

Martial Unity 1221

Chapter 1221: Begun

Thanks to his authority, they were able to speed past all the protocols that were in place for those who were entering the country. It wasn't even five minutes later when they emerged on the other side, finally stepping into the nation with a group of helpers tending to their every need.

Rui, on the other hand, took in the Virodha Theocracy.

('They sure love their large and tall architecture.') Rui mused.

Yet this was different from the large and tall architecture of first-world countries back on Earth. The skyscraper architecture of Earth was designed to maximize the efficiency of the utility of volume and space in an ever-growing population and economy.

The giant and tall architectural structure of the Virodha Theocracy, on the other hand, did not seem to care about efficiency and standardization. They were large and tall simply because large and tall art was better than smaller and short artistic architecture.

Buildings had intricate and three-dimensional art chiseled into them, pictorially representing stories, or conveying things that Rui recognized to be specific sections or portions of the Virodhaveda, the holy book of the Virodhabhasa Faith.

He did have to admit, it was certainly beautiful. He couldn't comment on its functionality, its ROI, or its utility of any sort. But, at the very least, it was beautiful and gave the entirety of the port town he was in an otherworldly luster.

It was as though he had stepped into a fantasy civilization.

This was especially the case because of the martial Festival that was in full rage at the moment across the entirety of the Virodhabhasa Faith.

This most certainly included the Virodha Theocracy, especially because the Martial Contest would soon be held in here.

Not only was there an absurd amount of decorative art that colored the already lustrous town but there was an incredible energy among the dense and bustling population around them.

"We will have to part ways here," Master Deivon turned towards him. "I have important matters and duties to attend to. I have arranged for an official guide and manager who will handle all troublesome affairs for you. For now, you may settle down in the hotel room that you have been assigned to. You may tour the town and the nation if you wish, but you will be escorted by guards at all times. Make sure you don't consume any alcohol or other intoxicating substances of any kind if you do decide to tour the place."

Master Deivon gestured to a fancy carriage that had arrived before them, a man in crisp business attire bowed toward both of them. He looked out of place in the religious setting they were in.

"If you need anything from me, you can send a message to me through him. We'll meet again for the ceremony and the banquet. Good-bye."

Master Deivon disappeared as though he teleported. Yet the faint, but rapid wind gusts that he generated indicated that he had used a Master-level maneuvering or supplementary technique. Yet it was so fast that it looked like nothing short of teleportation even to Rui's impressive senses.

"Contestant Falken," The man bowed to him. "I am assigned to be your guide and manager, I will endeavor to handle any and all problems and issues that you might face. This includes protocols in regards to the contest, rights, and freedoms that you will be guaranteed within the Theocracy, and guidelines for your time here in this state."

Rui nodded. "I appreciate that. I haven't had the time to equip myself with all the knowledge needed to navigate my time here prudently, so I will be relying on you. Master Deivon mentioned something about a hotel, will we be going there first?"

"Indeed, after that, we will introduce you to your assigned training chambers and other facilities that you have been given unlimited access to." The man mentioned.

"I'm looking forward to it," Rui nodded.

Thankfully, he didn't have to waste time with any annoyingly long tours over long distances. The establishment that he was going to be residing in included all the facilities that he would need, from housing quarters to food, training facilities, medical aid, and even entertainment facilities.

It was a giant complex that was meant to house all the contestants across all three Martial Contests of the three Lower Realms.

He narrowed his eyes once they entered. His powerful senses immediately detected innumerable powerful Martial Squires across the entirety of the establishment. Powerful Martial Apprentices, Squires, and Seniors all appeared to be at the peak of their respective Realms.

The overall quality of Martial Artists was leagues superior to the preliminary contests of the Seonmun Church town.

He wasn't surprised, of course. Each of them was a winner who had overcome many obstacles to reach this point.

The thousand Martial Squire contestants were undoubtedly among the strongest Martial Squires ever. While they perhaps were not one-to-one the strongest Martial Squires in humanity at the moment, since there were other truly strong Martial Squires like Tokugawa Ieyasu or Kane who were not participating.

('I wonder why he isn't participating in this contest,') Rui wondered. He had implied he had been looking for a truly powerful opponent. In that case, wouldn't it make more sense to look for it in a contest like this as opposed to sitting aloof atop a floating island?

He shrugged, he wasn't sure. Regardless, it didn't matter.

He wondered if putting them all in the same spot was just a matter of convenience, or whether there was something more to it, for when he walked into the luxurious restaurant for a meal, he instantly drew the attention of various Martial Artists.

The contest had already begun.

Unless the organizers were incompetent, they would have to know that putting the contestants in such close proximity could allow them to gain intelligence on their competitors well ahead of time, allowing preparation to become a small mild factor. The fact that this arrangement still persisted despite them knowing that meant that it was tacitly approved by the organizers.

Chapter 1222: Elder

A similar circumstance had occurred in the preliminary contest, where he was grouped with his competitors ahead of time in a single big room.

For some reason, he had a feeling that the organizers just liked drama.

Regardless, he did not intend to indulge in drama.

He simply ignored all of them before heading grabbing himself a quick meal from the luxurious buffet that had been arranged for all of the contestants.

While he did not bother making eye contact with any of the contestants, but inwardly had already begun monitoring them with his senses.

That was true for most of them, with their senses, they did not need to make any overt gestures indicating surveillance. At their level, most of them had pretty decent sensory techniques. Furthermore, the Martial body possessed inherently powerful senses to start off with.

Rui possessed particularly powerful sensory capabilities with his many sensory techniques, even a grade-ten technique, and he intended to put them to good use.

The most important sense that he had at the moment was his Primordial Instinct which allowed him to get a good gauge of the power levels of his opponents.

He had long applied a Mind Mask to his true power, just like he had during the preliminary contest. The difference, however, was how much he lowered his strength. Back then he had nerfed his aura to that of a grade-eight Martial Squire, but that was too low here. He would actually draw attention for being that weak.

Instead, he reduced himself to a grade-ten Martial Squire. That was just strong enough that he would blend in without drawing too much attention.

In the meantime, he had already begun conducting scans on all of them. The average level of the Martial Squires was so high that he long realized that he could not be as carefree as he was in the preliminary contest after unveiling his strength.

In the preliminary contest, he knew he would be fine no matter what once the initial phase had passed. He was simply too strong, and he had correctly estimated that not even the three grade-ten Martial Squires together would be able to overcome him.

However, that was not the case here.

There wasn't just one, two, or even three grade-ten Martial Squires.

There were hundreds!

It was truly an eye-opening circumstance. Although he had expected this to be the case, it was actually another thing experiencing the sensation of being in a room with so many powerful grade-ten Martial Squires. It was an unprecedented experience for him.

He had been in places where the quality or quantity of Martial Squires exceeded the norm before. Vilun Island had an abnormally high Martial Artist breakthrough rate from normal humans due to how war-obsessed and martial their culture was.

The Shionel Confederation became the gathering haven for more than ten thousand Martial Squires at its peak, each of them partaking in the intense competition for the treasures found within the dungeon.

Even after he left the Shionel Confederation, he ran into places that attracted lots of powerful Martial Squires to them such as the Umiana Trench and Ajanta Island.

However, none of them compared to the quality of the warriors that the main Martial Contest of the Virodhabhasa Faith attracted. The weakest Martial Squire that he could detect was a particularly powerful grade-nine Martial Squire. That was the floor of the contest; a Martial Squire who could easily waltz into the first class of guardians of the Floating Sect.

Even if he was stronger than many of them, he needed to be careful, because if they identified as a threat, he would not be able to overcome the numbers that they had.

He had managed to pull a victory against three grade-ten Martial Squires. But if he had faced four, or five, it probably would have been game over. Not even he could guarantee victory under such dire odds. That was why he was inclined to take prudent measures to hide his strength to ensure he didn't draw extra attention.

('Extra attention unlike that old woman,') Rui spotted an elder lady with long flowing white hair and wrinkled skin.

She looked like an ordinary grandma, if not for the ever-flowing sense of peril she emanated. It appeared that the other contestants shared his opinion as they eyed her warily. She was definitely in the upper echelons of the tenth grade, for sure. He could instantly tell that she was stronger than any of the three grade-ten Martial Squires he faced in the preliminary contest.

He could also tell that her power came from the sheer amount of experience that she had as a Martial Artist, and as a Martial Squire particularly. He definitely admired her persisting for many decades, but couldn't help but wonder how someone like her hadn't become a Martial Senior yet.

Of course, the conditions for becoming a Martial Senior were difficult. Just the individuality aspect was quite challenging. Rui had become uniquely aware that he was far from the norm when most of the Martial Squire contestants were middle-aged men and women at the youngest. Many had salt and peppered hair that clearly indicated that they were not in their youth anymore.

Forming enough individuality to reach the Martial heart was an incredibly difficult process for an overwhelming majority of Martial Squires. One could go their entire life trying to reach it, and simply

never would. There was a reason that only ten percent of Martial Squires discovered their Martial Hearts.

It appeared that this granny was not among them. Yet despite that, one glance into her eyes told him that she was not resigned to her fate despite her age.

That was something that earned his respect and admiration. He hoped that his fortitude would match hers if he ever ended up at her age stuck at a bottleneck that he had failed to overcome in many years.

She wasn't the only Martial Squire that drew his attention, the entire contest was filled with warriors that were monsters in their own right.

Chapter 1223: Scouting

There were several Martial Squires that were particularly stronger than even the other grade-ten Martial Squires, Rui could tell that even as they were trying not to stand out, they could not hide their threat level the way that he did.

The grandma that he was watching turned, glancing at him.

('Oh? She noticed my attention?') Rui mused as he ignored her.

It was quite remarkable that she had managed to catch him focusing on her when he was merely using his senses and not even looking in her direction. She had a remarkably sharp intuition if that really was the case.

Rui had to give credit where credit was due; the Martial Contest indeed lived up to the hype in general. The many people who were certainly going to be paying exorbitant prices were not going to be disappointed. Rui didn't even need to do that much, the show was going to be hyped with or without him.

He quickly finished his meal before leaving the restaurant. He had already seen everything he could. He momentarily considered going to the training area so that he could start building predictive models on his opponents ahead of time, but ultimately shook his head.

He didn't need to, and he didn't want to develop a mindset where he was constantly dependent on such measures to win. He had abstained from doing so last match and had won quite dominantly nonetheless.

When he returned to his room, he found a guide in the room that described all the events that would be occurring during the Martial Contest, and during his stay in the Virdoha Theocracy. Today was merely considered a bit of a rest day as every Martial Squire traveled from across the entirety of the continent in order to partake in the Martial Contest. Because of the vastly varying distance differences, they arrived at different times, and an entire day was necessary to adjust them all.

The next day was the opening ceremony as well as the banquet.

Rui frowned. ('An entire day dedicated toward just those events? Meh.')

Rui hated ceremonies, and he generally disliked banquets. The banquet in particular did not seem alluring to him especially given that he was on the run and did not want to allow people to get too much of a close-up view of him. But alas, he owed Master Deivon this, so he would just have to put trust in the super high-grade mask that he had procured for Rui specifically for the sake of protecting his identity.

The next day twenty-four hours after that would be fully dedicated to the Martial Contest.

The first three rounds would be held in rapid progression, and the tournament would be held immediately after the first three rounds once the final eight contestants were decided. Rui knew that passing the first two stages was the bare minimum for him for the conversation of Senior Xanarn's medical treatment being in question. The first two rounds filtered out barring the final forty Martial Contestants from whom only eight would be selected.

However, he did not intend to stop there. He intended to win the entire Martial Contest.

The tournament would, of course, decide the victory of the entire Martial Contest.

That should have been the end, however, when Rui flipped to the next page, he realized that there was more.

('...A second banquet?! Come on!') Rui groaned. He highly doubted that Martial Deivon would allow him to skip that either. It was highly unlikely, especially if he won the tournament as he intended to.

However, he could understand the purpose of the banquet. Given that many of the guests were people who were interested in procuring powerful Martial Art services etc., he could definitely be sure that the second banquet merely served as a way to connect the contestants and those who were interested in procuring their services.

The Martial Contest was essentially a talent show for a lot of people that displayed lots of talents across the entire continent. There was always a little clash between people when it came to gaining the favor of the particularly powerful or talented ones. He had a sneaking suspicion that he would be forced to deal with lots of annoying businessmen, representatives of states, ambassadors, leaders of powerful families, and a bunch of other powerful and influential people who had vested interests in taking the initiative to contact and buy out powerful Martial Squires.

It wasn't that the Martial Squires themselves were extremely valuable, or at the very least that wasn't entirely the case. Half of the reason that many of these dignitaries would be fighting over earning the services, commitment, and loyalty of people would be because each of these Martial Squires was potentially a Martial Senior in the making.

It was usually too late, or at the very least, extremely difficult to purchase the commitment and loyalty of Martial Artists after they broke through to the Senior Realm. Most groups, states, and organizations would do everything in their power to reel in new Martial Seniors that broke through recently.

It was much easier to find Martial Squires who had a chance of becoming Martial Seniors and reel them in when they were still Martial Squires. Once they broke through, they would have already been firmly within the organization that bet on them. As long as the organization did their best to pull them deeper in their grasp with contracts, or simple generosity with helping them stronger, the Martial Squire would remain with them even after they became a Martial Senior.

That was why he knew that he wasn't going to have a simple time if he won. People could tell that he was on the younger side even if he hid his face. That would mean that he won despite his youth against monsters of the Squire Realm that had spent multiple years in it, training for this very event!

That would absolutely draw massive attention from many of the guests who had the opportunity to interact with the contestants.

Chapter 1224: Ready

('That's not all.') Rui mused. ('I'll probably be approached outside the Martial Contest as well.')

Not everybody was on good terms with the Virodhabhasa Faith. Certainly, not everybody was a partner or a benefactor of the religion. There were those who sought to scout Martial Squires who weren't going to be part of the banquet. They would certainly try to approach Rui outside of the banquet.

Of course, he highly doubted that they would dare try using unsavory means to establish contact with him within the Virodha Theocracy given that he was a treasured contestant of the Martial Contest and the Martial Festival.

In that case, he would still have to be more careful since these people were less willing to play by certain unspoken rules and guidelines that the others who were partaking in the banquet would.

Regardless of what they did though, Rui already knew what he needed to do.

('Polite non-committance.')

He definitely could not agree to anything, but it probably wasn't wise to outright refuse them. They would probably offer means to communicate with them if he said he would consider whatever lucrative deal they were trying to get him to agree to. All he needed to do was make sure he didn't piss anybody off. That was definitely something worth striving to avoid, but aside from that, he had not intention of accepting any of their offers.

Once he returned to the Martial Union as a Martial Senior, hopefully, he would have everything he needed. The powerful organization did not lose even when compared to international powerhouses across the entire continent, and he probably didn't need anything else except it.

Regardless, everything was set, and he knew what he needed to do in order to get what he wanted to get. He spent the rest of his day simply wandering around, trying to make himself grounded and composed.

He even trained, but it wasn't to grow stronger. It was just that the discipline behind his routine helped him focus and enter a state of concentration very easily.

He also spent some time lightly traveling around the Virodha Theocracy. It was a pleasure to subject himself to the beauty of the place, especially since he knew he probably wasn't going to be back here for a long time.

Eventually, enough time passed and the next day arrived. It was time for the event to begin. The opening ceremony was soon to commence. Rui was content wearing his regular Martial Art attire, but apparently, the organizers had a different idea.

"...Really?" Rui raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, sir," His guide and manager bowed. "You may wear whatever Marital Art attire you please for the Martial Contest, however, the opening ceremony is an important ceremony, and you will be expected to wear dignified attire worthy of the event. You will also need to be groomed appropriately."

Rui sighed, before him was a group of women who were equipped with all kinds of tools that he had no understanding of. "Alright, let's get this over with. I'm not taking my mask off for even half a second, I'm letting you know that now."

The mask took care of his face, keeping it clean despite it never being taken off his face. It was equipped with esoteric substances that drained sweat while exfoliating his skin and ensuring that it was clean, furthermore, it made sure that his skin tone did not lighten and matched that of the rest of his body. It was quite a handy mask.

"Do not fret sir, they have been trained to deal with Martial Artists that do not wish to disclose their appearance as you do. They will work around this limitation."

Rui sighed. The three women escorted him to a bath where they began to brush and rub at him like he was a dirty statue that needed to be restored to its sparkling clean state. Rui did not enjoy even a bit of that, or the fashion part of their grooming session where they took measurements of his body before procuring a fancy ostentatious Martial Art attire with a symbol of the Seonmun town on it, signifying that he was in fact the champion of the Seonmun town.

He had to admit, the end result was pretty good. Violating as they were, the women knew what they were doing. He probably looked better than he ever had in his entire life.

It wasn't long before he found Master Deivon at his doorstep, waiting for him.

"Good, you look fine," Master Deivon nodded.

He too looked particularly well-groomed with an especially ostentatious attire that made him look especially important.

"Was this really necessary?" Rui grumbled. "We're Martial Artists, not fashion models."

"The opening ceremony is an important and significant ceremony. The image that it presents will affect the image of the Virodhabhasa Faith, and the Virodha Theocracy. If we allow you Martial Squires to wear your worn out, torn, and patched up Martial Art attire during this ceremony, it will reflect badly on us."

"I don't have to wear this during the actual Martial Contest, correct?"

"Correct, you will be provided high-quality custom-fitted Martial Art attire of any style and sort of your choosing so long as it doesn't involve working parts that aid in combat."

"I'll take you up on that,"

Master Deivon immediately took to the air once they walked out. "Come, we don't need to use carriages to get there, and I personally prefer traveling by myself rather than a carriage."

"I thought it was at the center of the nation." Rui raised an eyebrow.

"We'll be fine unless you're especially slow for a Martial Squire," Master Deivon burst forward, forcing Rui to exert himself to keep up.

It wasn't long before they reached the site for the opening ceremony. Instantly, they drew many eyes to them as they landed in the large colosseum. Thankfully, Rui still had his Mind Mask on so he did not draw any special attention from the contestants. Master Deivon, on the other hand, drew attention from the Martial Masters around.

Chapter 1225: Sage

There were plenty of Martial Squires, each wearing ostentatious Martial Art attire. Some of them were accompanied by Martial Artists of the Senior or the Master Realm.

"Deivon," One Martial Master addressed him the moment he arrived. "I'd heard that you actually chose to patron a contestant this year. It appears that that was not false."

She appeared to be even older than he was.

"Ria," Master Deivon replied back to her.

She turned her attention to Rui for a brief moment, before her eyebrows furrowed as she frowned.

"He..."

She turned to him with a concerned expression, Master Deivon in turn had a smug knowing smile.

This little interaction with Rui confirmed that Martial Masters had the ability to gain deeper insight into people. He was quite sure that it didn't operate on the same principles that he operated on when it came to gathering insights into people. A systematic way of gathering and processing data to gain even more data on them.

It appeared that they had some form of sixth sense that allowed them to peer deep into others. Based on her non-verbal communication, Rui could see that the two of them were able to gain insights into him that they shouldn't have been able to.

This was the same kind of thing he experienced with Headmaster Aronian as well.

He didn't think that they could explicitly gain information about his Martial Art or Path. It was quite clear that Master Deivon had been surprised by Rui's performance in the preliminary contest.

"Looks like you're serious this time," She mentioned with narrowed eyes.

"Heh," Master Deivon grinned. "You better hope you've found the best contestant to patron."

Rui wished he wouldn't draw attention to them, but it would be rude to interrupt their conversation and chastise him too.

Although Master Deivon was remarkably grounded in his ego, it would still affect his honor if he got talked back to by a Martial Squire that he was patroning.

Rui looked around as he noticed several Martial Masters glancing at him warily. This made him extremely uncomfortable due to how much stronger they were. He could feel that each one of them was extremely powerful and could erase him with a simple gesture. It made his hair stand on edge being the object of their attention.

Thankfully Master Deivon stood by, reassuring him, the protective strength of the man was certainly quite comforting. He shot a sharp glare at all the other Martial Masters, who promptly heeded the unspoken warning.

"Hmph, don't mind them," He grumbled. "They're just jealous because they realize that they can't beat me in our little contest."

Rui smiled wryly under his mask. "And here I thought my Mind Mask technique would be enough."

"That technique is not bad," Master Deivon remarked. "But it ordinarily is only opaque to people in the same Realm. In your case, it can fool even Martial Seniors for some reason. Your imaginative power is so great that any mental image you conjure can fool Martial Artists even a Realm above you."

Master Deivon turned to him with a look of interest in his eyes. "But it's not effective against me, or my peers."

"...Damn. So you all can sense how strong I actually am?"

"We can do more than that," Master Deivon smiled with a half-smug, half-wry smile.

"...I did not anticipate Masters to have such powerful insight. It was a slight miscalculation, I shall be much more wary next time I approach one in the future."

"Hahaha!" Master Deivon laughed out loud at that. "Fear not, you have me. I may not be the most powerful or influential Master around, but I can hold my ground well against any of them."

"That's reassuring to hear," Rui replied. However, he didn't miss the subtext in the man's words. It appeared that the man already considered his relationship with Rui not to be a temporary one once the Martial Contest.

It appeared that he was already intent on investing in Rui regardless of the outcome of the Martial Contest. Rui did not blame him for this at all, in fact, it made sense.

Rui knew his value, especially as he was right now.

"It's starting," Master Deivon gestured, his expression growing severe, as a procession of guards took their place on the podium at the center of the colosseum.

Suddenly, everything changed.

It happened faster than Rui could even fathom, but the very world around him shifted!

The air grew immensely thick. The atmosphere froze in its place. The land rumbled beneath his feet.

Every hair on his body stood on edge. His skin shivered as chills crawled up through it. He broke out in a cold sweat as he sensed a level of power that he had never ever sensed in the entirety of his life!

"Please welcome, Her Excellency Honorable Cardinal Sage Sariawar."

Rui's eyes widened as a single figure descended from the sky.

His jaw dropped as he beheld her figure. It was as though the very sky was gently lowering her from the heavens above, prostrating in the process.

A Martial Sage.

This was the very first time in his entire life that he had actually beheld the presence of a Martial Sage.

Unlike everybody else in the colosseum, her clothes were not ostentatious. She wore a simple single cotton cloth that wrapped across her entire body.

She didn't need extravagant attire.

The aura that she released was more than anything fashion could ever hope to match. It was as though her body was glowing like she was of heavenly origin. Her very aura seemed to bend the the sky and the earth.

Instinctively, Rui bowed.

He didn't even think.

No, that wasn't quite right.

He couldn't even think about it. He didn't have the opportunity to!

By the time he realized it, his instincts already prostrated his body, offering respect to a being that was just one Realm below Transcendence.

"Ah..." She murmured, glancing down at all those who bowed. "Rise."

The world obeyed her command.

Chapter 1226: Pursue

Rui immediately got up, beholding her form once again.

He couldn't help but almost feel that she was out of place in this very world. It was as though she was just one step away from breaking out of it.

Power beyond his wildest fathoming radiated from within her being, power that put to shame anything else he had ever sensed in the past. He couldn't even understand how a single being could possess so much individual power. It was though the very world was broken to allow an individual to ascend to such heights.

The Upper Realms in general seemed extremely inscrutable to him. Where was all this power coming from? He got the feeling that the Squire and the Senior Realms were a lot more transparent and easier to understand.

Regardless, he was unable to gain any insight into her power, her Martial Art or Path, or even the nature of her being.

"Today we commence the seventy-second Virodhabhasa Martial Contest," She spoke.

Her voice radiated beyond the medium of air, almost as if it wormed its way into everybody's heart. Almost as if the very information that she conveyed with every word engraved itself into his mind, unwilling to ever let itself be forgotten.

"Today, we commence the seventy-second attempt to scour our very world in hopes of finding the object of our worship and devotion," She spoke with a greater hint of severity. "Today we commence the seventy-second avenue of opportunity for the leaders of the Martial World of tomorrow to shine and show the world the very essence of who they are."

Her eyes went over each of the one thousand contestants briefly. "Today is your day. The entire world is watching. The power, the valor, the conviction, the heart that you show today will be engraved in history forever."

She paused, letting the contestants absorb her message.

They couldn't help but grow more severe.

"Bare yourselves," She instructed. "The path forward is one of great tribulation. Give everything you have; your body, heart, mind, and soul. Throw all of it out for the sake of moving forward, and you just may very well do so. The Martial Path we tread is one bestowed upon us by His Divinity himself, yet he demands sacrifice, and the investment of the entirety of one's self to the Path. The true winner is not the one that ends up with the cup in their hands, a medal around their neck, and the title of the strongest. The true winner is the one that used the pursuit of those to squeeze their potential to take even one more step down their Martial Path."

Her message made the Martial Squires reconsider their priorities.

Each of them had partaken in the Martial Contest to win the event itself. There was much to be obtained through victory. Capital, support, aid of all sorts, wealth, political power, and influence. It could easily set up one's life forever.

While some did consider the benefits of challenging themselves against the strongest of the strongest in general, very few considered that this aspect may very well be the most important part of the Martial Contest.

Rui too couldn't help but think about the driving force behind his action. Unlike the others, he wasn't doing this for material reasons, he did it to help someone he cared about while he was out and about training himself.

While he most certainly reveled with the three of testing the Flowing Void Style against his peers and growing stronger, he never considered that this very well could be the greatest benefit he gained.

If this little event could push him down his Martial Path even further, then he did not intend to let go of that opportunity. He would be a fool to let go of that opportunity.

His eyes sharpened as he looked at the Martial Contest not just as a means to get what he wanted for Senior Xanarn, but also as a way to train himself.

Sage Sariawar smiled at the response from the Martial Squires, nodding. "I shall take this opportunity to witness what you have to bear. I look forward to seeing what you will show me. I look forward to seeing what you will show yourselves. I truly look forward, as should all of you."

She disappeared all of a sudden, leaving the colosseum entirely.

"Good luck." Her voice reverberated across the world they occupied even after she left.

Rui couldn't help but gain a deep sense of admiration for the Martial Sage, as well as the Sage Realm in general.

"Amazing, is she not?" Master Deivon sighed with admiration and envy. "Every Martial Sage is like this; inscrutable, profoundly powerful, and deeper in the essence of their being than any of us. Just a step away from the absolute pinnacle of power."

Rui nodded slowly, still reeling from the impact of that encounter.

"Still, now is not the time to think about it. I have a contest to win."

"Good, I was afraid you'd let yourself get distracted," Master Deivon nodded with an approving smile. "Alright, now the ceremony itself will continue."

What followed were rather standard practice events. Each of the contestants was given a badge that identified the name or alias they went by, and the town they represented. There were even pledges to fair play, among other things. It was all too convenient to cheat by taking potions that could enhance physical prowess. Of course, the Martial Contest organizers will have almost certainly taken great measures to detect any foul play of any sort. He had no doubt that the Virodha Theocracy was more than capable of finding out whether or not a Martial Squire was engaging in any kind of foul play either through its own technological prowess or technology outsources from other sources like the carriage technological sector of the religion.

The ceremony was also thorough to sure to shout out the sponsors and the partners of the event. It appeared the promotion sponsorship deals were not a foreign concept even in the world of Martial Art.

Chapter 1227: Familiar

"That was unexpectedly not tiring," Rui murmured when the ceremony ended.

"There are too many people to keep waiting for too long," Master Deivon explained. "We Martial Masters alone make it not worth stretching the entire event for too long. Our time is too valuable, when we're not training, we're still working on important matters and fulfilling our duties."

"Then that means this so-called banquet is also not going to take too long, right?" Rui asked with a hopeful look.

"Ah, I'm afraid I might have to disappoint you," Master Deivon smirked. "The banquet is a part of our duties, so our time is well-spent."

Rui sighed. He had been fine with the banquet before, but after listening to what Sage Sariawar had to say, Rui didn't want to bother with such boring stuff. In fact, he wanted to skip forward to the Martial Contest immediately. He felt quite impatient to push himself against his peers, especially after listening to what Sage Sariawar had to say.

But alas, he was not the organizer of the Martial Festival, unfortunately. He would have to make do with it.

The banquet hall was gigantic, bigger than any other he had ever seen, not that he had been to many banquet halls in the first place.

An entire layout of food was present, and an absurdly luxurious buffet had been organized for all of the guests. Many began pouring into the hall, most of them being contestants who looked forward to having a hearty deal.

Rui couldn't help but feel sympathetic to the Martial Squires who didn't manage to get a patron that could increase their appeal to scouts and potential employers. These contestants would have a much harder time trying to find attractive organizations or individuals to be employed by.

For most Martial Squires, the challenge of finding a powerful organization that possessed the resources to help Martial Squires grow stronger was quite great for most Martial Squires. Many Martial Squires were born in parts of the continent that did not have many Martial Seniors, meaning that the region they were in did not possess the resources to make reaching the Senior Realm particularly viable.

The Kaddar Region was actually one such region. Martial Squires in that region were not foolish enough to believe that their chances of reaching the Senior Realm were high. There was a proportion of them that left the Kaddar Region to seek superior parts of human civilization, much to the dismay of the Kaddar nations.

They sought more powerful organizations that were capable of giving them the training and growth resources they needed like the Martial Union of the Kandrian Empire or the Virodhabhasa Faith.

And there were those who merely used the contest as a way to advertise themselves to the guests. The main contest didn't even need to strictly begin, the fact that each of the thousand of them had managed to overcome hundreds of Martial Squires in a chaotic rumble was proof that they were worth employing.

Most of them were grade-ten Martial Squires, and the minority that were grade-nine were cut from a different cloth from other grade-nine Martial Squires.

Regardless of who won the contest, the thousand that were attending the banquet were the best of the best. It was just that those with patrons would receive far better opportunities than those without patrons.

Soon enough the various non-Martial Artist guests began pouring in. Businessmen and women, envoys, representatives, delegates, directors, and even heads of state began pouring into the banquet hall.

Each of them had impassive facades but Rui could easily sense that they were keenly scouring through all the contestants, looking for ones that they had already targeted.

Rui's eyes narrowed as he actually spotted some familiar figures.

Commissioner Reze.

He did not dare make eye contact or show any special attention to the man. It wasn't that he was opposed to the man finding out, he had already decided that that was a trivial outcome, but he did not want to tip anyone off that he was connected to the Martial Union. There were too many powerful people in here for him to dare take such a risk.

If they did interact, it would have to be in a subtle manner. At the very least, Rui could not express any intention to want to speak to the commissioner.

A faint feeling of suspicion welled up within him. The Martial Union had countless envoys, diplomats, commissioners, and other officials and dignitaries, any of whom could have been picked to attend this event.

Why Commissioner Reze? Why was the same Martial commissioner that Rui had interacted with three years ago in the Shionel Confederation present here? If the chosen dignitary was randomly selected amongst those qualified to represent the Martial Union in such a big event, then what were the odds of Commissioner Reze being selected?

Rui narrowed his eyes. Of course, he had realized the truth the moment he laid eyes on the man.

His being chosen wasn't a coincidence.

It was a message from the Martial Union that they were aware of him, a message that only he could possibly understand.

He had expected this, of course. The Martial Union would be incompetent not to notice, thankfully, the Martial Union understood the risks and the predicament that he was in, thus they did not try to contact him directly. Instead, they chose the risk-free method of simply sending Commissioner Reze to send a message.

Of course, the man had not even so much as glanced in their direction. Instead, he began chatting up with other important dignitaries and some contestants who were worth scouting and stealing away to the Kandrian Empire. The Kandrian Martial Union was definitely one of the most powerful Martial Art organizations in the entire event, second perhaps to only the Virodhabhasa Faith. Becoming an internal member of the Martial Union was nothing short of a dream for many of the contestants.

Very soon, a small crowd of grade-ten Martial Squires formed around Commissioner Reze, each interested in earning his favor and approval!

Chapter 1228: Familiar II

Any ordinary man would be in a cold sweat being surrounded by so many intimidating grade-ten Martial Squires, that many would have fainted on the spot.

Yet Commissioner Reze did not appear to experience even the slightest hint of discomfort. His pleasant perfunctory smile was unperturbed in the face of the powerful Martial Squires that could end his life with the slightest exertion.

Of course, he knew such a thing would never happen.

Any Martial Squire that killed a high-grade Martial commissioner like Commissioner Reze was dead. They would die before they even left the building. They might as well kill themselves to at least die painlessly.

Rui knew the Martial Union well enough to know that they would never tolerate such an offense, least of all by a measly Martial Squire.

Furthermore, the Virodha Theocracy would also never allow such a thing to happen. Not only would all of the Martial Masters within the banquet hall notice such a thing and stop it, but the many Martial Senior guards in place who attentively scanned the entire crowd would never allow such a thing to happen.

He firmly spoke with each of them making offers, rejecting requests, negotiating terms and agreements.

He wasn't the only one. Many of the other dignitaries had already begun speaking to contestants one by one, trying to win them over.

It was hard to say who was competing for who.

Were the contestants competing for patrons, or were the patrons competing for contestants.

('I suppose both are true to a certain extent.') Rui mused while watching them. "I'm glad I don't have to deal with this."

"Don't be so sure about that," Master Deivon smiled as he turned towards a man that had been approaching them. "Ah, it truly has been a long time, Sir Guildmaster Patrick"

A shockwave exploded inside Rui as he beheld a man he thought he wouldn't see.

('Guildmaster Bradt...!')

He had been too fixated on Commissioner Reze to miss the man among the next wave of guests.

('But why? Why is a head of a powerful state visiting a trivial event like this?')

The Martial Festival was important to the contestants, it was decently important enough to other powerful organizations to send some envoys. It was important enough for the heads of smaller and weaker states to send their heads to personally try and scout powerful Martial Squires.

But such an event was beneath Guildmaster Bradt's personal attention. Martial Squires were pebbles to the guildmaster. The only reason Rui had been able to earn his attention and cooperation was that Martial Squires were extremely valuable for some time due to the Shionel Dungeon, and because Rui offered him a map to the Shionel Dungeon, something he doubtlessly had been putting to good use in the past three years.

"Master... Deivon, I believe," Guildmaster Bradt didn't even bother hiding that he didn't strongly recall his name. "It has been a while, indeed."

"We are honored by your personal presence, the Theocracy has gone out of its way to increase both the security and the luxury arrangements of the event in your honor." Master Deivon smiled.

"Hm," The man nodded, acknowledging him. "I didn't intend to personally attend, however, I was already in the Theocracy negotiating and finalizing the Bradt-Virodha Dungeon Treaty with Her Excellency, so I decided it was worth attending the event since I was already here."

He uttered those words rather nonchalantly, however, neither Rui nor Master Deivon missed the significance of what he had just said.

('Her Excellency? As in Sage Sariawar? He's been negotiating with a Martial Sage?') Rui was amazed. ('Also, did he say Dungeon Treaty? The Shionel Dungeon raid is complete since all floors have been completely scouted. That means that any agreement does not have to do with esoteric ore deposit harvests, but the actual dungeon itself.')

Rui realized that he genuinely had been making the best use of the three-dimensional map that Rui had made for him.

"Ah, yes, I did hear about that from Her Excellency," Master Deivon courteously smiled. "We of the Virodhabhasa Faith will never forget the Bradt Distribution Service's favor for selling an entire floor of the new Shionel Dungeon City to the Theocracy for occupation and religious practice."

Rui needed to exert himself to ensure that his reactions did not leak out into his demeanor or his movements when he heard that.

('He sold an entire dungeon floor to the Virodha Theocracy?') He gaped. ('Also, 'Shionel Dungeon City'? The man made a literal city out of the entire Shionel Dungeon?!')

That was an incredibly ambitious and bold plan that would have required immense capital investment. However, he couldn't even imagine the sheer amount of profit that he would have gained from selling an entire city to the Virodha Theocracy.

He couldn't help but be impressed with him. It was true that this wouldn't have been possible without the map that made the transport and travel through and in and out of the dungeon viable in the first place, however, it appeared that Guildmaster Bradt had squeezed both the map and the dungeon for maximum value, utility, and benefit. He could hardly imagine himself doing even a comparable job with the man, considering that just three years after he received the map, he was already signing such gigantic deals with international powerhouses across the distant continent.

"Ah, allow me to introduce the Martial Squire that I have been patroning, Squire Falken," Master Deivon smiled. "It isn't official yet, but I can inform you that he is a Virodha seed."

Guildmaster Bradt directed a look towards Rui for the first time. It appeared that Rui did not even register in his mind until Master Deivon pointed him out.

It wasn't pleasant, but Rui recognized that this was reality. The only reason that he had been able to speak with Guildmaster Bradt even remotely as an equal was that Rui was able to offer him some extraordinary benefits due to the circumstances of the dungeon and his personal abilities relative to it.

Now that that was gone, the two of them were far away from each other.

Chapter 1229: Offer

In fact, the fact that Rui was ever able to speak to him as an equal was a feat that was actually far more impressive in hindsight.

"He must be quite impressive if you have chosen to patron him," Guildmaster Bradt remarked.

Rui made sure to control his demeanor and non-verbal communication. He did not want the man to even consider the possibility that he was someone he knew. As far as Rui was concerned, they were just two strangers that had never met before, and that was how he should act about it. Unless he did something incredibly stupid, there was no way for the guildmaster to know what he was up to.

"He indeed is," Master Deivon smiled back. "I am certain he will perform extremely well in the Martial Contest, and given his age, he has a lot of future potential."

"Hm," The man considered Rui with a hint of interest. "If Master Deivon is vouching for you, then you must surely be quite impressive. What do you say, young man? Are you interested in working for me in the Shionel Confederation?"

This took both Master Deivon and Rui and aback momentarily. Rui did not think the man would openly try to poach a Martial Squire given his status and power. It was like an arms manufacturer that manufactured tanks, fighter jets, and battleships trying to negotiate a deal for a simple gun.

This was especially true when Master Deivon had already pretty much expressed that Rui was his heritor, it was almost disrespectful. He did not think Master Deivon would have tolerated any of the Martial Masters trying to poach him, but when Guildmaster Bradt did it, even someone as powerful as him had no choice but to tolerate it.

Guildmaster Bradt was accompanied by Martial Masters protecting him, he also had the ability to command the Martial Masters of the Shionel Confederation and had the ability to persuade the Martial Sage of the nation.

Furthermore, he was important to the Virodha Theocracy even based on what little Rui had gotten from this conversation.

Regardless, that didn't matter now. The man openly expressed an offer to Rui that clashed with Master Deivon's interest.

"I am honored that someone as high as yourself has personally sought me," Rui bowed. "However, I am already patroned by Master Deivon. Thus, it would be inappropriate for me to accept your offer. I hope you understand."

There were no pleasing both sides, but he already had a decently good relationship with the guildmaster. He would instead be stifling his relationship with Master Deivon if he accepted the man's offer.

"Hm," The man nodded with approval, turning towards Master Deivon. "It seems you have found yourself a good seed."

"Indeed," Master Deivon smiled. "We hope you will consider attending the Martial Contest if you haven't already."

"I will attend it," Guildmaster Bradt replied decisively. "I intend to partake in the rest of the Martial Festival in honor of the greater ties that have recently been established between the Bradt Distribution Service and the Virodha Theocracy."

Rui found this comment to be particularly illuminating.

('Greater ties between the Virodha Theocracy and the Bradt Distribution Service, instead of the Shionel Confederation?') Rui considered those words. ('He also mentioned the Bradt-Virodha Treaty... That too is specifically him, and not the Shionel Confederation as a whole.')

With just these subtle clues, Rui sharply pieced together a story that matched the truth of what was happening.

After Rui defeated the Root, it was quite likely that the Shionel Dungeon died. The Squire-level aura would most likely have disappeared, and given that most monsters were dead, the dungeon would have been open to more extensive exploration and colonization by human forces. At that point, the question of what to do with the dead and benign dungeon as a resource would most likely have arisen.

Ordinarily, it would have been owned by the governing body of the state and be used for national interests.

Ordinarily, that is.

The Shionel Confederation was a bit extreme compared to the norm. It was essentially a large association of merchants of all sizes that owned land and had a population. Thus naturally, the dungeon would most likely have been commodified. Given how libertarian and capitalistic the society was, the notion of government ownership and intervention was highly unlikely. According to Rui's estimation based on the profile he created of the Shionel Merchant Guild, the probability that the Shionel Confederation opened up the dungeon for colonization and was probably high.

In the past three years, it was likely that a new phase of dungeon colonization similar to the Serevian Dungeon would occur.

Guildmaster Bradt most likely welcomed this since he had a gigantic advantage over others thanks to the map that Rui gave him. He could not only monopolize an overwhelming majority of the floors of the Shionel Dungeon but also offer specialized transportation services to other colonizers that would allow for smooth back and forth through a gigantic complex maze that was dark to the senses ordinarily.

That would explain why he had ownership over the floors of the dungeon privately instead of the Shionel Confederation and was able to sell one of the floors to the Virodha Theocracy. The question was why would he give up such a powerful strategic resource within the Shionel Confederation that could be used to ensure that he never loses against any other merchant?

('It's definitely not for mundane exchanges like wealth, ordinary goods and services, and other regular commodities.') Rui narrowed his eyes. ('He said he was negotiating with 'her excellency', most likely referring to Sage Sariawar... Could it be?')

Could it be that he had procured the permanent service of an additional Martial Sage for the Bradt Distribution Service?

Rui narrowed his eyes, he had a strong suspicion that this was indeed the case. Sage Sariawar, based on the brief time he witnessed her, was someone who was wholeheartedly dedicated to the cause of the Virodhabhasa Faith. It was quite likely that she was willing to sell her services entirely if it meant furthering the reach of the Virodhabhasa Faith.

Chapter 1230: Impact

If that was the case, Rui could easily understand why he was willing to sell a precious floor from the Shionel Dungeon. The services of a Martial Sage were strategically great enough that they were worth parting from giant city-sized pockets of space that inherently possessed remarkable anti-espionage functions.

The Shionel Confederation possessed only one Martial Sage, and that Martial Sage was the only reason that the state was considered a full-fledged Sage-level nation. It meant that the Martial Sage was extraordinarily powerful within the Shionel Confederation, most likely on par with the guildmaster himself given the sheer amount of leverage he could have as the greatest military asset that protected the Shionel Confederation.

He could get his way quite easily.

That was probably frustrating to someone like Guildmaster Bradt. However, with the presence of an additional Martial Sage who was willing to offer her services as a Martial Sage much more sincerely, the Merchant Guild did not have to rely on the Shionel Sage as much. It restrained his power.

('It also makes the Shionel Confederation stronger as a whole against external influences.')

He had not forgotten that the original reason that the Shionel Dungeon had been freely opened to the whole world was because it was too weak to resist the pressure from the outside.

If the same dungeon had opened in the Kandrian Empire, or any of the other national powerhouses, they would have been able to monopolize the dungeon without having to cower to external militaristic

forces. It would have been able to charge much more extensive prices and concessions for entering the dungeon than the measly tax that the Shionel Confederation was limited to.

That was what the sheer might of the Martial Union and the Kandrian Royal Family combined could achieve.

With an additional Martial Sage in their midst, the Shionel Confederation would slowly be taking a step towards that level of power and security.

That wasn't all, there were so many benefits to it, that Rui couldn't help but feel that he had stumbled onto the truth.

Rui glanced at the guildmaster. He didn't expect anything less from the deviously shrewd merchant. The man was not to be underestimated.

Regardless, it appeared that he wasn't too interested in talking to the Martial Master and Rui beyond that point. He simply bid them farewell, before taking his leave.

Master Deivon immediately turned to Rui with an appreciative smile. "Frankly, I did not expect you to reject his offer for me. You do realize what kind of opportunity you've missed out on? Guildmaster Bradt is one of the most powerful international business magnates. Earning his interest is something that other Martial Squires would kill to have."

Rui shrugged. "It is not that big a deal."

He was speaking from experiencing. Dealing with Guildmaster Bradt and Chairman Deacon during the same period was one of the most stressful periods of his life.

Rui simply surveyed the banquet as even more guests had poured in.

He didn't expect to see so many familiar faces.

He saw a royally attired man speaking to several Martial Squires and even a Martial Senior.

('That... is the King of Graheria.') Rui mused.

It was the same man whose country Rui had infiltrated to learn of the gravitational stabilizer weapon that the Kaddar Nations had used to assault the Floating Sect.

Rui had also killed a Martial Senior of his nation.

It appeared that the Kaddar Nations were more desperate for Martial Artists after the war for the king to personally bargain with Martial Artists himself. He was, no doubt determined to sway at least a chunk of the Martial Squires to his nation due to the acute shortage of Martial Squires after the war had either killed them all, or the Floating Sect had poached them all.

('Speaking of the Floating Sect...') Rui glanced in the direction of another dignitary with an emblem of a floating island on her top.

It appeared that even the Floating Sect wanted a piece of the cake. This did make sense as the Floating Sect was mostly comprised of Martial Squires, thus they were certainly interested in upgrading the quality of their Martial Squires after much of it had deteriorated due to the deaths of the guardians in the war.

It was amusing for Rui to see so many familiar organizations and people that he had come to be acquainted with over the years partake in the banquet. It showed the sheer influence and reach of the Virodhabhasa Faith, it also showed that he had perhaps underestimated what it meant to be a seed of the Divine in such a religion.

But, it also showed the sheer number of people he had impacted in his journey as a Martial Artist. This was something that he had never really considered before. But the fact that he knew so many people on such a large stage and event said something about how much influence Rui had had on the state of the world.

The Serevian Dungeon War, Vilun Island, Kaddar-Ajanta conflict, the Shionel Dungeon raid, and the outcome of the election.

And now the Martial contest. A contest he intended to win.

The rest of the banquet proceeded smoothly. For the most part, Rui was content standing around and observing while indulging in the luxurious food of the banquet. While he was approached by several dignitaries, he politely refused all of them.

He found it interesting that Commissioner Reze never strayed anywhere near him despite speaking to all of the other contestants who had patrons. He did appreciate the gesture. It showed that the Kandrian Empire was willing to stay their hand and avoid complicating things for him.

If he performed well during the Martial Contest, then there was a much greater avenue for speaking with them, he would have such a high profile that not even Master Deivon's patronage would be enough to stop him from at least speaking with the more important guests.

Once he won the Martial Contest, he would have the opportunity to speak to Commissioner Reze and gain a better understanding of what had happened in the three years that he had been away.