyes narrowed. "You underestimate me."

Her eyes widened at those words. She shifted her weight momentarily, trying to get a better position.

But Rui had predicted that.

Instantly he rolled with that motion at the right moment, destabilizing her as he gained a dominant mounted position.

BAM BAM BAM!

He raised fists before raining down on her mercilessly with Outer Convergence and Reverberating Lance. Squire Frinjschia grimaced as she barely managed to defend against Rui's barrage.

Rui was doing this the hard way.

He could have used Thundercoil to momentarily gain a clear opportunity to get a rear chokehold on her. She would be unable to break out from his grip and would lose consciousness quickly.

But he didn't.

'Knocking her out or killing her will not awaken her Martial Heart.' Rui's eyes narrowed as he continued pressuring her to her limit.

He had to admit, it didn't feel nice. He didn't enjoy torment.

'I'm sorry.'

BAM!

He broke a tooth with that strike.

She grimaced with a flash of ferocity in her eyes. It appeared that she was done being used as a punching bag.

Her hands clasped into a clap.

Rui's eyes widened as he leapt away.

BOOM!

An explosion of wind blasted from her. It appeared that she was willing to harm herself if it meant getting Rui off of her.

Yet it appeared that she wasn't willing to give up.

Or at least, that was what her sharp eyes conveyed.

Blinding fast jabs shot towards Rui, each faster than the last one. He narrowed his eyes as he exerted himself to the limit to cleanly evade all of them. Yet it appeared that she was far from done. Her movements grew sharper and sharper by the second, she flowed smoother and smoother as she pushed her body and mind to the very limit of what she could bring out from within her.

Her muscles burned.

Her bones strained.

Her joints creaked.

Yet she resolutely suffered. All in order to elevate herself to a level where she could defeat Rui. The sheer amount of damage she was inflicting upon herself by disregarding her own wellbeing was inconsequential to her.

She was willing to give her life if that was what it took to overcome Rui.

Yet even that fell short.

WHOOSH! BAM BAM BAM!

Rui cleanly evaded a powerful blow as he simultaneously landed three swift jabs from her blindspot. She grimaced as she launched herself forward with the ferocity of a tiger, throwing a flying knee kick to his face.

WHOOSH!

Rui side-stepped it with ease, launching a powerful palm jab into her ribs inflicting a deep bruise.

Every attack she launched failed.

Every defence she mounted crumbled.

Every manoeuvre she made was outpaced.

The sum of her life's accomplishments fell, one by one.

His merciless eyes pierced through everything she offered. She may as well have been transparent. He killed every hope of victory she had.

Yet the one thing he refused to kill was her.

She hadn't failed to notice his aversion to killing her. With the power that he had demonstrated, he could have done so had he wished to. He could have also knocked her out.

Yet he chose to destroy her Martial Art.

She felt a deep pain within her heart.

Something important was about to break.

When she closed her eyes, a familiar sight entered her mind.

A path.

One that she had treaded her entire life.

Yet horror and despair dawned upon her as she saw what was to become of it.

A dark formless void had descended on the path she treaded.

When she gazed into the abyss, the abyss gazed back into her. Its depths were deeper than anything she had ever seen in this world.

It loomed over her Martial Path.

Scratches had already appeared.

Soon they would turn into cracks, and eventually fragments.

A Martial Path that she had tread her entire life.

Gone. Erased. Nonexistent.

A life as a cripple would await her. A life without Martial Art. A life without pursuit of her Martial Path.

Something stirred deep within her. Deeper than she had ever reached.

Was she willing to live such a life?

Was she willing to become cripple?

Was she willing to lose pursuit of her Martial Path?

A single word escaped her mouth.

"No."

BADUMP!

Chapter 1273: Historic

Rui's predictive model only grew stronger and stronger as he dealt with everything she threw at him while tormenting her with the best of what he had to offer without winning on the spot.

The one thing he did hold back was the Metabody System. It was detrimental to his goal. The pattern recognition system was all that he needed in this case. Time passed slowly as he methodically and surgically deconstructed everything that she threw at him.

She was a powerful semi-finalist, yet before even a fraction of his full power, she was powerless.

Of course, a part of this was because she had bad compatibility with him. Pattern recognition was the antithesis of pre-programmed muscle memory.

Well, pattern recognition was the antithesis of nearly everything, but her Martial Art was especially vulnerable.

Rui's hopes began getting doused as time passed and his dominance grew despite his opponent pushing herself to self-destructive extents to overcome him.

'Maybe I was getting a bit too full of myself.' He sighed as he prepared a Flowing Canon to knock her out. 'It's best to end this before I cause damage to her Martial Path.'

That was when he heard it.

His heart heard it.

A single word escaped her mouth.

"No."

Terror arose from deep within his gut.

RUMBLE!

The very land hoisting the colosseum shook.

A maelstrom of power surged forward from her elder body.

The very sky shivered as sharp red streaking lines emerged from her chest, spreading to the rest of her body.

The world seemed to welcome the birth of a new Martial Senior.

Her eyes opened, sparkling with newfound power.

They turned, fixating on Rui before her.

They were focused.

Too focused.

In that moment, Rui already knew.

She forgot about the tournament.

She forgot about the Martial Contest.

She forgot about the rules.

She forgot that Martial Seniors weren't allowed to Martial Squires.

No, whether she even knew about her ascended state itself was in question.

She was evaluating him.

At that moment, Rui felt the weight of a mountain weighing down on him.

His instincts warned him of what was to come.

He barely managed to activate Nemean Blossom at the last moment.

Her eyes narrowed at the sight.

She had made her decision.

"NO!" Senior Priest Deril rushed forward, activating his Martial Heart.

Yet he was too far.

BOOM!

A Senior-level attack crashed into Rui point blank.

The ground broke.

Every inch of the colosseum shattered.

The bedrock, comprised of esoteric compounds and alloys meant to endure even the best of what the Squire Realm had to offer, crumbled instantly.

The gusts of wind her attacks used to generate as a Martial Squire had turned into infant tornados.

CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK!

One moment his formidable guard, which remained strong and steady before all forces within the Squire Realm, was intact, and the very next microsecond, it wasn't.

The paltry dispersion of the Flux Earther crumbled before the sheer amount of force that she imparted into his body.

Rui's body was launched across the colosseum with such an extraordinary velocity that the very air around him incinerated in an inferno.

BOOM!!!

Rui experienced the single greatest impact of his life as he blasted past the giant walls of the colosseum underneath the spectator stands, stopping outside.

His body was misshapen. So much so that Kane would have thought he had used multiple Metabody techniques at full power at once, again.

He was bleeding from more orifices than one could count.

His body was broken in more places than he could count.

Yet, the moment passed, and he did not die.

His constitution managed to survive.

His brain barely managed to retain consciousness as he had shielded his head with the entirety of his body in a curled position.

It was not great. But it was enough.

He barely managed to inhale in a specific manner as he activated Weaving Blood in place of Nemean Blossom.

A sharp pain enhanced the already intense agony that he was experiencing as the Reaper Death poison kicked into action and quickly enriched his blood with the ingredients for cellular division.

The wounded tissue desperately accepted the gift and began healing.

In just a second, his muscles healed.

In the next, his flesh healed.

His bones followed suit as his muscles propped them into place before they were quickly reattached.

His arm particularly strained Weaving Blood due to how immense the damage was.

A medical team immediately had already seemingly teleported at his location from seemingly nowhere as a surge of spectators try to get as good a look at him as they could.

Master Deivon immediately appeared out of nowhere too with a grave expression. The three other Martial Masters also followed suit.

Each of them was prepared to see what they expected.

Each of them was prepared to have their faintest hopes utterly crushed.

Yet they were not prepared to see what they saw.

The sight they beheld was so utterly mind-boggling that every single one of them froze in shock.

Even the mighty Martial Masters who had witnessed much across their lengthy lives watched with unadulterated shock.

The sight of Rui Quarrier stepping out of a massive crater unharmed. All his clothes had long been incinerated.

His mask had crumbled, revealing the wildest grin he had ever donned. An almost maddening glint of excitement and ecstasy flashed across his eyes.

They watched with tumultuous emotions, they watched a moment that would forever be seared in history.

Yet no moment could last forever.

Master Deivon was the first to act.

He activated a breathing technique, snapping his fingers.

Rui disappeared, and a subtle gust of wind occupied where he once stood.

That action snapped everyone back to reality. Waves of murmurs washed over the crowd as they struggled to process what they had just seen.

A Martial Senior struck a Martial Squire.

The outcome of this event should be nothing short of either crippling critical wounds, or death, depending on how casual the attack was, and the relative power gap between the two of them.

In the case between an infant Martial Senior's very first attack that would undoubtedly be their weakest ever, and one of the most powerful Martial Squires ever, it was conceivable that the Martial Squire might survive if he was lucky.

"Then why the hell was he unharmed?"

This was a question that occupied everybody's minds

The impact of such an event could not be understated.

Chapter 1274: Tell Me

Squire Frinjschia suddenly snapped back to reality when the impact of Rui crashing through the contest barriers shook her, both physically and mentally. Only then had her current reality become cognizant to her.

Yet, she didn't even have time to celebrate or even process her breakthrough to a higher Realm.

"What have I done...?" She murmured with a grave expression as she too hurriedly headed for the crater that had been created in the distance outside of the colosseum.

What she saw shocked her to her very core.

The sight of a silver-haired and silver-eyed man walking out of a crater unharmed shook her to her very core.

For just the briefest of moments, she wondered whether she had actually broken through to the Senior Realm.

She couldn't be blamed for indulging this thought.

That was the sheer magnitude of the feat that the man before her had accomplished. The dust clouds from the crash had yet to fully settle, so ordinary people were unable to make out his appearance, but she could clearly sense every detail on his body.

There were no wounds.

He was unharmed.

He stood there, and an excited grin flashed across his face.

She wanted to immediately head on over, if only to make sure he was okay, and apologize for attacking him as a Martial Senior.

'And also to express gratitude.' Her eyes softened.

She was not foolish.

She may not have been the brightest, but she had spent an entire lifetime fighting. She knew what true malevolence looked like. She had lost count of the number of demons who tried to inflict as much suffering, misery, and despair on her, that she she had overcome.

Rui was not one of them.

This she knew with certainty, especially now that she had come to her senses. He pushed her to her very limit, and just the tiniest bit.

Just far enough to trigger her Martial Heart.

But close enough to ensure he didn't inadvertently cripple her before that happened.

It was surgical.

She knew that he was holding back an overwhelming amount of power within him. A strangely muscled form that supplied raw power that overcame even the mighty abyssfeeder. The astonishing speed and agility he demonstrated when he acquired a pass in the second round yesterday.

It had become evident to her that inflicting untold pain and suffering on her would have been trivially easy for him. Yet, he didn't and had chosen the strangely time-consuming path where he carefully pushed her bit by bit, methodically and systematically forcing her to and past her limits.

She was certain that he had blessed her with an opportunity to overcome her limits, a priceless boon that she had yet to come across her entire life. She needed to confirm it. She needed to hear it first-hand herself.

Yet before she could even reach him, his patron exhaled deeply, snapping his fingers and seemingly teleporting Rui away.

"Senior Frinjschia."

She felt chills crawling up her skin as a profoundly deep pressure pressed down on her. Senior Deril's expression was schooled, yet she could feel the fury that he was emanating.

"I will have to detain you," He coldly informed her. "For the unauthorized assault on a Martial Squire and reckless endangerment of tens of thousands of people."

His Martial Heart had long blazed into fury. It was much deeper than her own.

"I recommend you submit obediently," His eyes sharpened. "However, I do not mind giving you an early lesson on the power gap between a veteran and a novice Martial Senior if need be."

She would be lying if she said she wasn't curious about that. Yet she had far too much sense to dare to do something like that. For the first time in a while, she valued her life and well-being. She did not want to forfeit her life right after becoming a Martial Senior.

"I submit," She bowed her head lightly, deactivating her Martial Heart.

"You made the right decision," Senior Deril calmed down, yet he refused to deactivate his Martial Heart. "Follow me. Don't try to do anything stupid."

Senior Frinjschia nodded, before glancing back at the crater. The three Martial Masters had already disappeared. An evacuation team had already kicked into action, safely extracting spectators from the compromised structure.

Her newly enhanced senses quickly scanned the site.

She was unable to spot a single corpse.

She heaved a sigh. It was a miracle. It was also due to the fact that the colosseum barricade was extremely high and the spectator stands were abnormally high due to Martial Squires fighting in the air.

Thus Rui had crashed through a pure wall.

She was fortunate to not have sullied the greatest moment of her life with manslaughter. As long as she navigated the consequences of her action head-on with earnestness and sincerity, she could come out with this as an overall positive moment.

"What's going to become of the Martial Contest?"

"I am merely a priest, I do not have oversight on such important matters," Senior Deril spoke. "However, I suspect that the Virodha Council will decide to accelerate the restoration of the colosseum with extreme measures. This is one of the rare instances where such measures are justified. The price of doing so will be dozens, if not a hundred times greater than if it were restored at a normal pace."

The weight of her actions became more evident. It did not take a genius to guess that she was most likely going to be required to repay the Theocracy for that price.

"What... will become of me?"

"Again, I am a priest, I cannot say," He said officially, before his tone lightened. "However, if I had to guess, you will have to serve the Theocracy for a number of years."

That was a lot more palatable than she had expected.

"May I speak to Squire Falken at any time?" She asked.

"You do not have the right to request anything," He stated. "However, I can convey your desire to Squire Falken. Ordinarily, a Martial Squire shouldn't be able to visit convicts in an unauthorized manner but..."

He heaved a sigh of admiration. "...If he wins the Martial Contest, his status will be high enough that such a matter will be trivial."

She smiled. "Please do, that is all I request of you."

He didn't respond. Finally, they arrived at a remote location. She frowned as she felt something was off.

"Where are we? Who am I going to speak to?"

He didn't humour her with a reply. He gestured to a church before her with a grave expression. She glanced back, scanning the place with her senses. Her senses were unable to pierce the church.

She frowned. 'What kind of church has such intense anti-sensory measures?'

Her instincts warned her of a profoundly deep sea of power. Deep within the church.

It wasn't until she entered the church, closing the door that she realized who she was beholding.

A single person meditated within the church.

The very sky and earth seemed to accommodate her existence. Her being seemed almost out of place in reality.

Almost like she didn't belong.

She hid her power

Yet her power couldn't be denied.

"Cardinal Sage Sariawar," Senior Frinjschia's voice quivered as she fell to a knee, lowering her head.

Sage Sariawar smiled. A serene gesture that seemed to brighten the world around them.

It was as though nature itself prostrated before the emotions of a Martial Sage.

A single sentence escaped her mouth.

"Tell me..." Her smile grew wider. "Tell me about Squire Falken."

Chapter 1275: Compromise

Four Martial Masters stood among the heavens, deep in the sky.

The depth of the sky of Gaia was much like the world beneath it.

Nigh endless.

The depth of sky that a Martial Artist could reach was often considered a measure of their depth as a Martial Artist, in some Martial philosophies and disciplines.

The depth that the four Martial Masters had reached was greater than anything any Martial Squire or Senior could ever hope to reach.

However, that wasn't the only measure that they had taken to isolate themselves.

Beneath them was a barren mountain range inhospitable to most life.

Ordinarily, a cool wind current flowing across the continent would have graced them as it passed the entire region by.

Yet, no such thing could be felt.

Rather, the air was almost frozen.

Taut.

Ground to a halt.

Imprisoned in place.

The pressure that the four Martial Masters generated seemed to almost bend the world with the sheer force of mind.

"My fellow Masters..." Master Deivos broke the silence. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Cease your futile facade," Master Uma spoke. "Each of us knows precisely why we are here. We know what we saw."

"I find myself agreeing with the Decapitating Witch this time," Master Carian concurred, turning to Master Deivon with an inquisitive expression. "It is rather insulting that you would even try such paltry attempts at delaying the matter at hand."

"If anybody has an explanation to disclose..." Master Greminga continued. "It is you, is it not?"

"The only thing I wish to disclose is my displeasure at having my colleagues and peers meddle in my affairs," Master Deivon narrowed his eyes. "Since when did bishops interfere with the heritors of their peers?"

The three of them narrowed their eyes wordlessly.

It could not be denied. They were doubtlessly crossing a line that they would never dare to cross under any other circumstances. It was a taboo to meddle with the heritors of other Martial Masters.

"...'Since when'...you ask?" Master Uma spoke with a graver tone. "Since one of those heritors turns out to be the Antithesis himself!"

Her declaration was heavy.

Too heavy.

So much so that the world beneath them was unable to bear its weight.

RUMBLE!

The ground shook.

"Master Uma..." A dangerous edge appeared in Master Deivon's voice. "I would recommend you reconsider your words. He is a seed, not the Virodhabhasa himself. Spouting such nonsense can be constituted as lesser blasphemy."

"I told you to cease your futile facade," Her tone grew sharper. "We know what we saw. Against the abysseeder. Against the two finalists in the first and second rounds. That was nothing short of divine providence!"

She spread her arms. "Destruction of Martial Paths in one hand. A divine ability said to belong to Lord Virodhabhasa himself. Creation of Martial Paths in the other hand."

"He did not create a Martial Path!" Master Deivon snarled. "Your delusions do not comport with reality. Surely the two of you do not agree with this insanity!"

Master Carian and Greminga looked uncertain.

They were in between Master Deivos and Master Uma, the former was an agnostic, while the latter was a devotee.

They did not know what was the truth.

"He may not have created a Martial Path but..." Master Carian murmured.

"...He did empower it with his own Martial Art, propelling it to a higher Realm of power." Master Greminga agreed. "Furthermore, the destruction aspect of his power is undeniable. We witnessed the inception of the destruction. Yet he was benevolent enough to cease it just in time before any permanent damage was inflicted."

"That does not mean that he is the Virodhabhasa." Master Deivos narrowed his eyes. "This is not the first time that a Martial Artist has had their ability to practice Martial Art crippled in a fight due to some reason or the other. Are we going to round them all up and call them all by the name of the Antithesis?!"

That was a compelling argument. It appealed to the sensible nature of Master Carian and Greminga.

Yet it only fueled the rage of Master Uma.

Too much.

For a moment, the inferno exceeded her rational restraint.

She did not even bother responding to him. She had already realized that she was not going to convince those two that he really was the Virodhabhasa.

She knew it in her heart.

And her Heart promptly acted. Streaks of red lines flowed through her body.

Yet that wasn't all.

She employed a much higher force.

That day, a sight that was engraved into the soul of the land beneath them was witnessed. Every remote beast, monster, and creature gazed towards the skies.

What they witnessed was indescribable.

Master Uma's form had taken the visage of a sharp blade.

Where lesser beings once witnessed an elderly woman was a blade that shined with a lustre that defied their fathoming.

It was as though the blade was the true form of her existence. Yet it could also have been an illusion that barred the unworthy from beholding her true power.

They were unable to distinguish.

The expressions of the three Martial Masters grew severe as Master Uma committed the greatest of blasphemies.

Treason.

She rose up, flicking a single finger at Master Deivon.

Master Deivon's eyes widened as an enormous wave of vacuum flew towards him, rapidly activating his Martial Heart, raising a single finger.

One moment, nothing happened.

The next moment...

BOOM!!!!

Every lifeform within a thousand kilometers quivered.

An act that transcended lesser beings had unfolded before their very eyes.

A mountain had been cleaved in half.

It had withstood aeons of geophysical activity, aeons of ecological activity, aeons of human activity.

Yet before the might of a Martial Master, it was nothing.

SPLAT

A small cut opened up on Master Deivon's finger, bleeding mildly.

The attack had been unable to overcome his defence.

The air boiled as Master Deivon appeared to take the form of a fortress.

His eyes blazed with fury. "You have committed treason by attacking a fellow bishop without authorization."

"You have committed treason by hiding the Virodhabhasa." She accused with equally intense eyes.

Master Carian and Master Greminga had tilted to one side. Philosophically, they were neutral.

However, treason was where they crossed the line.

"Master Uma..." The two of them glared at her as they activated their Martial Hearts. "Cease. Or we will follow through on the protocols of dealing with blasphemers."

Master Uma's expression grew more grave.

She could take on Master Deivon. She could even win.

But she could not take on all three. That was suicide.

Yet she would rather die than be branded a traitor for her devotion.

The air intensified.

She was on the edge.

Master Deivon narrowed his eyes as he saw an opening.

Four words escaped his mouth.

"I offer a compromise."

It did not reverse the situation. However, he had earned their patience, even if for a moment.

"...As the aggrieved party, I will not follow through on the religious protocols, as long as you swear a blood oath on not meddling with that boy." He spoke with a surprisingly calm voice.

Her expression did not change.

Yet her intensity softened.

"Think about it..." Master Deivon spoke with a smile. "The four of us are the only Martial Artists of the higher Realm that witnessed this round, the other Martial Masters went away since their heritors were disqualified."

The three of them understood what he was trying to convey.

"The four of us should be the only ones who know the depth of that boy..." Master Deivon spoke. "If he does turn out to be the Virodhabhasa, then I don't mind sharing the credit to the three of you when we present our discovery to the Transcendent Prophet. Imagine the grace that His Holyship will bestow us with for completing the Divine Mission."

Master Uma's eyes widened, before swimming around in uncertainty.

The merits to this agreement were clear, while there were hardly any demerits at all given her position.

It was either die or be branded a traitor. Or gain partial credit for someone who she truly believed to be the Virodhabhasa.

She sighed, deactivating her Martial Heart.

A decision had been made.

Chapter 1276: Consequences

"Woah..." Rui murmured as the world around him suddenly changed. "Handy technique."

He glanced around, immediately noting the medical nature of the room that he was in.

It was clearly a hospital.

A medical team entered the room soon enough, comprising of a doctor and several nurses.

"Contestant Falken," The lead doctor smiled. "I am Doctor Veena. I have been instructed by Master Deivon to conduct a thorough evaluation of your health status."

Rui realized that Master Deivon was probably paranoid that Rui was either not as good as he looked, or had paid some price to heal the damage that Senior Frinjschia had inflicted.

'Well, he's not wrong.' Rui nodded. "Ok."

"Please wear this," She smiled, handing him a patient garb.

It was only then that he realized he was fully naked all this time, in front of an all-female staff.

"Master Deivon has also instructed me to provide you with this," She supplied him with a mask that resembled his previous one with Master-level anti-sensory esoteric compounds.

Rui was grateful that Master Deivon noticed how much Rui cared about protecting his appearance and catered to it. He was just afraid that it was not as useful as before.

'Thankfully ordinary people would have been too far to make out the details of my appearance. But the Martial Artists, barring Apprentices, will have gotten a good look at myface.' Rui sighed.

It was a predicament, but at the same time, it was almost a relief.

Until now, he hadn't realized how much of a psychological burden the constant hiding of his appearance had become. It had taxed his resolve more than he had expected.

Divulging it in front of all those people had felt therapeutic. This was also in addition to the satisfaction he felt from aiding the breakthrough of a Martial Senior, and then proceeding to eat a single attack from said Martial Senior. That was arguably the greatest accomplishment of his life as far as sheer difficulty went.

Just thinking about it put a smile of satisfaction on his face.

It was a shame that he didn't get to speak to Senior Frinjschia, but he would have time for that later.

Regardless, he had to deal with the consequences first.

The issue was that he didn't even know what the consequences were. The last time Rui had made a public appearance without any intel suppression was during the Serevian Dungeon War.

It was more than seven years ago. Since then, his missions have been incognito, or in remote isolated locations such as Vilun Island with total information isolation from the Panama continent.

The last time he had openly displayed his appearance in front of such a large audience was nearly a decade ago in the Martial Contest of the Kandrian Empire. He had grown a lot since then, even having gotten a stubble since he had long reached adulthood.

His measures of changing his hair and eye colour were a good final line of defence for his identity.

Unlike back on Earth, digital technology was far from prevalent. Had this been Earth, his image would have been all over the internet as articles, news segments, YouTube videos, and threads on various forums would have all analyzed his appearance to hell and back.

Intelligence agencies of various countries would have run simple facial recognition software and it would have been 'GG', as the kids back on Earth would say.

Thankfully, such a thing was impossible here in the world of Gaia. Digital technology was not only very primitive but also highly resource-intensive and required a regular supply of valuable esoterics.

Digital data management was even more primitive and restricted, which is why libraries still relied on scrolls and books.

Thus he knew the probability of someone tracing his appearance to the identity Rui Quarrier was highly unlikely, especially given that he was several tens of thousands of kilometers away from the Kandrian Empire. Finding a needle in a haystack was a dream job in comparison to this task.

Still, he had paid the price for getting too overconfident in the Shionel Confederation.

'Fight Meera, and then get the hell out of here as soon as the banquet is over.' Rui resolved himself.

In fact, he would have run as soon as he fought Meera, if not for the fact that the champion not attending the banquet held for his victory was an act of disrespect to the Virodha Theocracy.

Rui had no interest in potentially provoking powers much greater than Chairman Deacon. It was too risky.

'Damn girl, you better be worth all this trouble.' Rui sighed.

The health check-up was completed seamlessly, they found that his constitution held up a lot more poorly than he looked, due to the Reaper poison. Thankfully, it took several potions and he was back to normal.

It wasn't long before he got to meet Master Deivon in a heavily secured meeting room.

Master Deivon regarded him with silence for a moment.

It was as though he didn't even know where to begin.

"Has anyone figured out my identity?" Rui asked.

"We're trying," Master Deivos replied with complete honesty. "So far, we haven't had even the faintest of leads."

"That's unnaturally honest."

"You deserve that much, at least," Master Deivon smiled briefly.

"...If I deserve that much, then do I also deserve not having my identity looked into?"

Master Deivon shook my head. "Even if I did my best, I do not have the power to stop that."

Rui sighed, having expected that. With how many internal powers were interested in Rui, he didn't think a single bishop had the power to cease all investigations into him.

"What will become of the Martial Contest?"

"The Theocracy will employ powerful artifacts and esoteric resources to ensure that the colosseum will be restored in an hour," Master Deivon readily explained.

"What?" Rui raised his eyebrows. "That's absurd."

Master Deivon flashed a proud smile. "Do not underestimate us, young man."

"I'm glad to hear that," Rui grinned. "I would be deeply unsatisfied if I couldn't obtain an opportunity to the Senior Realm."

Chapter 1277: Analysis

They spoke for a bit more, and Rui was cheerful and relieved that the Martial Contest would go on.

Inwardly, however, he had already begun sweating.

He wasn't stupid. Perhaps other Martial Artists would have continued on about their day, but he had already realized something was wrong.

The first thing off was Master Deivon's tension. He did not look like someone whose heritor had yielded him good things. If anything, it felt like the opposite. Rui felt like he had gotten him in trouble, almost.

It was a pity that he didn't have any evidence to work with aside from the way Master Deivon presented himself.

Rui had also noted that the man had yet to congratulate him for winning the first and the second round.

These were small things, but Rui's sharp and keen eyes hadn't missed them. This was particularly odd for someone like Master Deivon who absolutely would have gone to at least uttered a few words of encouragement and congratulations.

He also didn't mention Rui's feat of surviving an attack from a Martial Senior. Almost as if it wasn't worth mentioning or was something that had already escaped his mind.

One reason that would be the case was if something even more important had happened. Given the timing, the probability wasn't low that it was related to Rui. If it was related to Rui, then the probability that it had something to do with the Martial Contest was actually quite high, since Master Deivon was doing just fine before the contest had begun.

Another elementary deduction one could make was that if it had something to do with Rui and the Martial Contest, then it had to do with Rui's matches. That would imply that something related to Rui's match had caused the tension that Master Deivon was experiencing.

He felt a wave of dread as he immediately realized what the only three possibilities were.

Of course, he realized that he couldn't actually dismiss his surviving a Martial Senior's attack as a possibility, however, that was not something that would cause Master Deivon to display the behavioural traits that he was displaying at the moment. He had seen how exceptionally powerful Martial Squires like Meera were treated. When Rui had outperformed Meera in two rounds of the Martial Contest yesterday and indicated that he was potentially above her, Master Deivon had not batted an eye. He had welcomed such a development.

Rui found it particularly odd that he seemed pensive now.

'No, it's most likely not me surviving a Martial Senior's attack.' Rui's intuition told him that that line of thought was most likely inaccurate.

That left two options.

Somehow, he had managed to gain an understanding of what happened during the first and the second rounds.

But that was impossible, the only way he could do that was if Martial Masters were much more impressive than he had indicated to Rui in the past.

"Is everything okay, Master Deivon?" Rui asked straightforwardly. "You seem preoccupied and tensed."

Master Deivon stared at him for a moment wordlessly, before sighing. "Yes... you're correct. I have been dealing with a headache."

Rui stared at him impassively. He went so far as to effectively create a quasi-predictive model on the man's behavioural patterns. He wanted to know more, and it would help to know how far he could go.

"Is that headache related to me perhaps?" Rui asked straightforwardly with a light tone.

Master Deivon nodded, resigned. "I suppose that can't be denied."

The air grew a bit more tense. "Is it related to what happened in the first and the second rounds?"

All it took was a moment.

A single look into Master Deivon's eyes was all Rui needed to know that he was right. If someone didn't know what he was talking about, then the first match was the most mundane match. He fought a balance-oriented Martial Artist, was losing at first, but then won.

However, just a single glance into Master Deivon's knowing eyes told him that he was on the money.

Rui exhaled as his eyes swum around, considering the confirmation that he had just received and its implications.

"How many people know?" Rui asked him.

"..."

"Master Deivon, please answer my question." Rui narrowed his eyes.

The tired man sighed. "About four people. Myself, and the three Martial Masters overseeing the contest, responsible for the three rounds."

Rui raised an eyebrow. That statement alone told him a lot about the political landscape of the Virodhabhasa Faith. It appeared that the political cohesiveness within the Virodhabhasa Faith was low, otherwise, the information would not be restricted to four people no matter what happened.

"...And what exactly have the four of you come to think about the first two matches that occurred?" Rui asked with a raised eyebrow.

Master Deivon simply stared at him. If it was any other Martial Squire, he wouldn't have even bothered gracing that question with a response. But somehow he couldn't shake himself off of Rui's piercing gaze.

"At least one of us believes that..." He paused, sighing.

"...that I am the Virodhabhasa?" Rui asked with a grave tone.

Master Deivon didn't respond.

Yet his silence was deafening.

"What are the consequences?" Rui asked, narrowing his eyes.

Master Deivon shook his head. "I have managed to quell the situation. No one will be coming after you."

Rui narrowed his eyes, staring at him. "Quelled the situation, you say?"

Master Deivon nodded. "For now. But..."

"But...?"

He sighed once more. "I don't know for how long I can keep them at bay. If not for the other two, Master Uma would have overwhelmed me. If the other two change their mind then..."

Rui realized the gravity of the situation.

"Listen to me," Master Deivon instructed. "Once you're done with the Martial Contest, you need to go away from here. Go away. Far away and... don't return until you're strong enough."

Rui sighed deeply.

A deep sense of weariness set into him. All he wanted to do was pursue his Martial Art, yet it seemed the forces of the world were unwilling to let him peacefully go about his life.

Chapter 1278: Fame

He glanced at Master Deivon with a careful expression. The man had been remarkably upfront about the circumstances that Rui was in. He didn't need to do that, really.

It was an act of good faith.

He was trying to signal to Rui that he was still on his side without being too direct to scare Rui away.

He appreciated that. He would have actually panicked a bit more if Master Deivon had aggressively insisted that he was there to help Rui.

Instead, he chose honesty and let Rui make his own evaluation.

"What is your opinion on the matter of what happened in my two matches?" Rui asked with a careful tone. "Since you are an atheist, you must have a more sober view of what happened, correct?"

For the first time, Rui detected true uncertainty from the Martial Master. The fact that the Master did not respond immediately was telling in and of itself.

"I... don't know what to believe." He admitted with remarkable honesty. "I used to think that the Divine Prophecy was a bunch of gish-gallop that a powerful Martial Transcendent had fabricated to create a powerful religion that he could cease control of, but... I have increasingly come to believe that this may not be the case."

Rui's eyes widened.

He almost felt honoured in a twisted way.

'You're getting full of yourself, Rui.' He immediately disapproved of himself. That was not the right reaction to have in this moment.

"Surely you don't believe I'm a deity from another world with the power of Creation and Destruction of Martial Art in two hands?" Rui jested, hoping to get the Martial Master to come to his senses.

Yet he remained silent.

Rui raised an eyebrow, realizing the man was serious.

"I don't know where you came from," The elder Martial Artist replied. "Regardless of whether you are a deity in making or not. I believe that you are destined for greatness. I believe that you are important to the future of Martial Art, perhaps the future of the world. I believe that... you are not someone who can or should be contained by a mere religion that is a lot more rotten than it looks."

Rui remained silent as he carefully studied the man with all his senses.

"I hope to have made a positive impact on your Martial Path and your journey to the pinnacle. As for the Divine Mission... I have chosen to reject that calling. It is one that is incentivized by purely selfish incentives within the Faith. I have made my own choice. Once you finish the Martial Contest, I will obscure your departure to the best of my ability. Leave, and obtain the power that you are surely destined to have. Once you become a Martial Master, the ability of the forces of this world to infringe on you is far more limited." The Master spoke with an increasingly determined voice.

It was as though uttering his conviction was the final step in committing himself to it.

The magnitude of this was not something Rui had missed. He was missing out on a lot if he chose to indulge in less extreme solutions.

Rui was actually prepared to inform him that the Kandrian Martial Union had a vested interest in him had Master Deivon decided to take a more unsavoury approach.

Then it would become a question of whether it was worth making an enemy out of many Martial Sages and Martial Masters, all for Rui.

Thankfully, he didn't need to go this route.

"I appreciate your graciousness. Thank you for not infringing on me with the justification of religious providence," Rui bowed to him slightly.

The man shook his head. "It isn't that great a deed. Now go, the reconstruction will be done soon."

Rui smiled, nodding, before departing.

He had a lot to think about, but for now, he wanted to focus on the reason that he was even remaining in this tournament.

An opportunity to break through to the Senior Realm. Three years had passed since he departed from the Shionel Confederation, and he was getting increasingly impatient and unsatisfied.

His psychology had started shifting too. He didn't even feel like a Martial Squire anymore. He truly felt he was ready to break through to a higher Realm of power. There was one person who perhaps possessed the ability to push him to break through.

If that didn't happen, he would leave the Virodha Theocracy and the Faith and head to the remaining person who could push him through.

What he was truly worried about was if he didn't break through even there. He would have to spend a lot of time searching for someone or something that could force him to break through. In fact, it would even be the case that he would have to stop actively developing his Martial Art, lest he became too powerful for any Martial Squire to even challenge.

That was a horrible scenario.

It was why he was determined to break through against Meera.

When he arrived at the colosseum, it had already been restored and an absurdly huge crowd was waiting outside the structure.

They even noticed Rui sky-walking to the structure with conspicuous Squire-level guards meant to assure his safety while he was a contestant.

"It's HIM!"

"I'm your biggest fan!"

"Are you a Martial Senior in secret?!"

It was only then that Rui realized that he was inadvertently a celebrity within the Virodha Theocracy.

'I suppose it can't be helped.' Rui sighed in resignation. Given what he had accomplished, he wasn't surprised.

His story had spread like wildfire across the entire nation and beyond. He had been too preoccupied to care before. But now that he had seen his fame manifest in such an overt manner, he found it to be overwhelming.

Still, it was probably a good thing. The more famous he was, the harder it was to act openly against someone that had earned the admiration of so many. The public's approval was an important stakeholder interest that every power block needed to be careful around.

Chapter 1279: Terror

He noticed the presence of many more Martial Apprentices and Martial Seniors amongst the spectators as well. It appeared that the Squire-level contest had attracted so much attention that even the other two groups with their own scheduled contests could help but gather to witness the famed Martial Squire who ate a blow from a Martial Senior and got up.

He also noticed the presence of many Martial Masters in the VIP zone. It appeared that not even they had been able to resist their curiosity.

However, their presence had made him more wary. He had already underestimated Martial Masters once. Master Deivon had made it clear that their insight was disproportionately higher than what he could extrapolate from their estimated power.

'I need to be extremely careful. I have already learned that Martial Masters are basically clairvoyant in their ability to gather information.' Rui narrowed his eyes.

No Martial Path destruction shenanigans.

No Martial Heart Awakening shenanigans.

Even if Meera was on the verge of becoming a Martial Senior, as she probably was, he did not intend to push her through.

Unlike with Squire Frinjschia, he didn't feel an ounce of sympathy or pity for Meera. Her circumstances were entirely different from Senior Frinjschia. The latter had truly hit a barrier that she was unable to overcome, all mostly due to bad luck. Her perseverance had earned Rui's respect and admiration, and he wanted to give her the opportunity that she most likely would never receive ever again, considering her age and steadily declining condition.

Meera, on the other hand, was quite young. She wasn't nearly as absurdly young as Rui was for their level of power. She would have many, many opportunities over a long period of time. She didn't need him. She didn't inspire any desire in him to help her either.

'I'm going to push myself to take her down as soon as possible.' He declared to himself. 'No messing around.'

It took some time, but the spectators had returned to their seats.

The energy of the crowd was a lot more volatile and charged. The spectators seemed to be oscillating with energy and excitement.

It appeared that the anticipation of seeing Rui fight and the experience of witnessing a historic event was enough to quell the outrage of having their security compromised.

'That's actually insane.' Rui mused to himself. 'Just how much do these people love and revere Martial Artists?'

He noticed that even the people perched in the VIP seat seemed to be absorbed into the tournament, as opposed to socializing with each other.

Various Martial Masters, heads of state like Guildmaster Bradt, ambassadors like Commissioner Reze... all of them obediently sat in their seats quietly.

Rui almost forgot about the two of them. Regardless, now was not the time to ponder about them.

He returned to the contest stands.

There were only two people inside.

Squire Janeau, who immediately regarded him with wary eyes.

And, of course, Champion Meera, who appeared to be highly absorbed in maintaining her nails.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The announcer began. "We will soon resume the Squire-level Martial Contest now! Here's a fun fact that not many know; There was actually a controversy behind the scenes of whether this should even be considered a 'Squire-level' contest anymore! That is the magnitude of the events that have preceded this resumption!"

The crowd went wild as it cheered loudly.

"And now, we will continue to the final match of the semi-finals! Whoever wins this will go on to face Squire Falken in the finals! Are you excited?!"

The crowd roared in approval and enthusiasm.

Not a single person could wait!

"Without further ado! The final match of the second round features Contestant Janeau facing off against Champion Meera!"

The two of them immediately got up, heading out in the colosseum.

Rui immediately took note of the atmosphere between them.

Meera was as impassive as always, she simply gazed at Squire Janeau with an ordinary expression.

Squire Janeau was completely different from how he was in the first round.

Gone were the wild behavioural tics.

Gone was the barely restrained aggression.

Gone was the bloodlust.

He merely stared at her with a mixture of wariness and apprehension. His head was inclined downwards as his eyes seemed to look up to her, despite being taller than her.

This was in sharp contrast to the prior battle where he blatantly looked down on his opponent.

Rui understood the difference, yet he couldn't help but disapprove. 'All it takes is a single stronger opponent to douse that fire? Tsk, it's an insult to Nel to compare you to him. He would have gotten even more excited and his battle-lust would have grown even higher.'

Meera simply stared at him like he was a meal on her plate.

A single glance at her eyes was enough for the truth to become evident.

He was a trivial existence in her eyes.

He was not someone who could stir her.

"Take your stances," Senior Deril instructed.

Squire Janeau crouched, centering his legs together close.

A preparation to run, if needed.

Meera didn't so much as twitch as her eyes were fixed on him. Yet she didn't gaze into his eyes.

Instead...

'She... Is she staring at his teeth?' Rui wondered.

"Begin!"

Squire Janeau leaped back warily, a drop of sweat trickled down his head.

Meera didn't move initially.

She continued staring at him.

She didn't exude any overt pressure. Yet the air around her seemed to chill a few degree nonetheless.

STEP

She took a step.

...

STEP

STEP

STEP

Squire Janeau, to his credit, didn't run away immediately. His expression intensified as he tried putting on a brave front.

"Bring it on, you bi-!"

He froze as he felt a profound wave of malevolence radiating from her, unlike anything he had ever felt.

Malevolent, yet innocent.

"Before we fight..." She murmured. "May I do you a favour?"

Her tone was soft, yet earnest

She meant every word with sincerity.

Yet something was profoundly wrong. He could feel that in the depths of his heart.

"...What?"

His voice was stiff.

"...Ah, it's not much," She smiled. "There's something wrong with your teeth, you see."

Her words were ordinary, yet the horrifying sense of peril growing inside his heart disagreed.

"My teeth?"

"Indeed..." She murmured, her eyes fixating on them. "The problem with them is that they are..."

Her presence grew heavier.

A single word escaped her mouth.

"...disgusting."

He felt a shiver crawl down his spine.

"Before we fight... allow me to get rid of them for you."

Pure horror gripped his heart.

He leaped back, dashing away at top speed.

Yet, the very next moment, she appeared before him.

She didn't even care to look into his eyes.

No.

Her eyes were fixed on his sharp canines.

CLASP!

Her body coiled around his faster before he could even process what happened.

One moment he was standing.

The next? His head was in her lap. His right hand buried under her feet, while his left shoulder was firmly gripped between her legs. She herself squatted on the ground, hold his shins firmly to the ground with her knees.

Her hands were on his face.

"We can fight after I get rid of them, okay?" She murmured, almost in a trance as she fixated on his teeth.

"Wait! I resi-!"

"Sssh," She pried his mouth open with both hands.

His eyes widened with horror.

"Don't speak, you'll only make this harder for both of us."

Her tone was composed.

She resembled a dentist who truly wanted the best for her patient.

"AAAAAARAARRHRGRHRG!LSKSHLSS!!!" His body shivered as he felt a horrifying pain flash up his skull.

Every muscle in his body revolted.

He exerted every grappling technique.

Every supplementary technique.

Everything he had.

To break out of her grip.

Yet he felt as though his body was cast in Senior-level esoteric alloys.

He couldn't even budge.

"There we go," She said with an encouraging tone as she tossed one canine away. "Thirty-one left to go... Oh?"

Squire Janeau shivered as his instincts warned him of what was to come.

"Your teeth heal and regrow?" She murmured unhappily.

The following words she uttered reminded all those who witnessed the battle, if it could even be called that, of the terror that was the champion of the Martial Contest.

Her hand caressed his face.

A troubled expression appeared on her face.

"No choice... I guess I'll have to keep pulling them out until they stop regrowing."

Chapter 1280: Commence

A shocking spectacle had unfolded. The entirety of all the spectators watching had frozen silent.

Not even the commentators had much to say after a while. At most, they tried to keep the atmosphere from deteriorating too much, but they couldn't do much in that regard.

Many had thought that Rui's fight against Senior Frinjschia would go down as the most shocking and impactful fight in the Martial Contest.

Yet, many had already begun to question that.

"AAAAAAAARGHRGRHRGRHRGRHRGRHG!" Squire Janeau screeched in agony as Meera pulled out another canine from his mouth. Her powerful body had entangled with Squire Janeau in such a way that she had immobilized him with just the lower half of her body effortlessly, leaving her hands free to focus on extracting his teeth.

She never once gave him a chance to forfeit, unwilling to let him go.

It was a sight that had seared itself into the minds of the horrified spectators.

'She's a fiend.' Rui watched as she extracted yet another tooth. 'I'm actually surprised at the fact that there are no measures in place to ensure that this kind of stuff doesn't happen.'

Senior Deril had an impassive expression on, yet Rui felt like he was itching to end the fight, looking for a valid reason according to the rules.

Yet it appeared that he didn't find any.

This meant that everybody watching had to watch what was nothing short of torture.

Besides was a rather large pile of teeth. All of which had been spawned by Squire Janeau's body. Rui had already realized that his healing factor most likely borrowed from a reserve of compounds and nutrients specifically meant to aid with his fang regeneration.

'On top of that, it most likely borrows from his bone density once that reserve ends.' Rui sighed. 'No wonder this hasn't ended.'

Yet watching her had given him a better understanding of what kind of person and Martial Artist she was.

'She isn't cognizant of her insanity.' Rui concluded. 'Even now, she's merely acting on her aesthetic sensibilities. She cannot help but do so. A compulsive drive to act on her aesthetic sensibilities is nothing short of a mental disorder.'

It would explain the incongruence between how she was in normal interactions and how she was when acting on her aesthetic sensibilities.

His thoughts were interrupted by a new development in the battle arena.

THUD

Squire Janeau's body has been tossed by the side, unconscious. An open mouth revealed that his teeth had finally stopped regenerating. It appeared that she had finally hit the limit.

"Mmmmm..." She stretched her hands in the air as an expression of satisfaction appeared on her face. "Finally done..."

"Winner; Champion Meera." Squire Deril sighed, finally getting to end the match.

Not a single person clapped.

Not a single person cheered.

It appeared that even her most hardcore fans could not find it in themselves to support her after what she had done.

A few potions were magically supplied to her out of nowhere via some esoteric transportation system as she restored herself. Not that she had exerted herself much at all, but every bit counted.

Unlike the previous time, she did not leave the colosseum.

"And this brings us to the final match of the Martial Contest! The shocking newcomer Squire Falken will join Champion Meera in the finals. This is it! This is the pinnacle! Whoever wins will have the capital to call themselves the strongest!!!"

This evoked a reaction out of the ground as fiery passion resurged, and a loud roar resounded across the colosseum.

Not even Meera's macabre acts had prevented the sheer excitement of the clash between the two most powerful Martial Squires of the Martial Contest.

STEP

Rui drew the colosseum's attention as he stepped into the battle arena. The entirety of the spectators roared in excitement and enthusiasm. Meera's previous sight had set a horror in them, a fear that she was too strong.

Yet the sight of Rui reassured them. Just one glance at him, and even the most Martial-illiterate person would be able to see it.

Power. Sheer unadulterated power emanated from Rui.

Nearly every single person who beheld him couldn't help but feel awe at the sight of him.

STEP

He had arrived. The spectators had already begun going giddy at the sight of the first eye-to-eye confrontation between Rui and Meera.

They simply stared at each other unperturbed.

Neither one of them seemed bothered by the other's actions and capabilities.

Had any other Martial Squire of the Martial Contest been standing before either of them, they would have been unable to keep their cool. Yet the two of them were unfazed.

"Take your stances." Senior Deril instructed.

Neither of them moved.

Meera smiled at Rui. "I had a feeling this would happen when I first got a look at you."

"...Is that so?"

Ordinarily, the spectators eschewed any delays to a fight. Yet not a single person dared to hasten this one.

"Mhm. I just had a feeling." She nodded. "...A feeling similar to last time, where the same thing had happened."

"...?"

She shook her head with a smile. "Are you interested in making a wager?"

Rui tilted his head in confusion. "Wager?"

"If I win... I'll do you one favour." She nodded. "But if you win, you must do me one favour."

"That's generally not how wagers work."

"I'm glad we have come to an agreement..."

"Enough," Senior Deril cut Rui off before he could retort with a stern expression. "Do not make me repeat myself. Take your stances."

"I'm good as is." Meera replied.

Rui stared at her deeply for a moment before adopting his classic neutral stance.

"Begin!" Senior Deril commenced the match.

The final battle of the Martial Contest had begun. The spectators held their breath, waiting.

Neither side made the first move.

They simply stared at each other.

Nothing happened.

Something had to give.

Rui sighed. "...Fine."

He rushed forward, lashing out at her with a powerful Flowing Canon strike.

The first attack of the battle had been launched.