

Martial Unity 1241

Chapter 1241: Regards

He wasn't sure how he was supposed to answer that. Of course, he most certainly recognized that it wasn't a literal question, even though he was tempted to reply with 'male homosapien', he did not think that the aloof Master would find that amusing.

"I'm not sure what that means," Rui replied. "I'm a Martial Artist, just like any other."

"Cease your lies," Her voice reverberated in his ears. "I have lived dozens of times your life. I have seen more than you could possibly even begin to fathom. I know how to differentiate between things that are like any other and things that aren't."

It seemed that she wasn't willing to buy his bullshit.

Rui grew more wary. She seemed a lot less down-to-earth than Master Deivon, who did not act so arrogantly with him all the time despite being two Realms above him. However, her status and power were far greater than even Master Deivon's. Perhaps it was too much of him to expect to be able to be relaxed around her.

If she found out his secrets, especially the one of being from another world, he did not think it would go well. Even if the best possible outcome happened and she worshipped him instead, that was still a terrible outcome in his eyes. He did not want to become the object of devotion and worship of a religion as powerful as the Virodhabhasa Faith.

"I don't know how to answer that," Rui replied. "As far as I'm concerned, I am a Martial Artist who pursues his Martial Path out of personal ambition and love. My Martial Path is... powerful and obscure, but it's not as though there aren't other Martial Paths like that out there."

Tokugawa Ieyasu existed, after all. Furthermore, if he wasn't wrong, Squire Meera was also certainly cut from another cloth as well. He had a decent idea of what her Martial Path was, and it was arguably even more absurd than his.

She simply stared at him with her sharp eyes, not so much as changing a shade.

Rui grew nervous, but he hoped that being a Virodhabhasa Seed, and Master Deivon's heritor would ensure that she does not cross a line.

Instead, she simply closed her eyes and continued training.

"I'm allowed to be here?" Rui asked with curiosity.

She did not bother responding, but it appeared that she did not intend to kick him out. Thankfully, just like Rui had predicted, she could not do anything to him because it did not violate the rules that she herself had announced, which most likely meant that she could not put so much as a scratch on him.

That was good, because if she did kick him out, then his entire plan would have failed.

He did not want to expose his power, after going through all the possible ways in which he could acquire a pass, he sharply realized that hiding in the pocket of air around Master Uma within the table was the only possibility that ensured that he mostly hid his power.

Of course, he exposed Void Forestep, but that much was inevitable, the other outcomes of returning with a pass, or trying to steal a pass exposed his power much more.

Even now, Squire Meera was fighting off several grade-ten Martial Squires, and much to his admiration, she defended her pass.

Of course, her burden had lightened considerably as other Martial Squires also began getting passes to the next round, becoming easier targets than someone with an absurd Martial Path like Squire Meera.

One by one, candidates reached the table, gaining a pass before heading back. Unlike Rui, they were unable to sense the pocket of air that could serve as a good hiding place because they did not have Riemannian Echo.

Once the supply of passes became greater, the individual burden that each pass holder had to bear reduced considerably. Allowing them to be able to withstand the pressure.

Unlike when Rui faced three grade-ten Martial Squires, these Martial Squires did not have to actually defeat, overcome, or even push back their opponents.

Soon enough, the fortieth candidate got their hands on the pass, serving as a signal to Master Uma.

WHOOSH!!!

The storm disappeared.

"Woah!"

"Oof!"

Several Martial Squires lost their balance, having been resisting the storm this entire time, the disappearance of the storm caused them to momentarily become imbalanced.

Each of them glanced at Master Uma.

And each of them furrowed their eyebrows in surprise as they saw Rui relaxing opposite her.

Rui smirked mischievously under his mask as they furrowed their eyebrows in anger.

Why did he get to avoid all the competition while also spending time with the esteemed bishop?

"All forty passes have been acquired," Master Uma announced. "The competition has ended. Those who possess a pass in their possession at the moment of the conclusion of this round will go on to the next round. The one who last completely possessed the pass will be the one to pass out of whom both have a hand on the pass of this moment."

This meant that those the few who were engaging in a tug of war over the pass could not all pass, the challenger would not go to the next round unless he actually fully gained control of the pass.

The forty winners quickly gathered while the remaining one hundred and sixty were eliminated.

Of course, that did not mean their battle had been in vain. As part of the top two hundred out of a hundred thousand Martial Squires, they could be considered to be the elite out of the elite. Any organization below a certain level of strength would fight to have them.

However, it was undoubtedly the case that the forty winners who made it to the third round benefited far more.

Rui could sense with his Primordial Instinct that each of the forty Martial Squires was cut from an entirely different cloth than standard grade-ten Martial Squires. Even the three grade-ten Martial Squires that he overcame from the preliminary contest could not compare to these forty Martial Squires.

Chapter 1242: Abyssfeeder

Master Uma glanced at Rui once more time with a deep stare before disappearing from his very senses.

('Oh man...') Rui sighed. ('I just hope that she isn't going to make trouble for me.')

Regardless, now was not the time for him to think about such matters.

Each of the contestants was supplied with rejuvenation and healing potions. Rui's body slurped them up doing its best to restore itself to its peak. He was grateful that it was able to fix the burdens on the body caused by Void Forestep. Thankfully, rejuvenation potions were extremely dense and heavy in their nutritional content.

While the others would not need to eat for a while, Rui only returned to his previous state, the potion made up for a shortcoming, but it did not increase his reserves due to that.

Regardless, he got away with almost entirely with hiding his power. The same could not be said for everybody else. The forty that passed most certainly exposed their power to each other. Rui was the least known out of them all.

The only thing that they knew about was his super speed, however, that was such incomplete information that it would actually work in his favor. There was a high chance that many of them assumed that he was a maneuvering or speed-oriented Martial Artist.

That was something that could be used against them potentially.

Suddenly, another Martial Master appeared before all of them.

Unlike Master Uma, this one looked remarkably young.

"Contestants, I am bishop Greminga," He smiled warmly. "The forty of you have come far. You have overcome obstacles that hundreds of thousands of your peers have failed to overcome. It is not an exaggeration to say that those of you who are still standing here will go on to be among the Martial Art leaders of tomorrow."

It appeared that this Martial Master was a lot more receptive to the importance of the Martial Contest compared to Master Uma, who uttered the bare minimum of words.

"The challenge you shall face this time is not light," The man explained. "Only eight of you will pass this round and go on to enter the final tournament that will be held tomorrow. It is my duty to ensure that those eight of you truly are the most fit, and the most powerful out of all of you."

He smiled, before waving his hand.

Forty strange boxes appeared in a circle around him.

"Within these containment units lies your challenge. Within them lies what many consider to be the bane of Martial Art, or at least, an element of it."

That evoked a reaction from the contestants. It was a strange thing for someone like him to say.

The bane of Martial Art?

That was an extraordinary claim to make when so many diverse and powerful Martial Artists existed. An extraordinary claim that would be laughed at if not for an extremely esteemed Martial Master making the claim.

It was especially odd coming from a bishop of the Virodhabhasa Faith. The bane of Martial Art?

('That sounds an awful lot like what the Virodhabhasa, the Antithesis, is supposed to be.') Rui narrowed his eyes as he studied the boxes.

Unlike the others, he could actually peer into their depths. He carefully studied their contents.

('Is that a... seed?') Rui frowned.

The man waved his hand, and the containment units opened, dropping their contents to the ground.

They were indeed what looked like seeds.

Suddenly, they moved.

A dense pitch-black web emerged from the seed, spreading out into the air and into the Earth. It was such an eerie and alien sight that the Martial Squires could not help but put some distance between them.

"How disgusting," Squire Meera murmured.

"This is Relenia Varasa," The man explained to the confused contestants. "Also known as Abyssfeeder. It is a species that is found in particularly volatile and chaotic environments and ecosystems within the Beast Domain, areas that are entirely uninhabitable to species below a certain level of power."

They all stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

"It is one of the few monster species that can survive in danger zones that are a Realm entirely above it," The Martial Master generously explained. "Generally, danger zones are graded by the bare minimum power level a creature needs to be to survive for extensive periods of time as opposed to dying quickly. A Senior-level danger zone is a danger zone where only Senior-level creatures and above are able to sustain their lives. Anything less is simply prey, fodder, and sustenance for the entire ecosystem to consume and predate. This species, however, is one of the few species in existence that can defy that. It can exist in danger zones graded an entire Realm of power above it."

They narrowed their eyes at that statement. If that was the case, then there was no doubt that the species was capable of a lot. Such a species would be extremely dangerous to find oneself aligned against.

"It does this by rapid physiological evolution that we don't fully understand yet," The man explained. "In extremely hot environments, it rapidly evolved with highly efficient heat absorption and resistance systems as well as incredible cooling systems. In extremely cold environments, they develop remarkably effective heat generation systems. They have been shown to adapt to all kinds of temperatures, atmospheres, extreme geologies, and extreme ecosystems of all kinds. Including..."

He paused for a moment. "...Martial Artists. They are omnivorous and are fully capable of treating even Martial Artists as prey to consume. They change the foundation of their bodies to adapt to Martial Artists and their Martial Paths, evolving their biologies to them, and consuming them. They are considered a highly dangerous species, with a danger potential evaluated at S-Class by the Monster Evaluation Department of the Security Council of the Transpanamic Consortium."

That spread a wave of shock among all those who heard it. Not many understood the full implications of what the man just uttered, but it was clear that this lifeform was not to be underestimated.

Rui couldn't help but be surprised while the others were alarmed.

He did not know that there were creatures out there that embodied his Martial Path as a genetic trait. That sounded incredibly difficult to achieve. Evolution worked by the principle of survival of the fittest. The fittest survived, and the fittest reproduced. It naturally meant that any species that evolved maintained a coherent and constant physiology as a result. He didn't understand how a creature that evolved to evolve could possibly exist.

Then again, he knew that his framework of evolution was based on Earth, which was a much more grounded and less fantastical planet. The presence of esoteric substances complicated any and everything. Every ounce of scientific theory was no longer applicable one-to-one to the world of Gaia due to its presence. The more Rui learned about what could be done with esoteric substances, the truer this simple fact became.

If it was possible for life to evolve to evolve, then it was only possible because of the supernatural capabilities of esoteric substances. Only they could explain why such an insane thing could come to be.

As excited and amazed as Rui was about the existence of such a species, and the relevance of their existence to him and his Martial Path, now was not the time to lose himself in a reverie in this line of thought.

He quickly pulled himself together as he returned his focus back to the contest at hand. He most certainly needed to overcome this challenge if he wanted his goals for coming to be achieved.

All of the Martial Squires were fully on guard as they realized that the third challenge revolved around this extremely dangerous creature. They needed some time to process how they were going to handle such an aberrant threat.

It appeared that Master Greminga was more than willing to give them that time as he disclosed more information about the threat that they were going to face.

"The Abyssfeeder is almost entirely comprised of an extremely precious and rare esoteric substance known as primordial seed. An extraordinary esoteric substance that can become anything when subjected to the right stimuli. It is an exceedingly difficult esoteric substance to manage and engineer

and is a popular area of research and development. That is believed to be what allows the Abyssfeeder species to evolve so well."

Rui's eyes widened as he instantly developed an extreme curiosity about the substance in question. It sounded like primordial seed was an extraordinarily high-grade esoteric that was extremely valuable. It also fell in line with his prior expectations of an esoteric substance being responsible for the remarkable capabilities of the Abyssfeeder species.

He even felt the vague itch to get his hands on some.

"Now then, I have given you the context behind the challenge, as well as some time to consider it," The man generously explained. "It is time to actually talk about the objective, rules, and conditions for victory. As I'm sure you've realized, you will all be facing a specimen each. Each of them has been largely starved in the past few days when they were accustomed to consuming sustenance regularly in a Lost City danger zone where they were found. Thus they will seek out sustenance to consume, one way or another. Their raw physiological prowess is well within the Squire Realm, however, as I said, their ability to overcome hurdles and tribulations far exceeds their conventional limits. Your objective is to defeat them. The first eight to win will move on to the final tournament."

The containment units fully released the growing Abyssfeeders, before disappearing. Immediately, their webs began spreading even more into the ground and the air.

The man smiled when he saw all of them stiffen. "Good luck."

He, too, quickly disappeared, leaving but a small gust of wind behind.

The contest had already begun.

The forty Abyssfeeders continued to grow larger and larger, growing in a sickly and alien manner.

For a moment, none of the contestants knew what to do. Instinctually, none of them wanted to get close to the strange lifeforms. Given what they knew about it, it seemed rather unwise to barge in head-on.

Rui, however, begged to differ. He had a little more insight into the shortcomings of adaptive evolution.

It was the strongest after it evolved, but not before.

If there was any time that one ought to focus on when aiming to take them out, it was before they evolved.

He quickly activated Hypertrophic Surge, growing in size and density, uncaring for the eyes he drew. Defeating an abyssfeeder early was easily worth the price of exposing another ability of his.

He activated Transverse Resonance tier five, launching his most powerful attack.

Nearly every Martial Squire widened their eyes in shock as the ground shook in response to the technique. He launched five incredibly potent attacks, each faster than the previous one. By the time the first one crossed half way through, it had already overlapped with its four faster successors, engaging in constructive superposition, merging into one singular titanicly potent projectile that warped light itself.

BOOM!!!

The colosseum rumbled, reeling in shock.

The contestants gritted their teeth as they turned towards Rui with a wary expression. His performance was so abrupt, and so abruptly shocking, that they regarded him as a greater threat than any of the Abyssfeeders!

They were not strictly wrong.

Yet Rui's attention was fixed on the Abyssfeeder that he had struck.

In fact, the same could be said for the other specimens that all froze in their spots, almost as if wondering if their brother was still alive.

RUMBLE

The ground suddenly shook as the dust cleared.

Rui narrowed his eyes.

He didn't even need to see it to know that he had failed.

He watched as a flat thin sheet of blackness emerged from the ground, slithering through the rubble.

It was unharmed.

Rui focused all of his senses on it as he realized what had happened.

A grin broke out on his face. "It would be a joke if that was enough..."

Both of them lashed forward at the same time. The Abyssfeeder faced off against the Voider.

Chapter 1244: Water

His eyes narrowed as he studied the damage that his attack had inflicted on the Abyssfeeder specimen that he had attacked. It wasn't that he hadn't done any damage at all to its second inspection, he just realized that it was harder to tell because its anatomy was so undefined and hard to gauge.

But it was clear that it was not entirely ineffective. And yet, he was a little wary of the fact that his strongest attack did not even hurt it all that much. One of the biggest points of concern was the fact that it didn't even need that much time to begin adapting to a certain offensive.

('It's adaptation timeframe is absurdly little.') Rui tutted.

When he compared it to his adaptation, at least, the adaptation speed of the Abyssfeeder species was much higher.

Of course, Rui adapted to opponents as a whole, not to a single attack. Their adaptation also worked on fundamentally different principles.

His Flowing Void Style employed the VOID algorithm, which relied largely on data analysis starting from simply physicality and stance analysis to pattern recognition to create predictive models and did the actual adapting through the adaptive evolution model, picking the right counters based on what the predictions were.

It used to be that, but he recently added the Metabody System which allowed him to change his physical parameters to the most optimal to counter his opponent. He essentially altered them to complement his adapted fighting style.

Together, this formed the core of his Flowing Void Style.

('But this creature... It doesn't even seem to have a sophisticated mind,') Rui sharply analyzed based on their movements. ('It's adaptation is purely physiological.')

His attention focused even more as it approached. It had for some reason become an extremely flat sheet of blackness instead of the web that it was before. It began approaching Rui, which is when he sensed something was off.

('Wait a minute...') He frowned. ('I can sense it through Seismic Mapping, but not Tempestuous Feel.')

That meant it sent vibrations through the ground and not through the air.

('Which means... I see, so that's how it handled my attack.') He tutted as he understood what had happened. ('Acousting air absorption. That's how it dealt with my attack.')

It somehow had managed to alter its body in a way that would permeate the impact of the air particles through it in a manner that exploited the fact that gases are not bound together the way solids were. It would also explain why it didn't register on his Tempestuous Feel.

Just as Rui was starting to get a better idea of how this creature fought.

It lashed out at him swiftly.

It appeared that the other Abyssfeeders had also waited enough.

The other contestants grew graver by the second as they each sought to deal with the strange creature in their own ways.

Rui simply stood in place as the one that he had attacked reached him. He did not want to avoid confrontation because he needed as much data on this creature as he could get. The entire philosophy behind his Martial Art was data-driven adaptation, without data, he couldn't fight at his peak.

Another reason he not only stood his ground but rushed towards the Abyssfeeder was because this was not just a clash between man and beast.

It was a clash of philosophies.

Of course, he was cognizant that the abyssfeeder certainly not conscious or sentient enough for the complex thought needed to have philosophies. However, despite that, it was undoubtedly the case that there was a clash between the philosophies of himself and his monster of an opponent.

What was the best way to adapt and evolve to one's opponent in a physical conflict?

This was the avenue where they diverged almost entirely.

The creature's physiology was the foundation of its ability to adapt and evolve, its body was the foundation of this ability.

Rui, on the other hand, did not adapt nearly as much through the body. While it was true that he had the Metabody System which did alter its body to adapt to his opponent, the fact of the matter was that the degree to which he altered his body paled in comparison to his opponent. While he used autophagy, the hyper-enhanced flow of nutrition and cell-building compounds, the Herenal Virus, cell wall thickening, and such principles to alter his combat physical parameters, these were rather minor changes in comparison to the drastic changes that the Abyssfeeder went.

The creature did not even resemble its original self whatsoever.

Unlike it, Rui relied on the adaptation and evolution of thought. The VOID algorithm allowed him to make exactly the combat and hand-to-hand decisions that were perfectly suited to countering his opponent. The foundation of adaptation and evolution relied on the mind, rather than the body.

Rui narrowed his eyes as his expression intensified.

He felt his heart growing warmer.

He could not afford to lose this battle. The loss threatened the dominance of the philosophy that he had dedicated himself to.

Be water.

One might never expect it out of an instruction consisting of two words, but it had changed Rui's life.

No, that wasn't quite right.

It had changed both his lives. He had interpreted those words as referring to the state of one's mind. Back on Earth, that was the only interpretation that made sense.

Yet, this wasn't Earth.

In the world of Gaia, those words could mean a lot more than just the state of mind.

After all, he was looking at a creature whose body may as well be water. It had started out as a shapeless mass of webs, and now it was rushing towards him in the shape of a mat, was it not water in spirit?

Which water was superior?

Mind or body?

One could not say.

Yet even as the true battle was about to begin, a single thought flowed through him.

I won't lose.

He couldn't lose. For other battles, the loss was not absolutely intolerable.

But not this battle.

Mind of Water was the foundation of his Martial Path. He had dedicated everything to it. It was almost who he was as a person.

Losing that... That was no different from dying in mind.

He would rather die in flesh than let that happen.

I will win.

Rui's expression intensified.

His expression crumpled with severity.

His muscles brimmed with power as his mind honed itself sharper than it ever had. Every cell in his body roared as they came together, the sum totality of his being dedicated itself to this battle.

Deep within him, his heart stirred.

BADUMP!

Chapter 1245: Omen

Many Martial Masters had deigned to spectate the first three rounds of the Martial Contest. Most that did only did so because they had patroned a Martial Squire. Very few Martial Masters were genuinely interested in the Squire-level contest. If they did choose to spectate the Martial Contest, it would be the Senior-level contest. It was usually a lot more interesting to them, given that it was only one Realm below them.

Yet those who did choose the Senior-level conflict would later regret the choice once their fellow peers informed them of what happened.

Every Martial Master heard a heartbeat.

There was plenty of noise, the attacks from the contestants, the crowds going wild. Yet none of them missed it.

Master Deivon widened his eyes with an expression of shock as he watched Rui.

('This...') He could hardly believe what he was seeing. ('...The Heart omen, he has arrived at the precipice of the Senior Realm? At the age of twenty-four?!')

Contrary to what many believed, the fulfillment of the Martial Body condition was not a sign that one was ready to enter the Senior Realm.

No.

The Martial Body condition was the absolute bare minimum. Most grade-ten Martial Squires had fulfilled the Martial Body condition, yet most grade-ten Martial Squires never became Martial Seniors. Only a minority did.

There had been Martial Squires who had fulfilled the Martial Body condition decades ago and had still not advanced. It was not a sign of anything, much to the dismay of Martial Squires.

There was a more distinct sign that one was truly at the precipice of the Senior Realm. It was one that Martial Masters did not reveal to Martial Artists of the Senior Realm.

Even as Master Deivon beheld Rui, he could sense that Rui was different from normal. He didn't know why, but he could clearly see it.

Mind and body had overlapped, coordinating in a symphony of melody and rhythm.

A symphony that only Martial Masters were qualified to hear.

BADUMP

At that moment, it rang in their ears. It could not be impeded by mere noise, it almost rang on a different plane of reality, one only they could sense.

The many Martial Masters in the audience frowned as their eyes shifted away from that of their peers and towards the source. It didn't matter even if their heritors were on the losing foot.

It was a rare opportunity to behold something that was hard to come by.

BADUMP

Master Gremingar, whose duty was to carefully oversee the entire battle, couldn't help but divert his attention away from others as a hint of confusion flashed across his trained face.

Master Uma opened her eyes for the first time from her meditation in her VIP seat. Her eyes slowly turned towards Rui as she stared at him expressionlessly.

An amazed smile slowly emerged on Master Carian's face as he paid even more attention to a Martial Squire who had already earned his interest.

BADUMP!

Unbeknownst to everyone else, their eyes were fixed on Rui with rapt attention as they beheld the inception of a battle that may very well allow them to witness a spectacle that was too rare to be missed.

Rui, however, didn't know.

Even if he did, he would never care.

After what seemed like an eternity, it was time.

The true battle had begun.

WHOOSH!

Rui sharply avoided an attack from the Abyssfeeder. A black spike had emerged from Abyssfeeder, lashing out towards Rui out of seemingly nowhere.

Yet it appeared that it wasn't done.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH!

Rui somersaulted away as he evaded the black spikes. He did not want to let them pierce his flesh, he was rather wary of any potential venomous attacks. If the creature could adapt its entire body on a fundamental level to handle any environment, then poison was a very realistic possibility.

('I can't take any damage, it's too dangerous to fight at close range.')

He had already begun adapting. He quickly concluded that hand-to-hand combat was futile, if only because it did not have hands, and fought by generating spikes from its body, at least for now. But that made it harder to predict while making it easier for him to get hit at that range. The only way to dodge a barrage of spikes was to move back, there was no space in between spikes.

He also couldn't attack it with strikes very easily, if his fist ran into a spike, it would not end well, he had already decided to avoid the spikes, making close-range attacks impossible. Grappling was absolutely out of the question, he would die if he tried that.

('In that case, it's better to open up the distance entirely.')

Rui's expression sharpened.

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

He fired away three powerful Mighty Roar Flash Blasts at the creature.

BAM BAM BAM!

"Tsk," Rui narrowed his eyes as they were less effective even when he considered the fact that they were much weaker than the tier five Transverse Resonance that he had launched earlier.

It lashed forward like almost nothing happened. It began changing form, going from being flat to returning to a blob-like shape. Rui narrowed his eyes as it began taking a concave or hemispherical shape.

('The inner hemispherical surface matches the shape of the sound attack, this increases the area of contact, reducing the pressure.') His expression grew more grave. ('Furthermore, by increasing its surface area, it has a higher chance of getting a good grasp of my body in close quarters.')

It rapidly shifted across the ground, relying on a wheel-like mechanism to seamlessly chase after him.

Rui immediately began sky-walking as he continuously observed the creature's changes and shifts. He was starting to get a good idea of how the creature functioned effectively. The fundamental metabolic processes that the body underwent were still a large mystery to him, but the principles that guided the change were becoming more transparent to him.

Immediately the Abyssfeeder took to the air, and Rui studied it more intently.

('Air absorption and expulsion thrust.') He quickly concluded.

It sucked in air and launched it downwards extremely powerfully, using Newton's third law to propel itself towards him.

Not even taking to the skies could shake its determination to consume him!

Chapter 1246: Adaptations

Rui continued increasing the intensity of his long-range attacks from a distance, spamming barrages of sonic bullets, trying to slowly gather damage while keeping it away from him at a distance, while also sky-walking at top speed.

Ordinarily, this would be difficult for any grade-ten Martial Squire to overcome. Rui's long-range offense was quite respectable even without Hypertrophic Surge, furthermore, with Gale Force Breathing, and Outer Convergence he could shift around the air quite swiftly. Catching up to him was a remarkably heavy task.

Yet, the Abyssfeeder simply shifted its form. From a concave hemisphere, its shape shifted to that of a disk.

('Coefficient of drag reduced by ninety-six-point-eight percent.') Rui's expression grew more severe. ('It's adapting to aerial maneuvering by becoming more aerodynamic because I took the battle to the air.')

Now, the earlier equation no longer held true. The Abyssfeeder zipped through the air at a much greater speed than Rui could. The human body was not aerodynamic, and there was a limit to what Martial Art techniques could do in that regard.

Nothing beat literally changing the shape of one's body to cut through the air effortlessly, even particularly useful techniques like Gale Force Breathing were not enough. The Abyssfeeder shot through the air towards Rui faster than any of the contestants could hope to outrun or tag with attacks, that was why most of them quickly returned to the ground.

But not Rui.

BOOM!

Many widened their eyes.

Rui sharply tagged the flashing disk with a tier three Transverse Resonance out of seemingly nowhere, displaying remarkably high accuracy that far exceeded the conventional limits of the Squire Realm!

While others had trouble landing attacks from a distance on the Abyssfeeder midair, every single attack that Rui launched struck it.

('Your propelling trajectory is transparent.') Rui narrowed his eyes as the ODA System worked tirelessly to give Rui incredible accuracy. Because the creature mindlessly became increasingly efficient and energy-consumptive in its trajectories, Rui could easily predict which direction it was going to go even without relying on a predictive model.

Despite zipping toward him at incredible speeds through the air, Rui continuously nailed it with every attack, refusing to allow it to enter close range to him. Furthermore, due to the fact that the sound bullet could not be easily perceived once it was launched, it simply was not equipped to dodge him. It could try and gauge his aim from physical cues, but that required not only being sentient and intelligent but also having an understanding of human behavior.

Rui had ruled out both possibilities. He became more and more certain of his understanding of this creature the more he fought it. He became more and more certain that it embodied the concept of the body of water as opposed to Rui's mind of water.

('Its adaptation and evolution are not guided by adaptation rules baked into its DNA,') Rui narrowed his eyes as he continued firing away at it, not allowing it to reach him. ('It's more like individual cells undergo random rapid genetic changes or mutations in the face of an environmental problem or hurdle. Cells with successful changes most likely serve as a blueprint for the rest of the cells in the body, while cells with unsuccessful changes either continue changing or copy the successful changes. Thus the entire creature adapts to any given problem or hurdle in this manner.')

As for how these changes occurred? Rui had gained insights into that as well.

He narrowed his eyes, staring at its fluctuating body. ('...RNA editing.')

RNA executed the genetic information stored in DNA. However, unlike DNA, it could be edited by the body through complicated biochemical processes. It was through RNA editing that octopuses edited their brains and bodies to be able to adapt to different temperatures during different seasons.

It was clear to Rui that the creature most likely used an extreme version of this process to adapt to much more than octopuses could, along with the presence of primordial seed in the creature's body. Together, he understood why it came to be known as the bane of Martial Art. Its ability to adapt was almost unparalleled.

BOOM!!!

Rui blasted the creature with a tier five Transverse Resonance, knocking it off trajectory a bit.

While the audience and spectators looked impressed at Rui's absurd aim allowing him to constantly knock away the aerodynamic disk from entering close range from him, Rui knew better than to be satisfied with the course of the battle.

BAM BAM BAM!

Three powerful sonic bullets struck the disk this time, and yet...

('It didn't even budge this time...It grew even faster!') Rui narrowed his eyes as his expression grew more severe. ('It's adapting quickly!')

Its external appearance had not changed, yet Rui's powerful Riemannian Echo revealed the truth.

('It's shifted all of its mass to the core of its disk body, its external structure had become porous and hollow... a sponge to suck air better than it ever did before.') Rui clenched his fist. ('A disk form for aerodynamic maneuvering, a porous and hollow exterior to facilitate greater absorption of air not just to propel itself forward, but to increase the power of its acoustic absorption to become almost immune to sound attacks. It has literally molded itself to become the perfect counter to my long-range techniques.')

It was not fun to see techniques that even he, as modest and grounded as he was, prided himself in to be crushed so overwhelmingly. Its air and sound absorption properties made it extremely difficult to keep it out of range.

Yet...

('I'm not going down that easily.') Rui activated Hypertrophic Surge as he empowered a tier five Transverse Resonance.

BOOM!!!

The sudden surge in power clearly caught the abyssfeeder off-guard, knocking it away. Yet Rui's expression grew more severe when he saw that it could only knock it off-trajectory, it did not suffer any damage.

Just looking at that, he knew that it was a matter of time before even this powerful attack became completely negated.

Yet the fire in his eyes only grew more fierce as his thoughts raced furiously, formulating his final plan.

If this failed, then he would lose a lot more than just the third round.

Both his mind and body knew that.

The totality of all his mental and physical power raced to even greater heights as he truly pushed himself to the limit.

To the limit... and beyond.

BADUMP

Chapter 1247: Choice

He narrowed his eyes as he prepared himself. He had been analyzing the abyssfeeder deeply, gaining insight into it with every movement it made. There were several things that he found out about it.

Its patterns were actually incredibly simple, as a creature that adapted and changed in the same manner that plants naturally sought out sunlight, it did not possess complex thought that caused some incredibly complex patterns in behavior.

That sounded well and good, but it came with a deep problem

Its patterns were simple, it was just that the patterns continued changing as the body did, undoing a bit of his progress every time he changed it.

It was frustrating because it was in a way adapting to his adaptation by making it difficult to adapt to him. Of course, he knew that this wasn't actually the case. This was an unintended consequence of the nature of existence as opposed to an active adaptation measure that it took to counter his adaptation.

Nonetheless, it had been effective. He was not able to form a perfect predictive model because, by the time he did, it had already formed a different body that mostly invalidated the predictive model he had built before. That was the reason he needed to come up with something new.

He refused to believe that the VOID algorithm had become obsolete. This was the first time that something had refuted his predictive model so definitively.

However, he was firm in his belief in the pattern recognition model of the VOID algorithm. The universe and all of reality were made up of all kinds of patterns on every level. Why would a single monster defy that rule?

It didn't, he just needed to expand his scope.

If the patterns of its movements keep changing with its body then... Rui's eyes had narrowed. I'll just have to create a predictive model to predict the future changes in its body, based on the past!

That was the goal he had established for himself early on in the battle.

Since he knew that the adaptive choices made by the abyssfeeder were not as a result of thought, but more of a result of biochemical processes that followed a whole bunch of patterns such as the laws of physics and the principles of biochemistry.

All he needed to do was pay attention to the right parameters and begin noting down parameters.

Unfortunately, unlike a predictive model for movements, Rui had never actually created a predictive model for physiological and anatomical change.

He needed to create a new framework then and there.

A horrifyingly complicated task that needed to be accomplished perfectly in the middle of combat against the abyssfeeder.

Furthermore, that wasn't enough.

He needed to create a predictive model that would not only predict what kind of body it would have but also the predictive model that would be necessary for the body.

Ordinarily, predicting future movement predictive models for predicted bodies just by looking at the body would be impossible.

Predictive models predicted movements by scouring through an incredible number of patterns and evaluating what outcome had the highest probability. They required time and effort because each person was an incredibly complex individual.

Each person that was.

Abyssfeeders were entirely different, they were much simpler. They were not too different from automated toys in a way, the only issue was that their body kept changing due to the physiological changes.

Still, it was a massive undertaking nonetheless, not only would his body predictive model need to predict what kind of body it would have in the future, but it would also need to give him the elementary predictive model for the movements of that body.

Every Martial Squire would not even know where to begin.

It was an absurd proposition, barely within the realm of possibility for a Martial Squire.

And yet...

"Heh..."

Rui did not even notice the smile that had crept up on his face.

I will do it.

His body pushed itself to the absolute.

I will accomplish it.

His mind sharpened, honing itself into a razor that cut through the fog of uncertainty. His vision fixed on the abyssfeeder.

For a moment, he was under the illusion that he could communicate with it.

I beg you...

An earnest request surged up in his mind.

...Don't fail before I succeed.

A butterfly that broke through a cocoon without its own effort would never fly. The very act of breaking through a hurdle was the foundation of growth.

In that moment, the Martial Contest, the final tournament, the predicament of Chairman Deacon, even Senior Xanarn's treatment...

They all faded away.

They may as well have not existed. They no longer even sat at the back of his mind, they simply ceased.

His mind was focused on more important matters.

Mass distribution, range of combat, coefficient of drag, linear and angular velocity, also, surface area to mass ratio... He immediately began computing the variables needed to create such a predictive model, furiously computing together a rough statistical and data analytical process to compute all the information and yield a predictive model that would output predictions based on the current data on the abysfeeder's body which he collected using his powerful senses.

It was a race.

If he succeeded before the creature fully adapted to his long-range combat, then he could turn the battle around.

If he failed, then it was game over. He didn't think he would die at this stage of the contest, but he would rather die than fail.

He had already reached a state of mind where his life no longer mattered to him. He fought not even for victory in the Martial Contest.

He only fought to validate his Martial Art. The failure would mean that he was unable to overcome something that was the antithesis even of his Martial Art. It would be a severe blow to his spirit.

Such a thing must not be allowed to happen. Every cell in his body roared with agreement as he pushed himself to the absolute limit.

BADUMP

Chapter 1248: Clash

The audience watched the contestants fighting with shocked expressions.

Almost none of them were competitive!

It was terrifying to see what a single creature could do to Martial Artists of all kinds. There were only two Martial Squires out of the forty who were able to not get overwhelmed.

One was the reigning champion, Squire Meera. She had ended up getting locked in a stalemate with the abyssfeeder.

Their battle was hard to comprehend, it was almost incoherent. Both sides seemed to change rapidly, so much so that nobody could make sense of what was happening to them.

In comparison, the battle that Rui was undergoing was a lot more comprehensive.

He blasted away at the abysskeeper from afar with everything he had, refusing to allow it to come closer.

Rui narrowed his eyes as he realized that his tier Transverse Resonance was increasingly less effective with each attack. He knew that it was not going to last long based on the rate at which it was progressing.

Thankfully, it seemed as though its rate of adaptation against the powerful attack was lower in comparison. It appeared that the stronger the attack, the proportionally slower its progression was.

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

Rui somersaulted backward as he launched three power tier four Transverse Resonance attacks in rapid succession.

BOOM!

The abyssfeeder quivered under the sheer amount of power that Rui was outputting.

It was as though it could hardly believe that a single Martial Squire could output such power!

Transverse Resonance tier four and tier five were already in the grade-ten territory, furthermore, they were amplified by the titanic power of Hypertrophic Surge.

On top of that, Rui was accurately nailing every single attack perfectly on the dot to ensure maximum impact. The ODA System of the Pathfinder was something that made the already daunting task of approaching Rui even more perilous.

That was why the fact that it continuously made progress against him was even more impressive.

It continuously focused more and more of its body mass at its core, shifting all vital and vulnerable tissue deep inside, while the tougher and harder tissue occupied the exteriors of the disk-shaped creature. The exterior looked extremely solid but in reality, it was light and extremely porous and web-like, perfect for absorbing air and sound and using it to fuel its own acceleration.

If not for the fact that Rui strategically used the ODA System to attack it in angles that were perpendicular to the direction that it wanted to go in, it would have been a lot more successful in using his power to accelerate towards him. However, Rui continuously used many tricks and tactics to slow it down.

Slowly but surely he was adapting to the adaptation of abysskeeper.

The only question was whether it was fast enough.

If it wasn't, the Abyssfeeder would continuously make progress towards him, and eventually reach a close range and attack him from there. It would be unlikely that he would be able to switch to Nemean Blossom, or Weaving Blood fast enough.

Furthermore, even if he did, it would most likely be game over at that point.

Rui's eyes sharpened as he resolutely pushed himself even further. His movements became more and more efficient as he resolved to increase his accuracy even further.

There were several measures that he took to make it harder for the creature to absorb his attacks.

Power is not what makes absorbing them more difficult, not truly. He realized. What does make it harder is the energy density.

A lot of power spread across a wide attack was easier to absorb, less power focused across a much smaller area was much more difficult. The sheer amount of energy focused across a small area made it more difficult for that portion of the creature's organs to absorb the attacks.

This way, he could reduce the energy he consumed, while also making it more difficult to absorb and negate his attacks.

The distance between himself and the abyssfeeder served as a measure of who was winning.

If the distance was reduced, then it was only because the abyssfeeder was winning.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Rui bombarded the creature with attacks as he continuously applied Gale Force Breathing and Outer Convergence to speed away.

His eyes widened as the abyssfeeder resolutely followed. The predictive model that he was constructing allowed him to see what was coming ahead of time.

It's adapting once more. He narrowed his eyes as he ran calculations. It's growing smaller.

The abyssfeeder began reducing its disk size as it began squeezing even more mass into its super-dense core. It appeared that the primordial seed was so flexible that it could freely be squeezed into a small dot, increasing its density seemingly limitlessly with no resistance!

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

The very atmosphere shuddered as Rui unleashed his most powerful long-range attacks one after the other.

Yet the truth became increasingly clear to those who watched.

"It's getting closer..."

"Damn, can no one beat that thing?!"

"Do your best!"

Yet, words of encouragement were just that.

Words.

They did not impact reality; the fact of the matter.

The fact of this matter was that even with all the measures and tactics that Rui came up with to adapt his combat style based on the predictive model he was developing.

It was not good enough to keep the abyssfeeder away.

BADUMP!

The abyssfeeder raced in towards him sleekly. It did not cause so much as a ripple through the air as it approached him.

The time was nigh.

Rui's eyes sharpened as he exerted himself to the absolute limit, yet it appeared that his long-range offense had finally truly died.

WHOOSH!

Fifteen meters.

The abyssfeeder was arriving.

Every cell in his body felt intense danger.

BADUMP!

Ten meters.

His eyes intensified.

It was not over.

He refused to let it be over.

He would die before he let it be over.

BADUMP!

Five meters.

The time had arrived. It seemed clear that the gambit had failed.

Or it should have.

Yet in that moment, where he should have experienced the height of despair...

"Heh..."

...He had the audacity to grin.

BADUMP!

Every muscle in his body brimmed with raw unadulterated power.

Every cell worked together as Outer Convergence converged more power than it ever had.

BOOM!!!

The final clash ensued.

Only one could emerge victorious.

And only one did.

SPLAT!

The spectators widened their eyes in shock.

"Eh...?"

Rui was late to notice.

He glanced down at his arm.

Only then did the pain register.

The pain of having an arm chopped off.

The abyssfeeder had brutally chopped off his uppercut at the shoulder joint.

BADUMP!

Chapter 1249: Insufficient

BADUMP!

Rui's arm flew across the colosseum arena.

The air plummeted.

A vague impending sense of despair and doom radiated across the battle arena.

None of the contestants had failed to notice despite their own losing battles. Many of the contestants had been disqualified, having been saved from absolute death. Those who still held on were severely wounded, even more so than Rui.

Yet, it appeared that Rui followed suit.

The colosseum was silent. Even the noise from the other battles seemed to melt away into the background as an overwhelming sense of defeat seemed to fill up the spectator stands.

That was when it happened.

THUD!

The abyssfeeder that took Rui's arm plummeted to the ground, forming a heavy crater when it landed.

BADUMP!

Everybody watched, shocked.

And confused.

The creature took off Rui's arm in the clash, why had it suddenly collapsed?

No one knew.

It began shifting in its crater, quivering as its body began shifting.

It was healing.

Or it would have, had it been allowed to.

BOOM!

Rui broke the silence as he blasted it with a tier-five Transverse Resonance.

A solemn expression emerged on his face.

He faced the abyssfeeder head-on.

Two words escaped his mouth.

"Mind wins."

They cut through the fog of defeat as he made his declaration to the world.

His expression intensified as he called upon every ounce of power within his body.

His eyes sharpened.

His bleeding body mourned as it pulled itself together.

Yet it bled.

He didn't seem to care. A glint of madness flashed across his eyes as his offense grew even more aggressive.

The spectators watched, frozen, as Rui went into a frenzy as he unleashed every ounce of power onto a crippled creature.

They watched his figure, his movements, his attacks.

A single emotion radiated from him.

Frustration.

It was incomprehensible.

They didn't understand.

What happened?

How could such a clear defeat morph into such a clear victory?

What was even more incomprehensible was the frustration that was visible on his face.

What kind of Martial Artist grew frustrated after they started winning a losing battle?

Only the Martial Masters understood the true depths of that emotion.

He was close. Master Deivon sighed.

Even now... He's pushing himself to cross the precipice to a higher Realm. Master Gremingar shook his head.

But... It's too late... Master Carian closed his eyes. The Martial Heart only heeds the call of need, not the call of frustration.

Master Uma stared at him impassively, before closing her eyes.

They had all seen what had happened. Unlike the spectators, the truth of circumstances had not escaped them.

Just before his arm was taken off, he struck the abyssfeeder with an uppercut. Master Gremingar narrowed his eyes. That single attack did more damage to the abyssfeeder than all of his previous attacks. It did more damage than even the loss of an arm.

He used vibrations to permeate the impact all the way to the core of the creature. Master Carian mused. Ordinarily, that is nothing special but...

But the difference was that the abyssfeeder had been adapting to Rui's long-range attack by protecting all of the vital tissue of its body by shoving it deep inside the core of the body.

The Martial Masters were not the only ones who knew this. Rui was the only other one who had also recognized the truth.

And he had capitalized on it.

He had continued launching more attacks from a distance. He had continued making it harder and harder for the abyssfeeder to absorb the attacks.

In response, the abyssfeeder continued shifting more of its vital tissues to the core of the body while the exteriors became freer to absorb the sound through acoustic air absorption.

It was the perfect counter to Rui's long-range.

He had known that.

He had forced it to continue using that adaptation with even more powerful attacks.

He had been waiting for the moment the abyssfeeder would inevitably cross the distance between them, reaching him.

Everything had been for that moment.

In the moment they clashed, he had launched his most powerful Flowing Canon throwing as much raw power in a single strike as he could.

Yet it wasn't the power that he was focused on.

It was where that power went.

He activated Reverberating Lance to a degree that he seldom did, pushing the technique to its absolute limit.

All so that he could permeate the impact past the exterior and to the core of the creature.

Protecting vital tissue in a core from external attacks was the perfect counter to distant attacks.

Yet what was the perfect counter against one, was the perfect weakness to another.

Against the Reverberating Lance technique, it was no different from baring one's vulnerability openly.

The impact permeated through the creature, striking the vital weak tissue within its core. It was no different from Rui striking the neck of a Martial Artist without any defensive techniques protecting it.

It was overwhelming.

The abyssfeeder had managed to take his arm off before that happened. But once the impact struck the core and did its damage, it couldn't even maintain its body shape anymore.

It had turned into a black puddle within a crater, one that was now continuously being assaulted by Rui.

It tried to heal the damaged tissue, but Rui refused to allow it to.

It tried to adapt, but the damage was too great.

Its movements became slower and weaker with each attack.

It kept struggling... until it stopped.

It stopped moving.

Every sign of life faded away.

Yet Rui didn't stop.

He gritted his teeth as an expression of frustration occupied his face.

Get up.

His other hand subconsciously reached his chest as he felt his heart rate slowing down.

Get up!

The trigger condition for the breakthrough to the Senior Realm was a battle that pushed one to the limit challenging the driving force behind one's Martial Path.

He had instinctively sensed that this battle may very well have been the key.

Yet it was insufficient.

He was too strong.

Chapter 1250: Both

The silence drowned out the noise.

No one understood why he radiated more despair than when he was losing against the monster. His actions looked absurd to all spectators aside from those who came to be aware of the source of his frustration. Not even the contestants understood why he took such a strange victory lap.

Regardless, what was done could not be undone. As much as he wished that the creature was still able to continue fighting to push him to the Senior Realm, it was dead. He was just going to have to accept this simple truth and move on.

For a brief moment, he considered attacking other abyssfeeders to see if he could get the same stimulation once more, but he shook his head, sighing.

It was clear to him that that probably would not work. He could feel his raging heart calming down, and that meant that he would have to go through an incredibly stressful battle from scratch. However, even if he did do that, it would still not be enough.

He had already proven himself stronger, he had already proven that the VOID algorithm was the better adapter, and the biggest drive to win had already gone. He had also already qualified for the next round, so there was not even a necessity for such an action.

He instinctively knew that such a paltry attempt at trying to stoke the flames once more was simply not going to work.

He heaved a sigh as he calmed down, but his mood had already soured. Not even the victory and the prospect of getting to the final tournament tomorrow was enough to cheer him up. It couldn't be helped, he had come close to getting something far more valuable. He didn't even strictly need to go any further considering that his agreement with Master Deivon required him to reach the final tournament, and nothing more. Senior Xanarn's treatment had already been secured.

What he was most focused on right now was the opportunity that he had just lost; one that would take him to a higher Realm. He had already found a successful blueprint for it. A Martial Artist who could push the core of his Martial Art to its absolute limit. An opponent that could challenge the foundations of his Martial Art to its absolute limit. An opponent that could challenge the driving force that drove him down his Martial Path of adaptive evolution.

Unfortunately, there were very few opponents that could do that.

Just being strong wasn't enough. Had that been enough, he could just challenge a Martial Senior to a serious fight, and break through in the process of fighting their Martial Heart. But the driving force of his will to fight and pursue his Martial Path was not victory itself. He fought for his ambition of fulfilling Project Water and creating a Martial Art that could adapt and evolve to all opposition in the world, and becoming a Martial Artist who could do that.

Only an opponent that could threaten the sanctity of the choice he made with creating the VOID algorithm; whether that chosen path to fulfilling Project Water was the right choice, could truly rile up his Martial Heart. An ordinary Martial Senior that he knew he would be able to beat if he was in the Senior Realm simply did not intersect with the core driving forces of his Martial journey.

These insights were the sole consolation to the failed opportunity of breaking through to the Senior Realm. Before, he did not know what kind of battle could serve as a viable trigger. But now, he knew what kind of circumstances an opponent would need to create to force him to take the final step.

The other alternative was the threat of hurting his family. He did not even need for this to pan out to know that he would be driven to insane degrees if his family was ever being hurt in front of him, but he did not even consider trying to purposely put them in such a circumstance. That would be sick, and if he was willing to do such a thing in the first place, then he wouldn't be so driven to protect them, so it was even contradictory.

As for helping Senior Xanarn, he didn't even feel bad in admitting that she probably couldn't serve as a trigger. He liked her but it didn't even begin to compare to an ambition that spanned across two lives and a family that he grew up with.

"Huff..." He shook his head, returning to reality as he finally took stock of what was going around him.

"Hm?" His eyes narrowed as he noticed that there were only ten contestants including himself left in the colosseum. "Where...? Oh."

He was so detached from reality he didn't even realize that they had all been disqualified. Most likely because they were about to die at the hands of the abyssfeeder. Which made sense to him, grade-ten Martial Squires were no different from canon fodder to him while the abyssfeeder was powerful enough to take his arm out before dying. It was cut from a different cloth, literally.

In fact, now that he had satisfied his desire to preserve the sanctity of the choice he made, he actually no longer felt threatened by the physiological adaptation evolution that the abyssfeeder had. In this particular battle, it was mind versus body, however, that did not mean that they had to compete for the rest of his life.

Why couldn't it be mind and body? He had already begun to go down that path with the Metabody System. Sure, when he originally created the VOID algorithm adapting and evolving the body was not part of the plan, but that was because it was not possible back on Earth. Had it been possible, there is no way he would not use it. Adaptive evolution was adaptive evolution, regardless of mind and body.

With that in mind, he actually glanced over at the corpse of the abyssfeeder. It had already turned into separate puddles of black goo. A glint of greed flashed across his eyes.