

Martial Unity 1531

Chapter 1531: Tales

The two of them chatted some more about a variety of light topics. Eight years had passed, yet Rui noticed that there was no distance between them. They had gone back to chatting just like they used to nearly eight years ago.

That was something that Rui deeply appreciated, it was exactly what he needed.

He would feel awful if their relationship had been destroyed because of his eight-year disappearance. Perhaps Julian was keen enough to realize that and had chosen to proactively close the gap between them.

They returned to the old conversations that they used to have centered around nuanced topics relating to the anthropology of science, technology, and Martial Art.

"You obtained a journeyman scholar's degree in the sciences?" Julian asked with surprise. "Interesting, although you were always abnormally familiar with field of science, you never indicated any interest in pursuing the sciences as a career. You had always had your eyes fixed on Martial Art from day one."

"I needed both the knowledge and the authority to access information on certain substances for a Martial Art technique of mine," Rui explained. "So I decided to study up a bit, and ended up clearing the exam as the topper."

"As expected of my brother," A proud smile appeared on his face. "You are probably the only Martial Senior in history who is also a journeyman scholar."

Rui shrugged with a wry smile. He didn't give the slightest bit of a damn about his degree or the title of journeyman scholar, but making his brother proud and impressed was definitely worth the effort.

It wasn't long before the two of them completed a long talk together before heading back to the Quarrier Orphanage. It took even less time for all the adults to gather around the living room while the kids played outside in the evening.

Everybody was curious to know what Rui had been through in the past eight years.

How could they not be?

They certainly mourned when he had disappeared. But now that he had returned, he undoubtedly had some entertaining tales to tell!

"You don't have to stare at me that intently," Rui heaved a wry smile. "Now then...where to begin?"

He began at the beginning. He told them about Kane and he faked going to different places before eventually heading to the Shionel Confederation. He told them about his exploits in the Shionel Confederation including the fiasco that eventually led him to leaving for eight years.

He underplayed the danger they were in, to a certain extent. There was no point in telling them that dozens of assassination and kidnapping attempts had been made in the past eight years. His mother might even have gotten a heart attack if she learned about this sordid fact.

"Returning would have put you in danger," Rui explained. "He was hunting me, and thus staying away from you would mean taking his focus away from you. That's why I didn't return. I couldn't, not unless I was strong enough to protect all of you, and eliminate anybody who would dare set their eyes on the people I care for and love."

There was a stunned silence as they processed what Rui had just told him. They were already aware that Rui didn't return to protect them, but they didn't understand the details.

"And that man...Deacon...Is he?"

"Yes," Rui firmly affirmed. "He's no longer a threat. That's why I returned, having confirmed that."

"..."

None of them knew what to say to that. It was surreal to even think that such a thing had unfolded. The story that Rui narrated was straight out of a novel!

Yet among all of them, Lashara was the first to react. Yet she didn't try to console him or reassure him with words. She merely pulled him into a deep embrace.

Rui smiled, accepting her affection.

The mood took a turn for the better as he went on to tell them the rest of his story. His adventures with Kane as they traveled to incredible places like the Umiana Trench, the Thundering Valley, Crexet Town, Ajanta Island, and the Great Forest of Hyponarak.

He left out several crucial details because they were dangerous to even utter out loud, but he was earnest about his experiences.

He didn't admit to actually murdering Deacon either. Who knew who was listening, waiting to use his words against him.

"...Once I confirmed the news that Deacon had perished. I returned home," Rui concluded his story. "That's the end of that story."

"My poor baby..." Lashara pulled him in for a hug. "You must have gone through so much."

Rui smiled wryly as he bent awkwardly while his mother peppered his head with kisses. He had a feeling that he was comforting her rather than the other way around.

The adults of the orphanage were overwhelmed by the details of his adventurous tale. Max and Mana in particular were fascinated by the various places that Rui had visited to get stronger.

"Is there really a hole in the ocean?" Max asked excitedly. "Yeah, it was shocking to witness, but it was definitely there," Rui nodded. "Martial Sages are incredible..." Mana murmured, deep in thought. "Tell me more about the Thundering Valley!"

As a maneuvering-oriented Martial Artist, she was naturally more curious about the Thundering Valley than she was about the Umiana Trench. Rui took his time, quelling all of their questions before finally satisfying the curiosity of the two young Squires.

"I know your experiences couldn't have been anything but extraordinary, but to you had such a fantastical adventure in the past eight years..." Julian murmured. "Truly fascinating."

The other adults were inclined to agree, the things that Rui described sounded almost fictional.

"This world is wider and larger than you can imagine," Rui smiled. "There is no limit to what is possible in such a world. You can only understand its many wonders if you see them in person. I'll take all of you to see them someday!"

Chapter 1532: Spar

It wasn't going to be easy to keep that promise, but Rui vowed to succeed. As a Martial Senior, his earning ability was truly high, especially considering that he was already a high-grade Martial Senior.

Although the Kandrian Empire had Martial Artists up to two Realms above him, the actual number of people who were stronger than him was a few hundred at the very most. This meant that he was still a highly important combat asset, which meant that money would never be an issue. Taking his family around the world for a tour was not impossible.

"Let's leave that for later though," Rui smiled wryly. "I have no intentions of going back to those places."

Eventually, his story-telling session came to an end. His audience had been enraptured in the details of his fantastical adventures across the continent, but they had been overwhelmed by it by the time it came to an end.

What could they even say about all the things that Rui had gone through?

Their experiences, in contrast, were extremely limited. Most of them had never ventured past the town of Hajin in their geographic vicinity. They didn't even feel qualified to comment on his experiences.

"I always knew that there are incredible reality-defying wonders out there, but to actually hear about your experiences with them in such detail..." Julian murmured, deep in thought.

"Alright, enough of stories!" Max got up.

"I agree," Mana nodded. "We have waited long enough."

The two of them dragged Rui deep into the forest where they had prepared a field to spar in.

"Goodness gracious..." Rui laughed. "You two sure are excited, aren't you?"

"Hah!" Max laughed. "We're going to kick your butt this time, big brother!"

"We'll show you just how much we've improved in the past eight years..."

"Oh... is that so?" Rui smiled, stroking his shaved chin. "Come then. Show me how much stronger you've gotten in the past eight years."

He stood with his arms behind his back as the two of them took their usual stances. They exerted mild pressure on Rui, although he certainly was impressed by their progress in the Squire Realm, and they had yet to begin.

Max's stance reflected his Martial Path; momentum-charged offense. His arms were folded with his fists pointed straight in Rui's direction. He adopted a stance that was reminiscent of the classical boxing stance before the introduction of gloves into the sport.

Mana, on the other hand, centered her crouched legs, keeping them as close to her center of gravity as possible. This made it easier for her to maneuver in all three dimensions, which is what she excelled at and focused on.

"Come," Rui calmly instructed.

The two of them flashed forward at a speed that exceeded even sound. Mana in particular raced forward at blinding speed before launching a swift combo blows at Rui's torso.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

Rui casually evaded them with minimal effort. "You've grown stronger."

"Of course we have!" She leaped, somersaulting above his head, before her flew down like a meteorite as she launched a powerful drop kick on him.

Max, on the other hand, had also arrived, throwing a remarkably powerful blow charged with his momentum.

Time slowed down to a crawl as Rui examined their movements. 'Their patterns have grown more efficient. Their teamwork has also improved.'

He happily noted their improvement before casually sidestepping both their attacks.

TAP TAP

He gently patted their attacks, altering their flow of power ever so slightly as he evaded their attack.

That slight alteration snowballed into a major discrepancy!

BAM! POW!

Their attacks wound up landing on each other, giving each other a good beating while Rui had long stepped away.

"Ow! Watch who you're hitting!"

"Are you even on my team?!"

Rui laughed heartily at the two Martial Squires bickering, with amusement. They had grown in many ways, yet he was glad to see that some things never changed.

"Come on, now," Rui teased. "All that hype and this is all you got? Tsk tsk, kids these days..."

The two of them glared at him. "We're not kids!"

They surged forward with remarkable coordination and teamwork, throwing all manners of attacks.

Yet not a single one of them so much as touched Rui. His actual movement speed was below their swift attacks, yet for some reason, they were unable to even come close to touching.

After a long session of what amounted to a cat-and-mouse chase, the two of them were finally drained of their stamina.

"You didn't even attack us," Max complained.

"This doesn't even feel like a fight," Mana murmured.

"...Alright then, why don't I show you a little treat?" Rui smirked.

BADUMP!

He activated his Martial Heart. Glowing red streaks emerged from his heart, spreading across his body. It was as though he was a mountain laden with streams of lava, erupting with an ocean of power!

Max and Mana widened their eyes with shock as they beheld the mighty power of the Senior Realm.

Their skin crawled with the sheer energy that Rui seemed to radiate.

"What is this...?" Max wondered with awe.

"This is the power of the Senior Realm..." Mana realized.

"That's right," Rui smiled. "And it is the power that awaits you in the Senior Realm."

He raised his hand. "Now then, go to sleep."

He flicked his finger at them, activating a simple breathing technique.

THWOOM!

He masterfully controlled the power, timing, and placement. Cleanly knocking them out without leaving so much as a scratch on their body.

"Hehehe..." Rui chuckled with satisfaction.

Their admiration did feel good as an older brother who had guided them down their Martial Path.

"You're so extra," A voice called out to him, cajoling him gently.

"Am I?" Rui glanced in the direction of the voice.

Senior Xanarn emerged from the woods. "Show off."

"Hey, I think I've earned at least that much," Rui smiled. "Wouldn't you agree?"

She did, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

Rui's smile disappeared as his expression grew serious. "Xanarn, we need to talk."

Chapter 1533: Diverging Paths

He had been wanting to speak to her ever since he got back, but he hadn't been able to since he was far too busy catching up with all of them.

"First, thank you for keeping your word," Rui began. "You protected my family and enlightened them about the truth. I appreciate that."

"Like I said, I was just fulfilling my debt to you. Besides, it's hardly been a chore, it's actually been quite the pleasure," She replied, continuing. "I never had a family aside from my grandmother when I was young. These past two years have been so soul-nourishing that I've felt like I could stay here forever. Which is why I don't understand..."

Her expression grew more serious. "How were you able to leave so easily? What you have is a dream come true for many. A place and purpose in a large family full of love and hope. What more could you want? What more could you want in this cold cruel world?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "If I were you, I would have never left this place. Not a single time. I would spend my entire life in this orphanage, and use my power to protect them from the harsh reality of this world. When you see those boisterous children running around...when you see your loving siblings raise those children with love and care, don't you feel the same way?"

Rui stared at her, listening to her heartfelt words. It wasn't that he didn't understand where she was coming from, he genuinely did. The issue was that she didn't seem to understand where he was coming from.

"I do experience the desire to protect my family," Rui replied calmly. "When I learned about the danger that I put them all in, I didn't hesitate to sacrifice billions of gold from the fruits of more than a year's worth of labor. If I had to make that choice, I would make it over and over again. However...there are some things I'm not willing to do."

Rui heaved a sigh. "This is something I didn't mention in the story back home but... back then the Martial Union offered me indefinite protection for my family as long as I became a member of their inner corps. Which basically means absolute loyalty and servitude. I refused because it would hamper my desire to live a free life and would hamper my ambition."

He paused for a moment before continuing. "That debacle taught me many things about myself, including the fact that my desire to fulfill my greatest ambition is my strongest drive, stronger than all others."

It wasn't the nicest answer, but it was the truth.

Senior Xanarn didn't respond immediately. She had already realized this truth, but it was something else to hear it so clearly from Rui himself. Not only was he self-aware about it, but he had accepted it and was not the slightest bit ashamed of who he was in any way.

"If you feel this way about the brothers and sisters you grew up with, those who took care of you, your own mother...then you'd probably feel this way even if you started your own family with a woman someday, right?"

There was a hint of disappointment and resignation in her voice.

"...I cannot say, but I would not be surprised," Rui replied before closing his eyes. "You do not understand. You cannot understand. The weight of my ambition. I am nobody, if not a man fulfilling Project Water."

She did not know what that was. Yet the details did not matter. What mattered was that they were at a crossroads, and it seemed that it was impossible for them to walk the same path.

"...I see," She replied, walking away before pausing. "I will remain here. In the past two years, I have experienced peace and serenity the likes of which even the Floating Sect did not give me. Your mother and the other caretakers accepted me wholeheartedly. They treated me like I was their own sister. The children of the orphanage adored me, looked up to me, and accepted my love like I was their own sister. Perhaps it is because the very nature of an orphanage is to give love to those who need it...But this orphanage is already my home, and perhaps the home where I'll raise a family."

She turned around, facing Rui. "That is my choice...It can also be yours if you are willing to."

Rui simply stared at her, heaving a sigh before shaking his head. "My choice was made before I was even born in this world."

This wasn't the first time Rui had made this choice either. He was not new to relationships, even if he was rusty. But in his experience, there was always a critical threshold for a relationship, a crucial make-or-break zenith.

Commitment. The commitment to put aside everything else in their life and put their relationship as the number one priority. Rui had reached this point a few times in his old life back in his younger days. And he had made the same choice every single time.

His work.

He had had a faint hope that perhaps he would meet someone who walked the exact same path as him, so he wouldn't have to choose, but alas, he had yet to meet somebody like that, in either life.

"...I see," She turned away, heading back to the orphanage. Rui heaved a shaky sigh, shaking his head before heading towards Max and Mana, slowly waking them up.

"Ngh..." Max groaned as he got up. "...Big brother? Wha-Oh."

He remembered the spar between them and the power that Rui had displayed.

"That power..." Mana murmured as she gained her bearings. "What do we have to do to attain that power? Tell us."

Rui smiled as he observed their deep desire for the power of the Martial Heart. He had achieved what he wanted by displaying his Martial Heart to them in such a fashion; stirring their drive.

Chapter 1534: Flight

1534 Flight

"Individuality, my little brother and sister," He replied. "Techniques that are both born from you and are highly attuned and synergetic with your Martial Body and Path. Techniques that make the absolute best of your body, squeezing out every ounce of power and potential within your body."

"Techniques that make the best of your body?" Max asked.

"That's right," Rui nodded. "Techniques that maximize the harnessing of your body, its potential, and power. That is the path forward to the Senior Realm."

The two of them accepted his words, nodding seriously. They had already resolved themselves to do what it took to obtain that power.

"I heard from big brother Julian that you are the youngest Martial Senior, is that true?" Max asked with stars in his eyes.

Rui flashed a smile of exaggerated pride. "It is. Your big brother is the best!"

"As expected of you, big brother," Mana nodded with a knowing expression. "Squire Kyrie also said that you were something special. Squire Dylan begrudgingly agreed."

Rui's eyes lit up at the mention of the two Martial Squires. A lot of time had passed, but he still had a lot of appreciation for the two Martial Squires that had done much to guide him and help him grow whilst he was a Martial Apprentice.

'It's been a while since I've seen them, I'll definitely pay them a visit soon.'

He decided to put off his long list of people to visit away for the day. It hadn't even been a full twenty-four hours since he visited, and he didn't want to get to handling these matters immediately after returning.

"It's good to take some rest," His mother agreed when he told her that. "My poor baby has been away for so long. Just relax for today."

He found himself resting his head on her lap as he patted his head gently.

It was at times like this when his family almost overtook his ambition. There was always something about his mother that caused him to wonder. Nobody else could make him waver in his ambition even in the slightest. Not Julian, Max, nor Mana. Yet when it came to Lashara...

"You look troubled," She softly spoke to him as she gently caressed him.

"..." Rui simply stared at her.

"No matter what you do from here on out, I'll always love you," She reassured him, almost sensing his troubles. "You're my precious baby, after all."

"I thought you'd want me to stay here forever," Rui softly replied.

"I want you to do what makes you happy," She replied. "When I created this orphanage, it was never my intention to shackle any of my children here. If I can nurture them enough to have them spread their wings and find their own path, then I am happy. Seeing you accomplish great things, things that you set out to accomplish makes me feel purposed."

That was not what Rui had expected. His mother had always been the worrywart in the orphanage, particularly around Rui. He was the first Martial Artist from the orphanage, and she had gone through sleepless nights worrying whether Rui would be alright.

"Many of the children have begun wanting to become Martial Artists looking at Max, Mana, and you," She heaved a sigh of exasperation and adoration. "I worry, but...I shouldn't suppress them. I just...worry."

She was right to, too. Rui had lost count of the number of times that he had almost died since becoming a Martial Artist. Surely the number exceeded a hundred thousand after having been a Martial Artist for nearly fifteen years.

Just a single mistake, and 'almost died' could easily be reduced to a single word. There was a reason that the Martial Union invested heavily in creating sixteen extravagant academies with the best of what Martial Art had to offer. It was to create sixteen Martial Artist-producing factories to replace all the Martial Artists who died every year.

"I'll train all of them properly now that I'm here," Rui reassured. "I will make sure they have everything they need to make it back alive, if nothing else."

Survival was a skill-set that he had become proficient at in the past eight years.

"That would certainly make me sleep easier at night."

That was reason enough for Rui, in addition for caring for the kids. The orphanage had accepted a lot of new orphans in the past eight years. He didn't even know most of them, yet in his mind, they were already part of the family.

It was his duty to think like that, after all, he himself had been blessed with that.

Eventually, he found himself falling asleep.

He slept better than he ever had in the past eight years. It was a deep, nourishing and satisfying sleep.

When he woke up that day, it was as though he had woken up for the first time ever. He had relaxed in a way that he hadn't in a long time. It actually took him a while to completely regain all his vigor.

"I'm heading out to see Kane," Rui informed them.

He had messaged Kane the day before and the two of them had agreed to meet the next day. With his speed, it wasn't long before he arrived at their rendezvous.

"Long time," Rui smiled, waving at him. "You look...different."

"Your hair and eyes are back to normal," Kane murmured. "Surreal."

Unlike his reunion with his family, their reunion was not emotionally charged. For one, neither of them were inclined to act so rigidly and seriously with each other. They addressed each other like it had only been a month since they saw each, as opposed to four years.

The first thing Rui noted was that he was still a Martial Squire, which was not good news. The whole point of returning to the Kandrian Empire was so that he could face a conflict that would threaten his Martial drive, awakening his Martial Heart in the process.

The fact that he was still a Martial Squire proved that there was something wrong.

"I wanted to tell you everything I've been through in the past four years but..." Rui paused, before continuing. "Your story is more important."

Kane heaved a sigh.

Chapter 1535: Return

1535 Return

Two years ago, two people arrived at the Kandrian Empire, passing through the transit port.

"We've arrived," Kane told Xanarn.

Xanarn took a few steps forward as she spread her senses across the transit port town. "So...this is the Kandrian Empire, this is his home nation."

"We've still got some ways to go before we reach the town of Hajin," Kane remarked. "But this is where we split. You have the map that he gave you, so you should be fine by yourself right?"

She nodded. "Well then, goodbye and good luck. You've worked hard in the past two years since he left. Regardless of what happens, none of that was for waste."

The two of them split paths as Kane headed straight home while Xanarn headed towards the orphanage.

BADUMP

BADUMP

BADUMP

His heart beat faster the closer he got to the Arrancar Mansion, reaching its peak when he arrived at the main gate.

"...Young Master Kane?!" One of the guards gasped.

"Clear the way," Kane ordered with a steely voice.

The two guards open the gates, watching him pass through as the security office adjacent to it scrambled to send a message to the security team and the staff. Who further passed on the messages to the main family.

The news spread like wildfire.

The prodigy of the Arrancar family had returned.

A series of Martial Squires swiftly appeared before him, surrounding him.

"You little shit..." One of them growled, stepping forward to him. "You have some balls coming back after all this time. You should have stayed away forever, if you knew what's best for you."

"Best for me...?" Kane asked, smirking. "Or best for you, big brother?"

The man before him narrowed his eyes.

Kane could tell he had struck a nerve.

"Everybody knows that you could never become the heir of the Arrancar Family as long as I'm around," Kane smirked, taunting him. "My talent. My growth. My potential, they outshine yours so much that it isn't even a question of whose more suited to succeeding our father, the Devil Sage, isn't that right, big brother Kanar?"

Squire Kanar's eyes narrowed with murderous intensity. "You bastard. You're just a loser who ran away. Who ran away from the privilege of being born in the Arrancar Family. And now you've come back to find your place? Shameless!"

"You've got the wrong idea," Kane narrowed his eyes. "I've come to forever escape the Arrancar Family. I want father to sign this."

He tossed Kanar a scroll, who begrudgingly opened it widening his eyes in shock after reading. "A formal statement from our father accepting your disownment of the Arrancar Family and a statement for reparations for all the damages done to you?! Have you lost your mind?!"

He tore the scroll apart. "Father will have your head for this! Get him!"

The Martial Squires lashed out at Kane, racing to apprehend him.

THWACK THWACK THWACK!

Yet it was only after Kane effortlessly knocked them out did they later realize how outclassed they were. Kane was good at hiding his strength, that was they had failed to realize.

They had failed to realize that in the two years that he had furiously trained in the Floating Sect, he had achieved a level of power that was truly only second only to Rui and Ieyasu back when they were in the Squire Realm. Although he had yet to achieve their absurd formidability there was no other Martial Squire on the continent who was his equal now that the two of them were Seniors.

"You bastard!" Squire Kanar charged forward with a furious expression.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH!

Just the slightest centimeters.

He shifted by just the slightest centimeters, and yet not a single attack so much as grazed him.

"Forty years in the Squire Realm and you're only grade-six or so?" Kane snorted with contempt. "This is what happens when you mindlessly rely on the Arrancar library to master existing techniques. You have mastered many existing techniques, yet because they are neither original nor unique from you, they are not attuned to your body. They do not have synergy with your body. You will never amount to anything more than a second-

rate Martial Squire as long as you continue down this path. What a waste of talent."

"SHUT UP!" Kanar gritted his teeth, launching an onslaught of haymakers.

Kane sighed, evading them before swiftly knocking him out and moving on. Worthless Martial Squires without more than a sliver of individuality were not what could give him what he needed.

He needed someone to push himself beyond his limit.

"Young Master Kane," A voice drew his attention.

A Senior-level presence graced the grounds. Kane braced himself, hoping that his resistance to this overwhelming power would push him to break through.

Yet something was wrong.

He didn't feel a rush or a drive for more power like Rui seemed to when he was about to fight Ieyasu.

He didn't feel like he was close.

"His Excellency wishes to speak with you," The Martial Senior calmly informed Kane.

"I have nothing to say to him," Kane growled. "I came here for my stateme-"

"His Excellency has agreed to all of your demands," The Martial Senior interrupted him. "Now then...Do not keep him waiting any longer."

Kane simply stared at him stunned, speechless. "What...?"

"It would be wise not to keep His Excellency waiting," The Martial Seniors narrowed his eyes, repeating himself.

This was not how things were supposed to go. He had come here for a fight, hoping that he would be overwhelmed by the Arrancar's Family's superior forces, awakening his Martial Heart to obtain the power needed to maintain his desire for freedom and escape from his family.

Yet his father had agreed to all his demands?

"Young Master," The Martial Senior calmly addressed him. "Please come immediately. He wishes to speak to you."

Kane narrowed his eyes, nodding slowly.

It wasn't long before he found himself in a cave deep underground. An unrefined cave with merely the bare necessities and none of the luxury or extravagance that the rest of the household had.

Even before he entered the cave, he felt his nerves tingle.

His soul screamed.

He had experienced this many times, yet each time may as well have been the first time.

The very air he breathed was different

The very land he stepped on had changed.

It was as though heaven and earth warped in the man's presence, prostrating in awe to the magnificence of his being.

"So..." A deep masculine voice rippled through the air and land.

It reverberated through the very fabric of space itself.

"The boy who ran away has come back home, has he?"

Chapter 1536: Inducing Drive

1536 Inducing Drive

Kane narrowed his eyes at those words as beheld his father.

As always, the man wore a simple feathered garb covering the lower half of his body, fashioned from the pelt of an Elder Phoenix. Scruffy hair covered most of his upper body and an unkempt beard covered most of his face, making him seem closer to a bear than a man.

His appearance did the cave justice, matching that of a caveman

"I'm not here to return. And this isn't my home anymore." Kane mustered up his courage with defiance, retorting.

The man snorted. "So I've heard...some nonsense about disowning the family. Tell me, boy..."

His eyes narrowed. "Did you really think you could trigger your Martial Heart with such a trivial attempt?"

Kane's eyes widened.

"Did you really think you think that stepping into a higher Realm of power was something that could be triggered so easily?" Sage Damian stared into his son's eyes.

Kane felt transparent under the man's piercing glare. Invisible. The Martial Sage's eyes revealed a raw aggression that was held and bound within him, tempered by his mind.

"I..." Kane faltered, clenching his fist.

"You do not even understand who you are anymore," The Sage snorted. "The very fact that you came here willingly, without political protection, knowing full well that the Arrancar Family's might was more than enough to capture you shows that the desire to escape the Arrancar family is not a part of your Martial drive anymore."

Kane's eyes widened with shock as his father calmly unraveled his actions and decisions.

"In fact..." Sage Damian's eyes pupils pierced through Kane as he studied his son. "...It seems that not only is it not a part of your Martial drive anymore, but it is something you're willing to risk if it means gaining the power of a higher Realm in return."

Kane's eyes flashed a knowing glint.

"Oh? Perhaps you're not nearly as unaware of the changes your Martial drive has undergone..." Interest crept into Sage Damian's voice. "So... tell me, my prodigal son, what drives you? What drives you to greater heights? What drives you to pursue the power of a higher Realm even at the cost of what used to be your greatest desire?"

"I...don't want to fall behind," Kane's eyes flashed with determination. "I don't want to fall behind him. He's my best friend. He's already reached the Senior Realm. But I...am still stuck in the Squire Realm."

"Him'...Hmmm..." Sage Damian realized who he was referring to. "Him, eh? So he's already become a Martial Senior, shattering the previous record by ten years. Interesting."

"Twelve years," Kane smirked proudly. "He became a Senior two years ago."

Sage Damian narrowed his eyes as a flash of raw aggression from deep within emerged on the surface. "You seem proud of another's accomplishments. You should feel ashamed for falling behind with your talent and potential. It means you weren't as driven as him."

Kane shrugged. "I don't care. He's my best friend. I don't feel ashamed of falling behind. My desire to keep up with him is not because my pride is hurt, it's because I want to stay with him. Because he's my best friend."

"Hah!" Sage Damian snorted with disapproval as his eyes flashed with aggression.

Yet even that simple gesture shook the world.

RUMBLE

Kane stood unsteadily as the very ground beneath his feet began vibrating. The air had already begun dancing into gusts.

"Uh...could you not? You're causing a lot of trouble to a lot of people," Kane remarked.

The Martial Sage narrowed his eyes as he tempered the predatory aggression within him. "Hmph. Know this, my son. A Martial drive that aims to merely keep up and not surpass is not a drive that will take you very far."

"Well, what if I told you that keeping up with Rui would mean becoming one of the strongest Martial Artists in the world someday?" Kane smirked. "One day, he will surpass everybody. I know it. He'll even become stronger than you."

"Will he now?" Sage Damian raised an eyebrow with interest.

"Don't go doing anything just because you're afraid of being surpassed though," Kane narrowed his eyes.

"Hah! Don't dare insult me with an accusation of cowardice. I am not as spineless as a boy who only knows to chase another man's back."

"Yap," Kane shrugged, growing more comfortable in the conversation. "With that out of the way...I do have one last question."

Sage Damian simply stared at him his steely eyes.

"All those years you sent the Arrancar Family after me. All those years I managed to evade them. Yet you never came after me yourself. Or deployed a Martial Senior or Master."

"I'm busy, boy." The man growled. "My pursuit of power. The burdens I bear are beyond anything you could possibly fathom."

"But you could have definitely had me captured if you truly wanted," Kane insisted, narrowing his eyes. "Yet, you didn't."

The man simply stared at Kane with sharp eyes. "I suppose it doesn't matter anymore since you now have a different drive..."

He closed his eyes. "It's simple. Drive is the source of growth. As a boy, you never had the drive to succeed the Family, nor an inherent desire for power, glory, success, or wealth. The only strong emotion you ever displayed as a boy was your growing hatred for the Arrancar Family. That is why I decided to make that your drive by using the Arrancar Family to threaten your freedom. Power was your only solution. Your strong desire to be free from the Arrancar Family fueled your growth tremendously, allowing you to break through to the Apprentice Realm at a prodigiously young age and make rapid growth from there on out."

His tone became exceedingly composed and calm. "...Exactly as planned."

Kane's eyes widened with shock. "Wait, so all this time. All that nonsense about the heir of the family was fabricated."

"A successor for the family is important, even if meaningless since I am not dying. Not now, not ever," The Sage remarked coldly. "The shallow desire of the other members of the family to gain more prestige by having you become the heir was a good superficial reason to justify tormenting you."

Chapter 1537: The Power of Youth

1537 The Power of Youth

Kane had always known that his circumstances were strange. Or rather, he known ever since he told his story to Rui, who had pointed out some inconsistencies, hinting that perhaps there was more to the story.

A Martial Apprentice, no matter how brilliant, was not capable of resisting such a powerful force. He later learned that even the political protection from the Lightning Sect was not enough simply because he wasn't valuable enough to spend tons of political capital to resist.

"So all that torment you put me through... All that bullshit that I had to go through. You did it all just to give me a drive?" Kane gritted his teeth, clenching his fists.

"That's right," Sage Damian calmly replied. "I did you a favor. My son, power is everything in this world. The weak perish. The strong consume. Weakness would cause not just you, but also everyone you love, suffering. Weakness itself is evil. Being weak in this world is no different from killing yourself and everyone you love, that is why I drove you to covet power."

"That is the most demented thing I've ever heard." Kane's expression crumpled anger, almost quivering fury. "You could have just loved me like a normal father, instead you filled your son with hatred and fear, and you call it love. Fuck off with that bullshit!"

"Love you like a normal father, eh?" Sage Damian's voice had been reduced to a whisper. "And what good would that have done you? Look at that little wench friend of yours, the one who is touted as one of the three geniuses of your generation."

"...Fiona?" Kane tilted his head.

"Her foolish Sage of a father pampered her with all the love in the world, did he not?" Sage Damian remarked. "What good did that do her? She's merely a grade-four Martial Squire after all this time. She had the astronomical potential to become the single greatest gem of her generation, yet diamonds are only born from great pressure. Her generational talent has gone to waste because her drive is as soft as her father!"

He bellowed vindictively with a hint of smugness. "...You, on the other hand, have forged yourself. The tribulations that you have gone through, that you have relentlessly pushed yourself through, regardless of whether it's because of your old drive or your new one, have allowed you to maximize your potential."

Kane simply stared at him in disbelief. "..."

"Look at you instead, you have reached the pinnacle of the Squire Realm at an extraordinary pace," Sage Arrancar remarked. "Reaching this level at the age of twenty-six is certainly a highly optimistic sign about your future. Fact of the matter is that not even Martial Artists can ignore the detriments of aging. Humans lose potential at a rapid pace beyond a certain age. This is true even for Martial Artists."

"I thought Martial Artists grow stronger as time passed..." Kane frowned.

"They grow stronger in power, but their potential reduces. The rate of growth. The rate of learning. The rate of changing. All of these parameters reduce significantly, putting hard limits on long-term growth." Sage Damian told Kane. "I have experienced this myself. It took me fourteen years to develop my last technique. And it just gets harder and harder every single time."

He closed his eyes, heaving a brief sigh. "This is why breaking through younger is valued more. The younger you break through, the earlier your lifespan is extended, the slower your aging, and the longer your youth is prolonged."

"...So what if someone broke through to the Senior Realm at the age of twenty-four?" Kane asked.

Sage Damian opened his eyes, throwing a knowing look at Kane. "...Then he would experience the boons of youth for a very long time. A human is at their prime for about ten years between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. Someone who reached the Senior Realm at the age of twenty-four would experience

that prime age for more than perhaps fifty years instead of just ten, depending on their Martial Body. I cannot even begin to imagine the sheer amount of gains that he will make in that time."

Kane clenched his fist in frustration. Based on what his father told him, if Kane did not break through before his prime ended, then he would always fall far behind Rui who was bound to race forward at an incredible pace due to a prolonged youth.

"...I see, I'll be sure to keep those words in mind," Kane's determination grew.

"Hm..." He closed his eyes, returning to his meditation. "You'll get your little statement signed, if that's what you want. If you came here for nothing else, then get out of here."

Kane stared at his father's meditating form, narrowing his eyes.

He hated and feared his father, especially back when his desire to escape the Arrancar Family was at its strongest. Yet now, his greatest desire was keeping up with Rui. So much so that he was even willing to risk becoming the heir of the Arrancarn Family if that was what it took.

The fact that he had even been able to keep up, even if barely and from a bit of a distance, with Rui for the time that they were together was proof that his father's method had merit, even if it was sick.

"You know...I hate that you my childhood miserable. I hate that I felt like a prisoner in my own home growing up. I hate that I felt the fear of being captured for all those years after I left the household." He gritted his teeth and clenched his fist. "But..."

thank you for caring for me, even if it was in your own fucked up way. I wouldn't be this strong if it wasn't for that. And I wouldn't have ever had a chance of keeping up with my best friend. I will acknowledge that that is thanks to you."

Kane's eyes flashed with defiance. "That is the one and only good thing you've ever done for me. But it's not enough enough for me to start cozying up to you as your son. I still hate you, asshole."

He turned around, leaving the cave without getting so much as a twitch from Sage Damian.

Yet, even as he left, the smallest of smiles cracked at the edge of Sage Damian's mouth.

Chapter 1538: Artifical Triggers

1538 Artifical Triggers

"...And since then, I've been fighting. In missions, operations, and commissions...But I haven't felt my Martial Heart awaken ever since then," Kane sighed, sitting opposite Rui as they enjoyed a cup of tea while Kane narrated his visit to the Arrancar Household to Rui, keeping a few embarrassing details from him.

Rui found his tale to be fascinating, especially the part of how he apparently had gained a massive advantage due to his prolonged youth. It made sense in hindsight, something he should have figured out. Thankfully, he would benefit from it nonetheless.

Regardless, he put that matter aside for the time being.

His friend needed his help, after all.

"I don't know what to do, at this point," Kane sighed.

Rui had thought that there wasn't too much to be lost by breaking through a few years later than earlier, but apparently, he was wrong. Kane was twenty-eight, just like himself. The later he broke through, the less of his prime he would be able to maintain.

There was almost nothing anybody else could do, this was a hurdle that ordinarily only the Martial Artist themselves had to face and overcome.

Unless, of course, they were also friends with Rui Quarrier.

Rui had not forgotten the fact that he triggered Senior Frinjschia's Martial Heart by threatening to break their path, inadvertently discovering a way to trigger the Martial Heart.

The way Rui went about it was not by challenging their Martial drive. What Rui did was threaten to destroy the means by which they would fulfill their Martial drive.

People pursued power for a variety of reasons. Many people pursued power for the sake of power itself. Many pursued it for wealth, prestige, influence, glory, and a variety of other reasons.

However, the power that they obtained was undoubtedly their only path to fulfilling these various Martial drives.

So what if something threatened to cripple that very power itself?

What if someone threatened to destroy the power that they had cultivated to fulfill their Martial Path?

Without that power that they had cultivated, they would not be able to fulfill their Martial drive. Thus crippling their cultivated power was the same as crippling their Martial drive. To someone who pursued wealth through their Martial power, crippling their Martial power was no different from crippling their wealth. The same was true for every desire that served as a Martial drive, all of those desires were threatened by the destruction of the Martial Path.

This was effectively identical to threatening the Martial drive, the same kind of threat that triggered the Martial Heart.

Thus, Rui had essentially discovered a way to trigger the Martial Heart by threatening the Martial Path that served to fulfill the Martial drive.

He had never so much as breathed a word about this to anybody else. Not even Senior Xanarn or Kane. It was just too revolutionary. The fact that four Martial Masters already knew about it was a headache, the fact that one of those four was downright hostile to him was an even bigger headache.

He did not need more trouble.

Yet, now that he was faced with Kane, he couldn't help it.

"Kane..." Rui drew his attention. "Let's change places. I have something to tell you."

"Ok..." Kane frowned, wondering where this was going.

"The Mantian Forest...no, that won't work," Rui murmured. "We'll have to leave the country. I don't feel safe even uttering it within the Kandrian Empire. Far too many powerful Martial Artists with powerful senses."

Kane had no idea where Rui was going with this, but he followed suit. To Martial Artists, traveling over such great distances was something that was not that big a deal, given their speed.

They quickly traveled across the nation, exiting it after passing through the transit port. It was only after Rui took him to the very top of a tall mountain in a surrounding forest, scanning the entire place for an hour with his senses did he feel confident enough to divulge the secret.

"I can trigger the breakthrough to the Senior Realm," Rui whispered as low as he could.

"What?!" Kane's eyes widened with shock.

"I'm serious," Rui reassured him. "I can do it."

"..."

Kane knew that his friend's capabilities and growth were beyond exceptional, but what he was suggesting was revolutionary.

He wasn't even the most informed person, yet even he could predict what would happen if the world learned about this.

All hell would break loose.

Pretty much every Squire-level or Senior-level force and above had some number of Martial Squires who were considered grade-ten or close. If these forces gained the ability to trigger breakthroughs, then they would gain several more Martial Seniors instantly.

On a continental scale...tens of thousands of Martial Seniors would be born very rapidly!

That was a titanic amount of power. A single Martial Senior was more valuable than a strategic inter-continental missile and a nuclear bomb rolled up into one. Ten thousand of them could trigger apocalypses.

It was game-changing. The Martial community at large would do everything in its power to gain this ability while individual organizations and nations would go to war not only to possess this ability but also to attack any entity that did come to possess this ability.

He felt a shiver climbing up his spine as he stared at Rui in disbelief.

"...But there are risks," Rui added. "If you're not ready. If your Martial drive isn't strong enough, then you'll be unable to trigger your Martial Heart. In turn, your Martial Path will either be cripple permanently or damaged at the bare minimum depending on how early I notice the failure. It will leave a deep psychological scar on you that may very well be there forever."

Those words broke Kane out of his reverie. Of course, it would make sense if there were some downsides. Even natural and normal breakthroughs to the Senior Realm were associated with the risk of death.

One was pushed past their limits, if they didn't activate their Martial Heart, then they would probably die in most cases.

Chapter 1539: Friends

1539 Friends

Kane felt chills when Rui described the risks. The breaking of his Martial Path? He couldn't even begin to imagine how horrifying that would be. It sounded like a fate worse than death.

Martial Artists were prepared for death. The risk of death was part of the job description. What they weren't prepared for was being permanently crippled from even wielding their Martial Path.

That, to most Martial Artists, was a fate worse than death.

The power that they had cultivated was the most important thing to most Martial Artists. It was born out of years, decades, and even centuries of hard work. The very idea of that power being stripped away was highly disturbing to say the least.

Kane heaved a sigh.

"Think about it," Rui remarked. "Don't feel pressured to accept immediately as proof of your determination or something. The fact of the matter is that risking the very root of your Martial Path is an extraordinary risk to take for anything, even if it is the power of the higher Realm. It's not an easy thing to decide upon. Think it over and then let me know."

Kane nodded, deep in thought. The two of them returned to the Kandrian Empire as quickly as they had left. Kane, expectedly, wasn't in the mood to chat. His eyes swam around in thought as he considered Rui's offer deeply.

Rui, too, did not want to distract him from what would probably end up being the most important decision of his life. Although he would love to express the story of his time apart from Kane, it wasn't nearly as important and could wait until Kane was no longer preoccupied.

"Don't sweat it, and remember; there is no wrong decision from where you stand at the moment," Rui advised Kane as the two of them bade each other farewell, parting ways. Rui wanted to give him enough free space to think about it without humoring him.

That gave Rui plenty of free time. Naturally, he returned to the orphanage to spend some more time with his loved ones, while pondering about what else he ought to have scratched off his list.

'I ought to meet up with my other friends.' Rui smiled as he recalled the memory of the times he spent with Fae, Nel, Hever, Dalen, and Milliana. Although he hadn't been with them in a long time, he never once stopped considering them his friends.

He spent the rest of the day reaching out to all of them. Thankfully, all of them happened to be within the Kandrian Empire at the time, fulfilling some domestic commissions. It took a few days, but Rui was finally able to organize a rendezvous with all of his friends.

At a spot in the town of Hajin, six people had gathered at a spot, waiting for the seventh.

They spotted him in the sky.

"That's him," Fae murmured with a composed yet delightful smile.

In the past eight years, she had fully matured as a woman. Her beauty conveyed a sense of calm maturity in place of the youth that used to characterize it. She had a more serious and solemn demeanor compared to when she had been in the academy.

Unlike Kane, she loved the Dullahan Family, embracing her role as the heir of the Martial Family. She had worked hard in the past eight years. While her progress wasn't nearly as impressive as Kane's or Rui's, she had progressed much faster than most Martial Squires, becoming a grade-six Martial Squire in less than ten years.

"He looks...different. He's taller." Fiona murmured with an expression of curiosity as she eyed Rui sky-walking down. "He has a heavier presence than before."

Unlike Fae, Fiona's physical stature had not changed all too much since when she was in the academy. She retained her diminutive stature, much to her dismay. Her temperament had remained unchanged in the past eight years. The glint of curiosity that flashed her in eyes had remained unchanged.

"He looks way stronger than before!" Nel's grin spread wide and far as he felt his heart beating harder.

He could tell.

He could tell that Rui had grown incredibly powerful. In the past eight years, he had honed his body and instincts to an incredible degree, becoming a high-grade Martial Squire. His instincts told him that Rui was not only incredibly strong but also stronger than him.

Yet that didn't discourage him.

No, that only made him more excited.

"Do not even think about doing something as outrageous as attacking a friend we haven't seen in many years," A calm and composed voice advised Nel.

Hever's impression had remained unchanged in the past eight years, unlike his appearance. He fashioned a thick beard that covered the lower half of his face, adding a lot of masculinity to his appearance.

"It's surreal seeing him after all this time," Dalen smiled, earning a silent nod from Milliana. The two of them stood side by side, holding intertwined hands. If one looked at Milliana closely, one would observe that her belly seemed inflated, ever so round.

Rui gently landed near them after he slowly descended from the sky. Too many people meant that he couldn't move at high speeds, the very shockwaves from his speed could kill a lot of people.

"You guys..." Rui murmured as he grinned. "It's been a long long time. How have you all been doing?"

His words sparked a sequence of greetings as each of them reunited with him for the first time in many years.

"You've grown up," Fae murmured.

"Definitely," Fiona nodded, having last seen him since before even before his long-term mission away to Vilun Island.

"LET'S FIGHT!" Nel roared, rushing in with a swift attack.

An incredibly irresponsible thing to do in a crowd.

And yet...

CLASP

Nel's eyes widened as Rui effortlessly curbed his attack on the spot. His power and momentum had disappeared magically, almost as if Rui annulled it with but a touch.

"Let's take things slow, shall we?" Rui heaved a sigh of exasperated amusement.

Chapter 1540: Revelation

1540 Revelation

"Wow...!" Nel murmured with amazement.

"You can't do that when we're surrounded by people!" Fiona chided. "Do you want to be penalized with reckless negligence by the Martial Union?!"

Nel was not even listening. He simply stared at Rui with sharp eyes, trying to gauge his power before a shocking realization dawned on him.

"You..." His eyes widened, stunned.

Rui smirked, aware of his thoughts, turning to Hever studying him. "Wow, you feel even more like a mountain than you did before. Looks like you've made solid progress in your Martial Path."

"I can say the same to you, can I not?" Hever smiled knowingly, shaking his hand. He too had made the same realization that Nel had.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Rui smiled, turning to Dalen and Milliana with a particularly interested look. He had already realized the truth, but he went to confirm it nonetheless.

"You too..."

"We got married two years ago, and now we're expecting our first child in half a year," Dalen smiled as Milliana was content nodding.

His demeanor was a lot looser and more relaxed than Rui recalled, as if he had found a sense of inner peace. Milliana had changed even more, obviously due to the fact that she was pregnant, but her normally blank neutral temperament seemed to have gained more femininity.

Rui could tell that Dalen was a grade-three Martial Squire, while Milliana was only a high-grade Martial Apprentice.

The two of them were a good representation of the progress of normal Martial Artists. Kane and Fiona were generational prodigies, Nel was a generational physical freak who had a few screws loose, while Fae and Hever were highly talented and even more driven.

Dalen, on the other hand, was much more normal, having made modest progress over greater time. The same could be said for Milliana. Rui's progress was so different and distant from them that they may as well have been different species.

Yet Rui didn't feel a sense of superiority, especially when his sharp senses could pick up on their non-verbal communication and demeanor. He could sense how content and satisfied they were with each other. They would probably go on to raise a large family of Martial Artists and live a good life with each other.

His conversation with Xanarn had happened too recently for him to not feel envious in that regard.

"I see..." Rui smiled. "I'm happy for you guys. I'm sad that I missed the marriage, but a belated congratulations nonetheless."

It wasn't long before the seven of them took a spot in a nearby cafe, ordering some beverages.

"You..." Nel started off. "You're a Martial Senior now, aren't you?"

"Yes." Rui didn't deny the truth.

He was accustomed to at least tempering his aura, making it harder to pinpoint his level of power, but Nel and Hever had managed to sense that he was in a higher Realm of power than them.

Fae, Fiona, Dalen, and Milliana on the other hand were shaken, stunned by this revelation.

"What?!" Fae exclaimed, shocked. "You're not even thirty!"

Fiona simply stared at him with utter bewilderment and shock. She was particularly personally impacted by this revelation, considering that the two of them used to be the peak of Martial Apprentices back in the day.

She knew that her progress as a Martial Squire was humble. Unfortunately, drive mattered far more than talent did the higher the Realm one was in. She was unable to surf through the Squire Realm the way she had in the Apprentice Realm.

Still, she hadn't thought that she was too far behind, perhaps several grades at most, but still within the same Realm of power.

Reality had hit her like a boulder.

What she didn't know was that Rui had already made more progress in the Senior Realm than she had in the Squire Realm.

"You...are a Martial Senior?" She stammered weakly. "Really?"

Rui smiled wryly, before undoing the Mind Mask he had on, unveiling his power.

A wave of pressure pushed down on each of them. The five Martial Squires felt extremely uncomfortable under the mountain of pressure that Rui unleashed for merely a moment before he sealed it once more.

Milliana had physically winced under the pressure, and considering her delicate condition, he did not dare go too far.

"Sorry about that," He commented. "But, there you go. Get it out of your systems."

The six of them were shocked. They had realized the sheer magnitude of this revelation. Although this knowledge was not common, all Martial Artists knew the youngest ages of breakthroughs in each Realm. This was common knowledge within the community and industry.

Each of them had come to realize the sheer significance of Rui being a Martial Senior at the age of thirty.

He was undoubtedly the youngest Martial Senior in existence.

"Hehehe..." Nel grinned being the first one to break out of his reverie. "Now we definitely need to fight!"

"Later," Rui waved him away.

"My...this news is going to send ripples across the Kandrian Empire..." Fae murmured. "Congratulations on your breakthrough to the Senior Realm. I must commend you for accomplishing this incredible achievement."

She smiled. "If one had told me that that kid I pummeled in the entrance exam would go on to become the youngest Martial Senior in history, I would not have believed them."

"Yeah, I don't know if I would have believed it back then either," Rui chuckled as her words dug up a distant memory.

Fiona struggled to muster up any words even while the others congratulated him heartily after shaking off their shock. "Truly unbelievable. Congratulations."

She felt particularly inadequate after hearing this accomplishment. In the time that they had been apart, Rui had gone leaps and bounds beyond her while she had taken steps, at most.

She didn't particularly want to become a hardcore Martial Artist, but knowing that she had the potential to accomplish such feats, and hadn't, made her feel like she was making poor use of her talent and potential.