

## Martial Unity 1231

### Chapter 1231: Mental

The banquet soon came to an end.

The time for ceremonies and formalities was over.

The Martial Contest was to commence soon. The schedule had been adjusted such that the first three rounds would occur that day itself, and the remaining final tournament would occur on the last day.

Rui wished that they could have spaced out the entire contest over a longer period, but alas, the Martial Festival did not last an entire month. The Martial Contest was an event that was meant to be held during the Martial Festival. That meant that it needed to end within the remaining three days.

"The three rounds will each be overseen by a senior bishop Master of the Theocracy," Master Deivon explained. "Their power and influence are far greater than a bishop Master like me or my peers that have also patroned contestants. They do not play such games and are powerful enough to be entirely above it, which is why they are chosen as organizers of the rounds of the Martial Contest since they can be trusted to be as unbiased as can be. If bishops with a vested interest in the outcome were chosen, then we could make the contest be extremely favorable to any particular contestant."

"Hmmm..." Rui nodded. "That makes sense. Have the contests for each round been announced yet?"

"No," Master Deivon shook his head. "However, we do know the identity of the bishop Master that will be responsible for the first contest. Master Carian Fara is one of the eldest bishops of the Theocracy and joined the Theocracy one hundred and forty-two years ago. He is an extraordinarily powerful Martial Master, both in terms of his Martial Art prowess, as well as his authority and influence within the religion."

Rui raised an eyebrow with an impressed expression.

"His Martial Art, the Psychic Calamity Style, is a powerful offensive mind-oriented Martial Art that seeks to destabilize or even cripple his opponent psychologically and mentally, as well as neurologically in the

middle of battle. Many Martial Artists have fallen to him," Master Deivon informed Rui with a hint of admiration.

"Mind-oriented Martial Art... eh?" Rui narrowed his eyes.

He had certainly not forgotten about his own affinity for mind-oriented techniques.

However, it was unfortunate that it was difficult for him to find the right time to delve into this powerful field. For a good portion of his career as a Martial Squire, he had been rounding out his Martial Art. Because he essentially needed to start from scratch again, it meant that he had a lot of work to do. Furthermore, this task had become much more difficult than in the Apprentice Realm, because of the need for individuality-based compatibility for the techniques.

Thus began a long journey of coming up with original and unique techniques for all primary fields of combat to round himself out.

Perhaps he had a brief opportunity to develop mental techniques once he settled down on the Floating Sect, however, he had ultimately committed to Project Metabody which took a little under two years to complete the first iteration of from that point.

However, now that was also out of the way. His foundations were solid, and he had successfully managed to implement a major upgrade to the VOID algorithm with the Metabody System addition.

It meant that his training itinerary was actually completely free.

('I suppose it's time then,') Rui mused. ('It is logically the most apt next step now that I have solidified offense, defense, maneuvering, and other primary and secondary aspects of combat. It is time to expand outwards towards other fields.')

Mind-oriented techniques were something he was quite interested in, and also a little wary about. Mind-oriented Martial Art techniques were not something that existed back on Earth, furthermore, his foundations in physics were not particularly applicable. He did not know too much about the brain or the mind.

Still, it would be criminal not to enter this field. His mind benefited from the rapid growth to adulthood twice. He had always been very bright in his previous life, and the second round of growth had elevated his mind to genius-level territory.

His propensity for mastering techniques that required the power of mind was incredibly high. This could be reflected in how powerful his Mind Mask technique was. While ordinary Martial Squires could only make themselves appear stronger by several degrees of grades, Rui could express the appearance of the power of a Martial Senior with the same technique not because of how powerful the technique was, but because of how powerful his mind was.

The same could be said for the Mind Palace technique, it was originally the most elementary method to remember several facts about the mission for Martial Artists who weren't all that bright. But Rui had elevated it from that to what was effectively a grade-ten technique that functioned as a databank capable of storing massive amounts of sensory data and organizing them through a dozen different parameters, he had even developed a tagging system that allowed him to scour through his Mind Palace the way a search engine did. He also had developed ROM and RAM within it!

It was the same as how a skinny lightweight Martial Squire using Outer Convergence simply could not compete with a muscular heavyweight Martial Squire using the same technique. The foundation of what the technique relies on is of an entirely different level in the latter compared to the former.

('Well, I'll think about it later,') Rui shook his head. ('Time to win the Martial Contest and heal Senior Xanarn first.')

He exhaled deeply, spending the rest of his time focusing himself away from all the distracting thoughts he had been having.

He didn't know what the first round was going to be, but it was going to commence soon. The organizers were anxious about finishing the first three rounds today so that the tournament featuring the final eight could be held tomorrow and the post-contest banquet could be held on the last day of the festival.

## Chapter 1232: Pressure

The contestants were given some time to recenter themselves after the banquet. Most of them ate lightly if not nothing. It did not make sense to eat a hearty meal before a contest. They spent the time

after the contest focusing on themselves. The banquet certainly was important to most of them, but it was over and it didn't make sense to linger on it before the contest was to begin.

There was another banquet after the contest that would segregate them into different levels of losers, and a single winner.

The final eight who qualified to be in the tournament that was to be held tomorrow were going to earn the most amount of solicitation and scouting from the various third parties involved with the Martial Contest in some fashion or the other. The top forty were also hot commodities and targets. While the remaining round-two and round-three winners would receive the least amount of solicitation.

While the pre-contest banquet was a lot more equal for each Martial Squire, the post-contest banquet was going to be a lot more unequal.

The champion may very well get more attention than all the other Martial Squires combined.

That was why the pre-contest banquet was a lot more light. The various third parties were waiting for the Martial Contest to end before making any commitments because they wanted to get a good understanding of the caliber of the Martial Squires involved. That was the reason that they could not afford to conclude any agreements with any of the warriors outside of the bare minimum given that there was a minimum guarantee of strength from each of the contestants.

Rui spent his time meditating. He grew immersed in his breathing entering a state of deep concentration.

Unlike the preliminary contest, there was a lot that could go wrong this time. He could not afford to grow complacent. A lot could go wrong if he ever ended up in a similar situation to the final clash of the preliminary round where a bunch of grade-ten Martial Squires ganged up on him.

He managed to beat three, but if five, seven, nine, or eleven jumped on him together then there was a good chance that even he would fall eventually, if only because his Metabody System had time limits.

"Fuuu..." He exhaled deeply.

His attention honed, sharpening into a lance.

His Mind Mask rattled in his mind, struggling to contain the perilous pressure that his mind would otherwise be radiating. He promptly tossed it away, none of the other Martial Squires could detect him through the walls fortified with heavy anti-espionage technology.

He had instructed the servants to wait outside.

He did not want to injure them with his aura.

Regardless, time eventually passed, and they knocked on his door when his manager came for him.

"It's time," The man informed Rui.

The two of them traveled to the heartland of the Theocracy remarkably swiftly, Rui didn't even notice by the time they arrived. A swarm of contestants had already gathered and continued gathering until it was time for the first round.

Anticipation tingled the air.

Even the contestants felt it. It could not be helped, they weren't even risking their lives all that much, but they felt more pressured than any life-risking mission that they had ever taken. The scope of this contest was beyond anything else that they had ever gone through in their entire lives.

Very few had gone through other events with comparable severity. Rui was one of the few contestants that was truly comfortable in such a circumstance

The colosseum was infested with spectators, and the noise they caused spilled over onto the battle arena, reflecting the mood of the setting.

Soon enough, a powerful figure overshadowed everybody, drawing all attention.

A powerful Martial Master.

He slowly descended from the sky, landing on a podium in the center of the colosseum. One could feel the depth of his age just by looking at him. He was a remarkably aged and elder man both at face value and in his demeanor.

"Contestants," An aged voice escaped his mouth. "Welcome to the first round of the Martial Contest. Each of you has overcome much to reach this point, and each of you must overcome the challenge that I have prepared for you if you wish to go further.

He narrowed his eyes.

"The first round in all Martial Contests of this scale has but one purpose..." A grave tone accompanied his voice. "To root out the incompetent. To root out the unfit. To root out the weak. Rest assured if you cannot overcome this challenge, you never have any chance of entering the final tournament that is to be held tomorrow."

He paused for a moment, letting those words sink into them.

"All of you have unique Martial Paths and Art with their own strengths and capabilities. They will most certainly be put to the test in this contest, but..." His tone grew sharper. "Not this time."

Many Martial Squires raised an eyebrow.

What were they going to be tested on if not their Martial Paths and Art?

"What you will be tested on is... Your fortitude!" His eyes widened as an extraordinary amount of pressure crashed into them. A titanic amount of weight pressed down on their shoulders, threatening to crush them.

"Overcome this..." The man's eyes narrowed. "Overcome me... Those who fail will be disqualified."

Yet the pressure did not exist in the material realm, it existed in their minds. He was unleashing a maelstrom of mental pressure on all of them.

More than half of the Martial Squires instantly buckled, collapsing to their knees despite their greatest resistance.

It was game over for them.

Yet the dropouts didn't stop there, the initial wave alone collapsed many of them. Yet it appeared that the quality of Martial Squires wasn't just for show as many Martial Squires resolutely bore the pressure with incredible tenacity.

There were those who not only bore it but were unperturbed.

('Surely this isn't it... right?') Rui scratched his head as he relaxed within his Mind Palace. Even without that technique and the Mind Mask that he was wearing, his evolved mind was not something that could be overcome with a paltry wave of pressure.

But with both those techniques activated, Rui almost couldn't feel anything.

## Chapter 1233: Dream

Rui was almost confused. The initial wave bounced back from him like a beach ball against a steel wall.

It couldn't be helped, he was twenty-four now, and his brain had almost finished the entirety of the growth to adulthood. The fortitude of his mind truly spiked past ordinary limits, every parameter of his mind was far beyond what someone his age could have possibly been capable of.

In fact, when he looked around, he had noticed that there were only grade-ten Martial Squires left, that too the older and more experienced ones.

He was by far the youngest one there, the youngest after him seemed to be a woman in her late twenties or early thirties.

Soon enough, the initial wave eliminated the weakest of Martial Squires. It became clear to them and everybody else that they were not of the same caliber of Martial Squires as those standing, and were promptly removed from the battle arena.

"So many simply from the initial wave, how disappointing," The man snorted contemptuously. "Is that all the Martial Squires of this generation have? Hm?"

He directed the question towards those remaining. "It may very well be the case that we may have to skip a round or there won't even be eight Martial Squires left by the time the third round ends."

('He's trying to get onto everybody's nerves...?') Rui wondered with an amused expression.

Regardless of what he said, it was clear that such a degree of pressure was not enough to take them down.

"All of you seem confident about overcoming the initial wave..." The man remarked with an amused expression. "Let us see if you can maintain that attitude."

Many stumbled as the pressure began escalating even more. The sheer amount of mental force that he was exerting had far exceeded that of baseline Senior-level pressure. Not even the Kaddar Martial Squires had exerted such pressure on Rui even at their peak.

Many of them began sweating profusely.

They gritted their teeth.

They clenched their fists.



They pushed against the land beneath them as they felt chains emerging from the ground, wrapping around them, threatening to drag them to the depths of the underworld.

The clouds darkened growing thick and dense as they descended from the skies, overlapping the very world, threatening to consume those that resisted!

Of course, this did not happen, at least, not in the real world.

That didn't mean their perception was as unperturbed as material reality was.

"...Urgh!"

"...Dammit!"

THUD!

They collapsed to the ground one by one.

They resisted.

They fought back.

Yet most failed, collapsing to the ground with expressions of frustration.

It was not a pleasant sight.

Yet in the middle of what ought to have been a profound tribulation, there were some who were looked out of place.

Rui simply stood there, feeling awkward.

He felt like he should at least pretend to be pressured, if not for no other reason than not to offend the Martial Master. It wouldn't make do for him to make a powerful enemy who thought he was insulting him by making a mockery of his challenge.

He glanced around, trying to get a gauge of what the average Martial Squire looked like, yet he did spot some anomalies.

He even recognized a few of them.

The old lady that he had spotted in the dining hall was also unperturbed. He had felt that she was strong back then but he now realized that she was even more formidable than he gave her credit for.

There were a few others that were fine even after the extensive boost in pressure exerted by the man.

"Hm..." The man hummed as he saw that even the added pressure stopped knocking down any more contestants.

The Martial Squires simply silently endured the pressure, yet the same could not be said for the huge crowds of spectators.

Many of them cheered for the standing Martial Squires. It appeared that they had been fed potions that gave them enough of the fortitude needed to endure the pressure without mentally collapsing, allowing them to feel the nervous tension and the sheer thrill of the perilous fear that the Martial Master evoked in them.

"WOOOOOO!"

"This shit is lit!!!"

"Is that the best you got, old man?!"

Of course, certain spectators were removed because of their disrespect to a vaunted figure of the Theocracy.

Nonetheless, it was in sharp contrast to the incredibly resilient Martial Squires who bore the tribulation silently.

"It seems I've underestimated all of you..." The Martial Master spoke.

His tone was severe.

His eyes narrowed.

A sadistic smile spread on his face.

Something was off.

They could all sense it.

"...But were you under the impression that the challenge had actually begun?" The man asked with the most innocent voice.

Their eyes widened.

A chill crawled up all their spines.

The man's arms and hands began moving.

It was a simple movement, smooth and slow.

They watched silently.

Their expressions grew vacant.

Their attention lulled.

"Psychic Calamity Style..." The man murmured, indicating the arrival of the actual challenge.

Two words escaped his mouth.

"Heavenly Pathos."

The man clapped as a strange flash of light spread across the colosseum for a brief moment.

Opaque barriers momentarily appeared in front of the spectator stands, isolating them from the scope of the powerful technique.

The contestants froze.

Their pupils dilated.

THUD

They all collapsed one by one.

Silence spread across the colosseum.

The spectators were stunned speechless.

"...What happened?"

"Why did they all collapse?"

"...Are they all dead?"

"Don't be stupid! He would never kill them!"

"They are not dead, obviously," The Martial Master clarified to the spectators. "The Heavenly Pathos technique is a powerful mental technique that has a wide area of effect, and a large scope. The technique hypnotizes the targets and causes a hallucination that allows them to live their greatest dreams, paradises, and ideal lives. Only those with powerful fortitude can break out of it. It is a Master-level technique, but I have reduced its intensity so that the Martial Squires have a faint possibility of overcoming this challenge most likely starting from within the next hour."

He glanced back at the unconscious contestants. "The first two hundred contestants that break out of the illusion and wake up will pass through to the next round."

Chapter 1234: Wrong

Rui opened his eyes.

Barely.

He woke up, but the pleasure that enveloped his body was deep.

He wanted to close them again.

"Hmm..." He heard a sleepy moan.

He glanced down.

Senior Xanarn was asleep next to him, resting her head on his bare chest.

For a moment something felt off.

Something was deeply off.

Yet before he could even consider it, a wave of deep serenity and satisfaction washed over him, soothing his mind.

He glanced around the room.

('This... This is my room in the Quarrier Orphanage,')

Suddenly, another pang of uncertainty struck his heart.

Something was wrong.

Yet his mind relaxed before he felt the need to investigate further.

"Mmm... You woke up?" Senior Xanarn murmured sleepily.

"Did I wake you up...?"

"The change in your heartbeat did," She murmured sleepily.

She opened her eyes, staring straight at him. "Did you have a nightmare?"

Rui tried recalling what he dreamed.

"Just now... I was in the first round of the Virodha Martial Contest," Rui murmured. "You know, the one that I won and became the champion of to secure your treatment all those years ago?"

"No? I don't remember that," She said with a hint of mischief. "Are you talking about the one that you told me about more than a hundred times until I became deaf in addition to being blind? That one?"

"Funny,"

She giggled as she hugged him sleepily. "Did you have a dream about that?"

"...Dream?" Rui murmured.

A deep flash of fear struck his heart.

Something was off.

"Hey," She glanced at him with concern as she detected the change in his heartbeat, embracing him closer. "Are you ok?"

The warm soft skin of her body pressed against his as she wrapped her body against him, soothing him.

"Yeah, something like that," Rui nodded.

"Rui! Why don't the two of you come for breakfast?" A voice called out to him.

He became aware of his surroundings again, recalling where he was.

This was Mayra's voice. She was in charge of the kitchen and meals, and she often scolded the members of the orphanage for being late to a meal.

"You should go," Senior Xanarn murmured sleepily as she untangled herself from him.

Rui nodded as he got up, putting on some clothes before heading out.

The familiar corridor of the Quarrier Orphanage leading to the main staircase was one that was burned in his mind. It was exactly how it always was.

"Good morning everybody," Rui wished them, receiving an equally enthusiastic wish from the children and the adults.

"Is Xanarn not coming yet?" Lashara asked, pulling Rui into a deep hug.

"No, she's still a little tired and sleepy," Rui replied.

"Hehe, you two must have gone at it all night," Max laughed.

"I can hear you two at night, you know," Mana murmured, blushing.

BANG!

Rui dropped a fist on both their heads.

"Ow!"

"What was that for?!"

"Learn tact," Rui firmly instructed.

"You didn't have to hit us that hard!"



"Stop complaining," Rui tutted. "You've broken through to the Squire Realm and recently gotten Martial Bodies, you should be able to handle this much."

He froze.

Another wave of uneasiness washed over his heart.

Something was off.

"Bullying children is not nice, Rui," Julian drew away his attention with an amused smile.

"They're Martial Artists before they are children," Rui snorted.

Lashara directed a pointed gaze at him.

"...Of course, they're your children before they're Martial Artists," Rui sighed, conceding.

"Hehe, mama to the rescue!"

Rui chuckled, admitting defeat as he took a seat at the table.

His eyes narrowed as he sensed Martial Artist presence in the vicinity. "...So many Martial Seniors..."

"They've been around for years," Alice remarked. "You were the one that hired them to protect us from Chairman Deacon all those years ago, remember? Honestly, you should get rid of them since you've already killed that man."

Rui froze.

Another profound surge of uneasiness washed over him.

"What's the matter, dear?" Lashara asked with a concerned expression.

She had managed to sense his emotions even without the super hearing of Senior Xanarn.

It was a testament to how much she loved him.

His uneasiness washed away.

"I was just thinking about that..."

"Are you still feeling guilty for what happened back then?" Lashara sighed, asking with a concerned expression. "We've all told you, haven't we? We've long forgiven you for that. You left us in order to protect us. How could we ever not forgive you?"

His heart beat heavier as the profound sense of uneasiness returned.

He glanced around the table.

Everybody was happy and merry.

It should have been everything he ever wanted for his family.

Yet despite that, he couldn't shake this deeply unsettling sensation in his heart.

Something was wrong.

"I think I'm gonna take a walk outside..." Rui replied. "Need some fresh air."

"What about breakfast?"

"It's fine, I'm not that hungry anyways," Rui replied as he took to the air, sky walking away at top speed until he reached the town of Hajin.

"Hey, Rui!" He heard Kane calling out to him out of nowhere.

"What are you doing here?" Rui asked with a surprised expression.

"We were all waiting for you," Kane told him.

"We?" Rui's eyes widened as he suddenly spotted Fae, Nel, Hever, Milliana, and Dalen.

"You were going to train us, remember?" Kane asked. "On the VOID algorithm."

"What?" Rui asked with a shocked expression.

"Did you forget?" Kane tilted his head. "You perfected the VOID algorithm, you successfully finished Project Water, and you created the ultimate Martial Art that embodies the very essence of Bruce Lee's philosophy to the core."

It was no longer just a wave of uneasiness.

Something was wrong.

Not with him, however.

Something was wrong about the very fabric of this world.

"I completed... Project Water?" Rui asked.

The uneasiness turned into a terror as he made a realization.

"No... I did not," Rui's eyes narrowed. "I know I did not complete Project Water."

"You're wrong Rui," Kane stared into his eyes.

"No, you're wrong," Rui grew more certain by the second.

He turned around looking at the world around him. "This world is wrong!"

CRACK CRACK CRACK!

The very fabric of reality began cracking like glass, before completely shattering.

#### Chapter 1235: Reality

The moment the contestants were affected by the Heavenly Pathos technique Master Carian employed to put all the contestants in a dream of their ideal lives led to an interesting circumstance for the spectators.

All of the remaining contestants had fallen to the ground unconscious then and there. No efforts had been made to cushion their fall given that such an impact was not at all a threat to the like of Martial Squires.

Many expected to get bored watching the contestants simply lie down on the ground unconscious, after all, where was the fun in that?

Yet it soon became evident that the contestants were literally acting out their actions in their dreams on the ground, it appeared that they retained full control of their bodies even while they were in this dreamlike state.

What unfolded was an amusing set of circumstances where the unconscious contestants began putting on a bit of a comedy show for the spectators. There were some whose actions revealed exactly what they were dreaming about, and they were not safe for work, to say the very least.

The Martial Master had mentioned they could break out of the illusion in a brief amount of time, thus many expected that this would continue for a while.

That was why the first break-out surprised everyone.

Their eyes widened as they noticed Rui opening his eyes, groggily getting up to his feet in just a matter of two minutes!

Master Carian furrowed his eyebrows, clearly surprised.

Although he had drastically lowered the intensity of the technique to even allow the Martial Squires to break out of it, it was still something that should have been far from easy.

As Rui came back to his senses, he glared at Master Carian. At that moment, he did not care about the man's identity, status, or power, he was about to rebuke the Master with strong words when something drew his attention, interrupting him.

Another Martial Squire got up just seconds after he did.

Rui narrowed his eyes as he recognized her.

She was the youngest Martial Squire contesting after him.

The youngest two Martial Squires had succeeded far earlier than the rest of them did for some reason apparently.

She swept her long flowing hair aside as she realized Rui was already standing, before pouting mildly. "Second... How not beautiful..."

Rui did not know what that meant, but he did not particularly care.

He turned back to Master Carian, with a unpleasant expression behind his mask.

"You seem truly displeased by this test, young man," The Martial Master remarked unperturbed.

"With all due respect, I believe there are less invasive and humiliating ways of testing fortitude," Rui replied with a measured tone.

"That is certainly true," The Master nodded, willing to entertain Rui's complaints. "But do you think reality cares about whether the tribulations you face are invasive and humiliating?"

Rui considered the question for a moment.

"Reality will break you down much more harshly than this illusionary technique will, young man," The Master snorted. "The only difference is that the stakes will be much higher when reality does it, compared to this harmless first round. Here you lose a bit of dignity, but reality will take your life, and the lives of everyone you care about. Ask yourself if you are prepared for the hard reality of this world if you feel the need to complain about such a trivial matter."

Rui paused, reconsidering his stance. He knew that the man was right. He had already experienced it after the fiasco of the Shionel Confederation. His own life and the lives of his family were at stake.

He sighed, his expression softening a bit.

Compared to that predicament, this first round was nothing, objectively speaking.

He just felt angered because the illusion that he had been shown touched more than just a nerve. It rubbed more than salt in his wounds, it was nothing short of acidic in its pain. It showed him everything that he wanted, that was so far away. He often coped by not thinking about it deeply and focusing on developing his Martial Art, walking his Martial Path, and pursuing power.

But the illusion forced him to confront it.

"Still," the Martial Master smiled, regarding both of the contestants who had woken up just two minutes after the challenge had begun. "The two of you have done well, there is no question that you have faced much, and overcome much. I am not surprised that you, Squire Meera, managed to accomplish this feat as the reigning champion of the Martial Contest. But you..."

He said a lot of things that Rui would have drawn Rui's interest ordinarily, but not this time. Master Carian studied Rui with piercing eyes. Rui immediately grew wary as he recalled what Master Deivon informed him about the insight of Martial Masters.

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do at the moment.

He could only watch as Master Carian took his time, his eyes widening as he observed Rui.

"You..." The man murmured. "Incredible. I have almost never seen anything quite like this in the Squire Realm. I can see why Master Deivon, someone who seldom patrons Martial Squires, has decided to go all-in with you."

"Your eyes are beautiful," Squire Meera walked over as she remarked with a jovial expression, agreeing with Master Carian.

"Uh... Thanks."

"It's a pity I can't see them over whatever it is you have done to disguise them." She casually remarked with a hint of melancholy. "That silver does not reflect you. That lacking fit is not beautiful."

Rui immediately narrowed his eyes.

This was the first time that someone had seen right through his disguise. He had purchased a bunch of rare drugs that could change the color of his eyes and hair and never had anyone realized.

Until she did.

It appeared that not even Master Carian had made that insight.

"You said... reigning champion?" Rui regarded her with wariness, recalling what Master Carian had said about her.

She simply nodded. "I am the seventy-first champion of the Virodha Martial Contest, Meera Froulia. "

#### Chapter 1236: Incoherent

Rui was rather surprised that she had managed to break out at almost the same time that he did. He managed to accomplish this with the help of his reincarnated mind and his strong dedication to his Martial Path.

She managed to accomplish the same feat without the former advantage. That was an incredible feat, worthy of the reigning champion of the Martial Contest.

He evaluated her with his Primordial Instinct. He was incredibly accustomed to getting a good gauge and grasp of Martial Squires with his mind and senses. He could usually easily understand their power, and decipher their Martial Art and Martial Path.

His eyes narrowed as he felt his nerves tingle.

Something was profoundly wrong.



He wasn't able to even fathom what her Martial Art was.

That wasn't the most disturbing part of her power level.

('This...') Rui's eyes widened. ('This isn't even incoherent. The impressions she gives rapidly fluctuate every second!')

One moment she was weak.

The next moment she was extremely strong.

The next moment she grew even stronger, giving off a quasi-Senior level strength!

...Before returning to an average power level.

He didn't understand. How could a Martial Squire's power fluctuate as if it were the readings of a seismograph? How could that even make any sense?

It Rui even more wary than if she was just plainly strong. He had dealt with that many times in his life and was confident that he could overcome it after understanding its depths.

What he truly was wary of was a Martial Squire whose power was incoherent. That was much more of a problem to him than an ordinarily strong Martial Squire.

"I wouldn't bother if I were you," Master Carian smirked. "The true depths of young Meera here are inscrutable to even my eyes. Then again..."

His eyes narrowed as he stared at Rui. "...The same can be said of yourself, can it not? You're birds of the same feather."

Just then, the third Martial Squire contestant got up after having broken out of the illusion that the Master had conjured.

Rui recognized her as well, it was the old grandma that he had spotted multiple times up until now.

It appeared that he had truly not misjudged her, she was certainly quite impressive to break out of the illusion this soon after it had been cast, trailing third behind Rui and Squire Meera.

People watched with interest as more and more began breaking out over the next hour. The ones that held their interest the most were the first eight that broke out of the illusion. They had the highest probability of making it to the final tournament as far as everybody was concerned.

The fact that the current champion of the Martial Contest was among the eight certainly lent credence to this theory.

However, Rui wasn't entirely sure how true that was. Mental fortitude did not corroborate with Martial power in a one-to-one fashion. Surely there were weaker Martial Artists with incredible mental fortitude, and there were prodigiously blessed Martial Squires with weaker fortitude.

However, it was true that mental parameters corresponded with the depth of the Martial Art, which, in turn, corresponded with Martial power, thus the correspondence was not bad, even if not perfect.

In reality, there was no way to root out the strongest in an absolutely perfect manner with a single test. It would take incredibly rigorous testing over extensive periods of time, pitting all Martial Squires against all others to even come close to having a hundred percent accuracy on who the strongest was.

However, this was not practical in such an event. This event was in celebration of a festival in its nature, and the event needed to reflect that.

That was a rather simple and unsophisticated format was chosen.

"It is time," Master Carian announced once the two-hundredth Martial Squire woke up. "The two hundred of you standing at this moment have successfully passed through to the next round. Congratulations, and good luck."

He clapped his hands, yet the noise it produced was an incredibly strange resonating tone that reverberated across the battle arena.

It was only after the remaining Martial Squire began waking up groggily to that trigger that Rui realized that he had deactivated his technique.

"You may be confused, so allow me to explain," Master Carian kindly informed. "You have all failed to overcome the challenge of the first round. You have been eliminated from the Martial Contest, we appreciate your participation, and we wish you good luck for the next time."

The losers of the first round quickly left the colosseum, heading out while the victors remained.

"The second round will begin soon, once again, good luck," Master Carian smiled as he sky-walked away.

The two hundred victors remained in place as they waited, unsure of what was to come next. Yet even before the next round could begin, a pair of potions suddenly appeared before all of them.

"Drink them," An incredibly elderly voice instructed them.

They all saw a powerful Martial Master descending from the sky onto the podium.

The next Martial Master responsible for the second round was an incredibly aged grandma, she made even the grandma Martial Squire feel young.

She was so old that she even needed a cane!

Of course, Rui was not stupid.

There was no way an especially powerful Martial Master needed a cane to balance or walk. It was either part of her Martial Art, or she simply carried it for some other reason.

Regardless, he followed her instructions, consuming both potions.

Instantly, his mind was rejuvenated, though his body remained the same. It appeared that the potions only refreshed the brain. That did make sense considering they did not physically exert themselves, only mentally. Rui did not even need any rejuvenation given that he had spent very little time in the dream world.

Yet the same could not be said for everybody, especially the lowest-ranked contestants who spent a lot more time breaking out of the dream world.

Chapter 1237: Storm

"It is time for the second round to commence," The new Master announced once everybody had been rejuvenated. "I am Bishop Uma, and I am the organizer of the second round."

She snapped her fingers and a ring table appeared around her on the podium.

Rui noticed a bunch of paper slips on the table that she was the center of when he studied it.

"As you can see, there are about forty passes on this table," She explained mundanely. "Each pass guarantees a contestant a spot in the third round. The forty of you who manage to get your hands on a pass, one way or another, will pass through to the next round, the rest will all be eliminated."

The Martial Squires frowned when they heard such a strange contest, the passes were right there in front of them, were they not?

Didn't that mean the fastest of them would get the passes first? Was she trying to filter away the slowest Martial Squires out of the competition?

Many of the heavier power or defense-oriented Martial Squires looked upset at this possibility, the contest was supposed to judge who was the strongest, not who was the fastest.

The part about the objective of getting a pass or item to select the winner was not unheard of. It was not an uncommon way to have a more open-ended competition where contestants had much greater freedom and choice on how they wanted to complete the objective of the contest.

"I haven't finished," She sternly remarked. "I have no interest in wasting time overlooking this round, thus I have decided to resume my training even while the round is underway. The contest will begin once I have begun my training technique. Note that there is no strict need for there to be forty winners."

This was another thing that stumped them. Were the rounds supposed to filter away only eighty percent of the contestants?

"I have already corresponded with the organizer of the next round and have obtained an agreement for reducing the number of victors to any degree if need be," She informed them with a stern expression. "If none of you pass through, then that's that. The Martial Contest will end right here."

That evoked considerable surprise from the various contestants.

('I underestimated how much power these bishop Masters have,') Rui narrowed his eyes. ('It seems they have absolute authority to organize the rounds however they wish to please with no checks or balances. That makes sense, I guess, considering they are below only the Cardinal Sages and the Transcendent Prophet.')

"If you can survive and overcome the tribulations to obtain the passes, you will pass through, if not, you won't. Regardless, I shall engage in my training no matter what the outcome.')

That was even more of a strange thing to say. Why was she the organizer if she did not even intend to oversee the second round?

She did not feel the need to explain any further.

Instead, she simply took her feet off the ground, sitting midair as her cane settled on her lap.

('Is she really going to train in the middle of a contest round after organizing such a silly contest?') Rui frowned as he crouched, taking a sprinting position.

He almost activated Godspeed, which would guarantee that he would reach the table before anybody else.

But he abstained after thinking about it for a moment.

He did not want to make a choice that was difficult to undo. Something was off, and he did intend to at least gain a greater understanding before making any choice in regards to how he ought to go about overcoming this rather simplistic challenge.

It turns out, that was a good choice.

"Fuuu..." She activated a breathing technique.

Immediately, everybody rushed in.

Only a handful of people stepped away.

Rui was among them, as was Squire Meera, and the grandma Squire and a few others.

('They've noticed as well...') Rui mused as he fixed his eyes on the Martial Master. ('...of the storm that is about to come.')

WHOOOOOOOSH!!!

Suddenly a gigantic tornado was born around the table the moment she began her mysterious meditation training with her breathing technique. The sheer intensity of the tornado blew away all of the Martial Squires who were caught off-guard by it, not having had their defenses propped up in time.

"Waaah!"

"What the hell is this?!"

"Rgh!"

Only the ones that had stepped away at the start were unscathed.

The training technique she was engaging in was so powerful, that its aftereffects generated an abysmally powerful storm.

('This is merely the side-effect.') Rui could not help but sigh in amazement.

It was no different from the tiny gust of wind that a punch generated. Except in this case, the training was so powerful that even that tiny after-effect had been magnified to an absurdly intense tornado.

Many were still in shock, but Rui had long realized the truth.

('This is the challenge,') He narrowed his eyes as he guarded against the winds. ('It's not a coincidence that the tornado formed just outside of the table. It's clear that if we want a pass, we're going to have to wade through what is effectively a Senior-level technique.')

The power that he felt from the tornado that was generated from the remnants of her training technique was clearly in the Senior Realm, he had experienced that power many times by now to be able to identify it instantly.

It appeared that all of the contestants had come to terms with reality and had begun focusing on how to get their hands on a pass, and how to ensure they don't lose the pass after they get it, either to the storm, or to their fellow contestants who had no qualms with killing and prying the pass from their cold dead hands.

The contestants rushed forward, using different means to try and overcome the tornado. The longer they waited, the lower the chance they had. Just standing in the tornado took a lot of energy!

#### Chapter 1238: Observe

He already knew this but, Master Uma was quite different from Master Carian. The latter was a lot more considerate and kind towards younger Martial Artists like himself. The former was a lot more ruthless and rough than her colleague.

She didn't care to actually oversee the actual challenge itself. She was so averse to wasting her time on younger and inferior Martial Artists like them that she decided to integrate her training into the contest's challenge so that she did not waste any time on them and could train while fulfilling her duties.

He found it interesting that she had the ability to essentially bypass her duties using such loopholes, but did not possess the authority to reject her duties. After all, if she did not want to be here, then why didn't she straightforwardly reject her duty as the organizer of the second round?

That made Rui conclude that the duty was assigned to her by someone with enough power and authority that she couldn't reject it. Especially since he could already tell that she was most certainly a zealot of the Virodhabhasa Faith.

Regardless, none of that mattered at the moment.

Rui narrowed his eyes as he considered the challenge before him. He analyzed the tornado she produced carefully, gauging as much information about it as possible.

It was not a natural tornado, obviously. That meant that there was a good chance that it did not strictly behave the way a natural tornado did.

And he was right.



('The wind is not uniform,') Rui narrowed his eyes as he felt the fabric of the tornado with his Tempestuous Feel. ('Rather than layers of flowing wind, it's more like a group of discrete gusts moving in one direction with gaps between them.')

It reflected the nature of the breathing technique that she was using, it was most likely not a simply continuous breathing pattern, but rather something shorter and more frequent.

Unlike the others, he could verify this through the storm despite it jamming all senses. Riemannian Echo was completely unperturbed. He could clearly sense Master Uma meditating at the center of the storm, and it turned out that he was right.

Her breathing was like the flapping of the wings of a bee. It was so frequent and rapid, that it was almost imperceivable. Each exhalation was short, extremely momentary, and swift. It generated a spiraling linear gust of wind that revolved around her.

She exhaled so many times per second, that the sheer number of individual gusts of wind essentially formed something that resembled a tornado.

For a moment, he couldn't help but actually appreciate how remarkably fair the test was to Martial Artists of all three primary fields of combat. The nature of the challenge allowed for offensive, defensive, and maneuvering-oriented Martial Artists to each try and overcome this incredible hurdle in their own ways.

Defensive-oriented Martial Artists could simply employ their Martial Art and Martial Body to weather and shield themselves from the power of the tornado, although it depended because certain active techniques like Flux Earther were less effective against the likes of wind.

Maneuvering-oriented Martial Artists could aim for the particularly larger gaps in the gust of winds that appeared from time to time. As long as they were fast and agile enough, they could navigate the artificial tornado well enough.

Offensive Martial Artists could simply fight back against the storm and push back against the winds in order to make progress.

It was clear that the others had also realized that Rui could see Martial Artists falling into the three categories attempting these three broad approaches.

The question he needed to answer was what approach he wanted to go for. Since he had the Metabody System, he could try all three approaches if he wanted.

('I need to choose the least taxing solution out of all three,') Rui narrowed his eyes. He wasn't sure if the potions that the contest would supply would necessarily return him back to peak condition if he pushed himself with the Metabody System, that was just how taxing the technique was.

It wasn't easy determining how he ought to go about it because he wasn't immediately able to gauge which of the approaches would conserve him the most energy. Even within each approach, he had multiple choices. Like within the offensive approach, he could choose to apply his power through physical strength or through potent projection of wind with techniques like Mighty Roar Flash Blast or Transverse Resonance.

Furthermore, he could also use Weaving Blood to simply heal all the damage he endured while he was wading through the storm.

And of course, he had not forgotten the last way either. He could just steal a pass from one of the contestants who did manage to get their hands on one. He was not opposed to this choice either out of some silly sense of honor.

This was part of the contest, Master Uma herself had specified that passes could be obtained in any way. That was an indication that attacking pass-holders for their passes was a perfectly legal tactic that perfectly fell within the rules of the contest.

It was a requirement that contestants be able to not only acquire a pass but maintain it to the end of the round.

With so many options at hand, Rui was a little at a loss. He wasn't sure about what the likelihood of their success were.

The other Martial Artists were generally a lot more specialized than he was which meant they had only one option to consider, making the choice a no-brainer. It was only he who had the luxury of choice, who also had the burden of choice.

That was why he decided to do something that drew the attention of all the spectators and even the contestants.

('Nothing like a good sit in the middle of a contest,') Rui mused as one leg lay flat on the ground, while the other perched on its foot, folded.

If he did not have enough data, then he simply needed to gather it.

#### Chapter 1239: Considerations

"Look at that guy, he has the audacity to sit down in the middle of the competition!"

"He's either confident or cocky."

"Tsk, who does he think he's fooling? He's just waiting for an appropriate target to get a hand on a pass, and then steal it from them!"

Rui did not care for the small commotion he drew. It was easier to resist the storm when he was more anchored to the ground and the colosseum wall behind his back, allowing him to conserve more energy from the storm.

That was the reason he went out of his way to do that, it had nothing to do with anything else.

('Hm, so far, only fifty percent of the contestants are making actual efforts in trying to get their hands on a pass. The remaining fifty are clearly opting to go for the robbing route.') He noted.

This made sense since not everybody was compatible with trying to overcome a tornado like this. Poison-oriented Martial Artists, for example, were extremely incompatible with non-living threats. They

could be exceptionally dangerous as long as their opponents were alive, but that was no longer true if they were dealing with forces of nature.

In such a circumstance, they could not accomplish anything against a tornado. It made sense to wait until a contestant got their hands on a pass, and then poison them and take their pass.

If Rui chose to go for obtaining a pass from the table, then he would certainly be forced to deal with those predators that were simply waiting for an opportune moment. However, being the predator did not strictly sound fun either, each contestant was going to defend their pass with everything they had, and he would be forced to reveal a lot of his power to all the other contestants if he chose to fight.

That was an undesirable outcome. This was not just a competition for passes, it was also a competition for information. The one that gained the most information had the highest chance to succeed.

Of course, that did not mean Rui ought to immediately begin developing predictive models for all contestants.

That was stupidly inefficient, not to mention impossible given that there were two hundred contestants and the fact that he also needed to focus on the challenge more than anything else.

He only collected some preliminary data to try and figure out which approach was the best. He had been observing the success rate of the various approaches being employed by the contestants. The results left him feeling admiration.

Not for the contestants, but for the examiner.

('All three approaches are equal in their progress rates,') He mused. ('That's not a coincidence. It means that Master Uma has perfectly manipulated the resulting storm to give all three fields of combat an equal chance to succeed, so as to not unfairly give any one category of Martial Artists an unfair advantage.')

It appeared that she was not as uncaring as she portrayed herself.

Still, that did not mean she was lenient.

Not a single Martial Squire had succeeded yet.

There were some who had made far more progress than the others.

Rui noted that the elder granny had made a lot more progress towards the table than most. She breathed in a particular manner, taking slow but measured steps in the direction of the table, which was certainly an impressive feat.

Rui glanced over, looking for a particular individual out of all the others.

"Hmmm..." Squire Meera stared at the storm with an impassive expression. "Pushing through the storm like a coolie, or letting my attire get battered by the winds..."

Rui narrowed his eyes.

The depth of peril she radiated spiked all of a sudden!

Her demeanor emanated displeasure.

Three words escaped her mouth.

"How aesthetically unappealing."

Rui tilted his head in confusion.

She wasn't done, however.

"I refuse such an outcome." She leaped into the tornado without activating a single offensive or defensive technique.

Rui widened his eyes in amazement as he watched pirouette through the gaps of the storm in an elegant fashion, unperturbed. It wasn't long before she came with a pass in her hand.

Her actions had not gone unnoticed by the other contestants.

They all couldn't help but gape at her in shock as she walked into the storm one moment, and exited a short while later with a pass in her hand.

She was the first contestant to get her hands on a pass!

Rui had to admit, her maneuvering prowess was quite impressive. Her attire and her neatly groomed hair were nearly unaffected by what she had done, which was astonishing given that she had just walked into what was effectively a tornado!

It meant that she had somehow managed to smoothly exploit the gaps in the tornado to find a way to the passes and back unperturbed.

However, it was bizarre because it didn't feel like she was a maneuvering-oriented Martial Squire in the first place. Furthermore, it had sounded as if she had actually considered the offensive and defensive approach, which meant she had the ability to at least attempt those approaches, but had ultimately rejected them because they were too ugly.

He didn't quite understand that part. However, when he compared some of her previous statements, he had begun to get an inkling of what that was all about. She may very well have the most remarkable Martial Art that he had ever seen.

Unfortunately, that was not the only challenge she faced. She also had to overcome the hoards of hyenas that converged on to her to get her pass.

Rui briefly considered trying to take her pass, before shaking his head. Competing with all the Martial Squires who were incapable of dealing with the challenge while also trying to fight the champion under these circumstances was not the best way of going about it. As long as the two of them kept winning, they were bound to clash in the near future.

#### Chapter 1240: Idea

Rui knew that going for a pass would land him in a similar situation as she was in right now, being targeted for a pass. Not that he didn't have experience being targeted. But the quality of Martial Squires in the second round was vastly higher than that of the preliminary contest.

If he was ganged up on here, then he had a very real probability of losing. Not even he could handle so many grade-ten Martial Squires for too long.

However, being the one to attack pass-gainers also meant competing with not only them but also the Martial Artist who gained the pass in the first place.

Furthermore, they would most certainly use the storm as a shield. Since the contestants would have long passed through the storm to acquire their own passes if they could.

('Tsk, such a pain,') Rui snorted. ('Surely, there must be a way to acquire a pass without the hassle of other contestants one way or another.')

His eyes widened as he came up with an interesting idea, breaking out into a grin.

He had a plan.

He quickly began the preparations as he rapidly began building a predictive model for the tornado and the Master's training technique.

What he was trying to do was map out the corresponding outcomes of the Master's breathing patterns and the resulting tornado. He needed to focus his mind to the absolute limit to be able to detect the patterns of her extremely rapid breathing.

Thankfully, she wasn't especially trying to confound anybody with her breathing patterns, it was clear that she was simply indulging in her own training. What the training was, Rui had no idea, after all, if the tornado were what the technique was all about, then it would be a Master-level technique and they would have all long been dead.

As it was, it was equivalent to a Senior-level technique, which was an entire Realm above them, and below her. Although they were Realm below it, the reason that they weren't all straight-up dead was because the power of the technique had been distributed over an extremely large amount of area and volume. Meaning each Martial Squire experienced only a tiny fraction of the full power of the Senior-level tornado.

And the fact that getting the pass was still an insurmountable task to most of them spoke volumes of the power of the Senior Realm.

Regardless, Rui was just barely able to keep up with her blurringly-fast breathing patterns that generated the tornado. He quickly formed predictive models that allowed him to predict the future state of the tornado based on her breathing.

He got up. Yet this time, no one paid him attention.

Just as he hoped.

"Fuuuuu..." He exhaled deeply, activating the Godspeed technique. Instantly his weight reduced massively as he felt a surge of power.

His eyes were fixed forward, yet it wasn't the storm he was watching.

It was the Martial Artist producing that storm. Riemannian Echo barely kept track of her movements, but it managed. After all, this was the same technique that allowed him to sense, predict, and dodge the Root.

('Now!') Rui lashed forward at a blinding pace.



He bobbed and weaved through the narrow gaps of the storm, putting his acrobatic ability to the absolute test. He flashed forward, squeezing through narrow pockets that he predicted ahead of time watching Master Uma breathe.

It was quite unnerving because he wasn't even paying attention to the winds.

He couldn't afford to.

Had she generated sound instead of wind currents, then he would have been able to use the ODA System to predict how it would all unfold. Unfortunately, he could not do that, thus he had to restrict himself to analyzing the source of the storm to see through it.

He simply trusted in the predictions he made, without so much as faltering, one misstep and he would get blown away with ease, especially with VOID Forestep.

The other Martial Squires noticed the powerful technique in play and immediately prepared themselves.

It appeared that there was another who could come to possess a pass very soon. Since that was the case, they intended to pounce on him the second he appeared!

Squire Meera heaved in respite as her burden lightened with some of her attackers choosing to wait for Rui.

Everybody held their breath in anticipation for the second pass-holder to appear.

It had become quite evident that Squire Meera was impossible to steal from. She kept muttering something about being ugly and had managed to protect her pass with remarkable success.

If she was too much, then they would have to settle for the next one. They definitely had no intention of letting Rui as well as the few others that had been able to overcome the storm and gain a pass.

They waited, poised in action for Rui to appear.

They waited, impatient.

They waited, frustrated.

And they simply kept waiting.

"Where did he go?!"

If he had been blown away, he would have appeared outside by now. If he got a pass, he would have appeared by now. What other outcome was there?

"Their perspectives are too limited... Wouldn't you agree?" Rui remarked, smirking as he clutched his pass, turning his head towards the woman seated midair right before him.

The two of them were in the only pocket inside the tornado that was devoid of winds. The immediate area around Master Uma inside the ring table.

She opened her eyes, sharply paying attention to the young man who was grinning at her, sitting right opposite to him. She simply studied him with her piercing eyes, continuing her breathing technique all the while.

Suddenly, he heard her voice.

She had but one question.

"What are you boy?"

Rui raised an eyebrow as he realized that she hadn't opened her mouth. She had manipulated the winds to produce a sound that identically matched her own voice verbatim!

That was an extraordinarily fine manipulation of the air, but it was the words she conveyed that held his attention.