

## Martial Unity 1251

### Chapter 1251: Stalemate

He had not forgotten about the esoteric substance primordial seed. According to Master Gremingar, it was a substance that could become anything. That was rather remarkable and clearly was something that held true given what the abyssfeeder displayed to him. It demonstrated many esoteric abilities that it developed on the spot to counter Rui, if he could tap into even a bit of that seemingly limitless power, perhaps he could become much stronger than he currently was.

He couldn't even imagine the sheer difficulty of such a task. This was an absurd hurdle that could not be overcome without immense effort and time. This was on a whole other level from simply grafting an esoteric substance deep inside his body.

Furthermore, it was essentially impossible for him to ever reach the abyssfeeder's level, but that was fine, he did not need to get to that level to make a satisfactory application of the primordial seed substance.

Regardless, it was a project that he would have to shelve for the future. Perhaps he could look into it after he broke through to the Senior Realm.

"...And contestant Feron has been disqualified on the basis of being unable to prevent death." Master Gremingar helpfully announced, drawing Rui's attention.

He saw a Martial Senior with an active Martial Heart standing in front of a severely injured Martial Squire. The man had lost a hand and an arm and had many holes impaled into him across his body.

In front of the Martial Senior was a stationary abyssfeeder that had planted itself into the ground and had taken the shape of a tree with long and sharp whips sticking out of the tree trunk. It was a strangely adapted form and one that was quite different from the disk shape that it had taken against Rui. He could even tell what kind of Martial Squire the target was based on these adapted traits.

Regardless, the Martial Squire had done an admirable job holding on this long, but it appeared that he was unable to make it into the top eight, just missing the cut-off by two ranks.

Rui glanced at the other Martial Squires.

Almost all of them were gravely injured, and very few were in a genuine fighting position.

Only one had managed to stalemate the battle.

None of them had defeated their abyssfeeder specimen.

In fact, now that Rui thought about it, he was pretty sure that none of them were supposed to defeat the abyssfeeder. Although Master Gremingar had said that the first eight to win would pass, that was most likely to trick them into believing victory was possible, getting them to go all out rather than fight passively.

In reality, the last eight standing were the ones that would go on to the next round. Victory most likely was out of the question.

In fact, the more Rui became cognizant of his environment, he actually remembered that there was an audience.

He began cognizant of the many eyes that he felt fixating on him even though his battle had ended.

Oh well, I'm sure that Master Deivon will handle this situation well.

"...Contestant Veriole had been disqualified. With eight Martial Squires left in contention, the third round comes to an end." Master Gremingar resolutely announced. "Contestant Reese, Contestant Yiu, Contestant Feoul, Contestant Frinjschia, Contestant Falken, Contestant Dreemont, Contestant Nikila, and Champion Meera, I congratulate all of you on passing the third round. Each of you had proven your power, perseverance, and will in making it this far in a contest that originally held hundreds of thousands of your peers. Each of you has the capital to be considered the pinnacle of the Squire Realm. No matter what happens tomorrow, know that your achievements will ring across the Martial World. I wish you all the best of luck, may the best Martial Artist win."

The colosseum erupted in applause as the Martial Squires collapsed in relief receiving immediate emergency medical aid. The abyssfeeders had been incapacitated and returned to containment immediately the moment Master Gremingar began his announcement.

Only one Martial Squire was able enough to not require emergency medical care. Even Rui needed people tending to his arm.

"That was a beautiful fight," Squire Meera offered with a good-natured smile.

Rui turned towards her, observing her body.

Bruises, a few cuts here and there. That was all he spotted.

He wasn't sure what was more impressive; stalemating an abyssfeeder with that little damage, or winning after losing an arm.

At the very least, he did not feel an overwhelming sense of superiority because he managed to take down an abyssfeeder and she did not. His victory had been close, even if he did account for that. Had the abyssfeeder been even a beat quicker, it would have torn off his arm before he could nail the final strike, and that would have been game over.

Perhaps the difference in this outcome reflected the difference in their mentality. Rui was willing to take risks if it meant victory. Perhaps he too could have harmlessly stalemated the creature had he chosen a less extreme solution to fight it, but he ultimately decided that that was not enough.

But more importantly, the fact that she did manage to stalemate it meant that it was possible that she could serve the same role that it did to Rui in this battle.

A glint of desire flashed in his eyes as he regarded.

Unfortunately, she misinterpreted it.

"I know I am beautiful, but could you please not lust after my body in such an open fashion? It is inappropriate." She remarked, yet he could see that she was hardly offended

He frowned. "I was not lusting after your body."

"You did, I saw you."

"I did not."

"Did too."

Is she a narcissist or just an airhead?

He wasn't sure, but frankly, he didn't care.

It didn't matter, every Martial Artist this strong had strange quirks. Rui couldn't pretend to have an ordinary temperament or personality himself. As long as she could potentially serve as a whetstone to his blade, he didn't care what her personality was.

#### Chapter 1252: Unsatisfied

His desire to find Martial Artists who could push his Martial Art and the ambition that served as the driving force for his Martial Path to the limit became much greater. He could see that Squire Meera qualified as one of them.

However, there was another Martial Squire who also qualified. He had not forgotten about Ieyasu, the man was quite incredible and easily qualified to be champion material in continental contests such as this. None of the other six Martial Squires could hold a candle to a man who easily defeated Martial Seniors without their Martial Hearts. He had actually managed to fend off the four Martial Seniors targeting Senior Leonil. The fact that the latter survived despite being weaker than Senior Xanarn who almost died spoke volumes about his prowess.

Unless some other circumstances shifted the game, these two Martial Artists were his only hope as far as Martial Artists went.

If that failed then he wasn't sure how viable it was for him to find the challenge he sought within human space.

If they fail then... perhaps the Beast Domain will be my only hope. His eyes narrowed. He had seriously considered entering the true Beast Domain at the heart of the continent during his decade-long journey away from the Kandrian Empire if need be.

It was the latest frontier. A region of nature that was so perilous that humanity had decided it was too difficult and costly to endeavor fully exploring and colonizing. This actually spoke volumes of just how absurdly dangerous the Beast Domain was. He knew what Martial Seniors were capable of, and when he extrapolated it to Martial Masters and Sages, the fact that the Beast Domain could fend off the likes of those monsters meant that it was quite formidable.

Furthermore, the abyssfeeder arose from the Beast Domain, perhaps he would find similar challenges to overcome.

Where did he say these Abyssfeeders were found? A Lost City Danger Zone? What in the world is that? Rui frowned.

Regardless, this option was only if no Martial Squire in the human domain could do the job. He could only cross his fingers and hope for the best.

The event ended as the injured contestants were taken away for more extensive medical aid. Many of the Martial Artists required quite extensive treatments to restore them to their peak for tomorrow.

The medical aid alone took some time, thankfully, it appeared that his arm had been preserved when it was chopped off, something he was grateful for. Healing his old arm was a much better solution than regrowing a new arm. The powerful medical treatments ensured that the arm was surgically reattached to his body without any problems.

"Congratulations," Master Deivon said to him, smiling before his expression became a tad bit more sullen. "...And I'm sorry for your loss."

Rui wasn't even too surprised that the Martial Master seemed to have figured out exactly what had happened during the fight with the abyssfeeder.

He shook his head. "I will have other opportunities."

Master Deivon looked pleased that Rui had not let this miss dishearten him. He decided to offer some good news to Rui to help cheer him up.

"I have prepared a medical and surgery team equipped with all the medical instruments, machines, medicine, and potions that they will need to nurse your patient back to perfect health," Master Deivon informed him. "I made sure to deploy the best of the best. They will be able to restore her, just as we agreed. You have fulfilled your end of the bargain, frankly, you have over-delivered. I am already satisfied with the capital that I have gained as your patron."

Rui had not forgotten that he had fulfilled his part of the agreement.

"Please keep me posted on all the updates in regards to her medical treatment," Rui replied. "I need to get some rest."

"You don't need to fight in the main tournament tomorrow, you know," Master Deivon informed him. "You can if you want to, but you don't strictly have to."

Rui shook his head, and a hint of determination flashed through his eyes. "I will fight. Fighting her on such a grand stage may give me what I need."

Master Deivon immediately understood who and what he was talking about. "Champion Meera is most certainly a worthy opponent. Still, it's a shame you weren't here two contests ago."

"Why do you say that?" Rui asked with a raised eyebrow.

"The previous champion... was cut from a different cloth entirely," Master Deivon sighed with admiration. "He defeated the current champion four years ago, it's a shame he never participated after that. He may very well have been the perfect solution to your predicament, as would you be his."

"Hm?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "Considering Meera is champion, I'm assuming she beat him two years ago?"

"She didn't. He didn't appear for the tournament last year, or this year for that matter. No one knows where he is or what he's doing. Perhaps he's dead, perhaps he's already a Martial Senior. Or perhaps he lost interest because he was too strong, much like yourself."

A faint possibility entered his mind.

Unlikely. Rui shook his head inwardly. There are more than a million Martial Squires in the world, it could be literally anybody...

Regardless, he could only work with what he had before his eyes. He hadn't felt it before, but the third round really put things in perspective.

He had arrived. He was ready. Evidently, the individuality of his Martial Art and its ability to squeeze out the best of his body had already reached a stage where he could reach his Martial Heart. He needed to seriously start considering his breakthrough. He had entered the tournament with a more ambivalent and ambiguous attitude, still riding the high from having completed the Metabody System, satisfied with its enormous success. But this third round washed away all of that.

He was no longer happy with just that.

He was at the cusp of a higher Realm of power, he could almost taste it. He was not going to be satisfied until he claimed the power that rightfully belonged to him.

Chapter 1253: Martial Participation

He had the rest of the day to relax and prepare for the main tournament. It was a tournament with three rounds, each round eliminating half of the contestants in four one-v-ones. The matchups of the rounds had not been decided ahead of time. This was probably to prevent any preparation on the part of the Martial Artists or their patrons. At the end of the day, it was preferable that the fights reflected their regular strength and capabilities.

Rui was actually quite impatient for the next round, unlike a lot of the contestants.

However, there was an entire half day before the next day arrived. He didn't feel the need to delve into any further optimization of his mind or body at this moment.

Instead, he consulted with Master Deivon over some matters that he was interested in.

"I had a feeling you would ask me about primordial seed and the abyssfeeder species," Master Deivon smirked, sitting opposite Rui. "It makes too much sense for you to be interested in it."

"Well?" Rui asked. "Can I get access to some research data on it?"

Rui considered asking for actual samples of the substance but ultimately decided against it. There was no point in asking for things that he simply was not ready for. It was better he at least started to understand the nature of what he was trying to meddle with so that when he decided to tackle the project of integrating primordial seed into his Metabody System, he would have a strong foundation.

"That's not too problematic," Master Deivon replied. "At least, as far as low-grade information is concerned."

"What about high-grade research information?" Rui asked with a raised eyebrow.

"That is a bit more complicated," Master Deivon informed Rui.

"I thought the whole point of you being my patron is that I get benefits I wouldn't ordinarily be able to get in exchange for giving you the religious political capital for finding a virodhabhasa seed that excelled in the Martial Contest." Rui raised an eyebrow.

"You have already expended a good bit of the capital you get by getting patroned by me with the stabilizing treatment, the actual expensive medical treatment, the Senior-level training chambers, the Master-level mask, and the potions we supplied that helped you fulfill the Martial Body condition of the breakthrough to the Senior Realm," Master Deivon pointed out.

Rui could not argue with that. Denying Martial Seniors a Senior-level training chamber and instead giving it to him was something no Martial Squire would ever be able to get from an organization. After all, no sane organization or person would debilitate their own Martial Seniors for a Martial Squire.

Master Deivon simply had the luxury to afford to be able to piss off a Martial Senior, it was still quite the boon to Rui to be able to gain high-quality training chambers that could contain his power.

He could deny the value of it, he would not have been able to complete Nemean Blossom without it. Furthermore, he would not have been able to refine the Metabody System without it either. Which meant he would not have performed anywhere nearly as well in the Martial Contest without it.

Given how close the battle against the abyssfeeder was, he may not have passed the third round without the generosity of Master Deivon.

"I appreciate all of what you have done for me," Rui began by saying. "I would have taken a lot longer to reach my current stage if not for the aid that you have provided even before the Martial Contest began. Thank you for all of that."

"But...?" Master Deivon flashed an amused smirk.

"But I know my value, and I know that the impact I have had is significantly greater than you anticipated," Rui remarked. "For example, in the third round. Nobody was supposed to defeat the abyssfeeder, correct?"

A hint of appreciation appeared on the Master's face. "Indeed. Master Grevinga originally intended for nobody to overcome the abyssfeeder. But it appears that he underestimated you. Then again, everybody did."

Rui figured as much. The strength of the abyssfeeder was too high for Rui to believe that the possibility of anybody overcoming it was intended.

"Still, it is not nearly as simple to gain access to research into primordial seed," Master Deivon explained. "For one, for better or worse, the Virodhabhasa Faith does very little to explore avenues of research that do not directly benefit Martial Art. Primordial seed is an exciting esoteric that can become anything, it is not considered an esoteric substance that is generally relevant to Martial Art as much as it is to esoteric technology. It is much easier to apply it to the latter than the former."

Rui sighed as he considered the matter. It meant that the Virodhabhasa Faith simply was not invested in the matter to possess what he needed.

"Furthermore," Master Deivon continued. "Even the shallow foundation we possess in regards to research into this inscrutable substance is not something that can easily be supplied to you even considering my patronage."

"Why not?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "It's just data."

"Don't play dumb, you know full well that exclusivity is the only reason information is valuable, young man," Master Deivon tutted. "Furthermore, because of how inscrutable the substance is, we have employed extravagant means to learn more about it, increasing the value of the information obtained from these extravagant means."

"Extravagant means?" Rui raised an eyebrow.

"Martial Masters... and even a Martial Sage," Master Deivon revealed, smiling at Rui's reaction.

"What?" Rui furrowed his eyebrows. "You're telling me a Martial Sage participated in a research project?"

"Does it sound that strange?" Master Deivon explained. "Knowing you, you must have already figured out why."

Rui threw him a knowing look. "Given that a Martial Artist's senses, intuitions, and instincts seem to grow stronger over time, and much stronger across Realms... I can only imagine the sheer amount of information that a Martial Sage is able to derive by studying esoteric substances. They are incapable of engaging in the scientific method, but their insights are probably incredibly helpful."

#### Chapter 1254: Dependence

"Correct," The man nodded. "This is not an uncommon approach among powerful organizations and nations that have a Martial Sage on retainer. Primordial seed is an extremely bizarre and absurd substance that is highly inscrutable, and difficult to understand. I do not possess a good understanding of the current state of research, but from what I understand, there still isn't a single consensus on what exactly is happening with this substance or a leading theory. That is why the scientific community turned to the power of Martial Art to aid them where their own capabilities failed them."

There was a smug expression on his face.

Rui understood his sentiment. It was good to know that the scientific community depended on Martial Art instead of the other way around.

"So the information that the Virodhabhasa Faith does have on the primordial seed is derived partially from a Martial Sage's insights? Hence making it extremely valuable?" Rui raised an eyebrow.

"That is correct," The Master nodded. "Much more valuable than if the information was acquired through more grounded means."

"I see..." Rui sighed, shaking his head. "It's fine, I guess it will have to wait. I did not know that Martial Artists played a role in the upper echelons of esoteric material science."

Master Deivon smirked. "It is one of the ways that we strive to gain and maintain leverage over the lab geeks and nerds, you see. Many discoveries and breakthroughs have only occurred because of the aid of Martial Masters and Sages."

As someone who has spent his entire previous life as one of those lab geeks and nerds, Rui was unable to partake in the humor.

"Well, it is good that we have some form of leverage, because there is no doubt that they have a lot of it over us," Rui remarked lightly. "The Squire evolution breakthrough process is a marvel of technology, and improving it is also a field of technology, not Martial Art."

Master Deivon sighed with a complicated expression, betraying the the severity of the issue within the Virodhabhasa Faith.

"It is unfortunate that the Martial Path ends at the Apprentice Realm without this wonderful technology," Master Deivon sighed. "One of Theocracy's greatest fears is that there may come a day where it may be used to control Martial Apprentices across the world. Gaining such leverage so early will forever allow one side to dictate the relationship. Ensuring that such a future does not come to pass is one of the missions that the Virodhabhasa Faith has undertaken. We have employed many secretive and hidden measures that serve as a failsafe to ensure that Martial Artists never lose control of the breakthrough to the Squire Realm."

Rui nodded, when he recalled something prudent.

"Hidden measures like... Spreading the Squire evolution breakthrough to insular Martial Art oriented groups that are disconnected from the greater human civilization?" Rui asked, raising an eyebrow.

That immediately drew Master Deivon's focus. "How did you know that? It is clear that that was not a guess."

Rui couldn't believe that he actually hit the mark on the head.

"I've come across some groups like that in the past," Rui explained. "I was rather surprised that such primitive and insular groups possessed the breakthrough to the Squire Realm. I had always felt this was a bit engineered."

Rui did not specify that he had visited Vilun Island, there was a good chance that that would give away his identity.

Considering the good relationship between the Shionel Confederation and the Virodhabhasa Faith, he did not want to risk a data leak to people he had made an enemy out of.

"Hm," Master Deivon considered his words before nodding. "We do spread the breakthrough to the Squire Realm to certain groups to ensure that they don't get controlled by an organization that does possess the breakthrough method. If we allow technocratic powers to manipulate Apprentice-level forces, then we will be sowing the seeds of our destruction, they will be able to manipulate and indoctrinate an entire generation of Martial Artists."

Rui was actually glad that the Virodhabhasa Faith took this possibility seriously. Prior to the age of Martial Art, Martial Apprentices were strong enough to be assets, but too weak to resist being controlled by the power of many; militaries, states, and organizations. He did not want this relationship to ever return.

The only way Martial Artists could ensure this never happened was through dominant power and independence, and both of those were not easy to achieve. Martial Art was quite powerful, but he knew better than anybody else what science was capable of. In a way, the people of Gaia were actually restricted by esoteric substances because it made it difficult for them to formulate comprehensive scientific theories about the nature of reality that allowed for truly sophisticated technology.

Earth's technology could accomplish things that the esoteric technology of Gaia could not, due to the difference in the sophistication of technology. Earth was much more limited and was forced to make the absolute best of what it had, squeezing the most utility and potential out of compounds and elements because of how limited they were. Gaia, instead had too much, there was no drive to make the absolute best out of every single esoteric substance when there were so many esoteric phenomena that the scientists of Gaia could barely keep up.

It was not inaccurate to say that the world was still in a phase of exploration rather than refinement.

When Rui thought about the wonders that would be possible if one fused the sophistication of Earth with the magic of Gaia... He could not help but be worried whether Martial Art would be able to keep up in such a hypothetical scenario.

If it could, it would be left to the Martial Artists of the Upper Realms. It would be up to Masters, Sages, and Transcendents to prove that Martial Art could keep up with the growing powers of esoteric science.

Ideally, he preferred a civilization where they were equally balanced and cooperative given that he still retained his scientist mindset to a certain degree, but the clash of interests made it hard for such a thing to be truly feasible.

#### Chapter 1255: Priorities

"If the Virodhabhasa Faith does not have the information I seek, then who does?" Rui asked, out of curiosity.

"Powerful technocratic organizations, institutes, as well as nations with powerful technological foundations," Master Deivon offered. "The one organization that most likely possessed the most information on it is the Esocline Research Confederation."

This was not the first time he had mentioned that name. "If I remember correctly, that was one of the partners of the Virodhabhasa Faith that you mentioned was responsible for the carriage infrastructure of the Virodhabhasa Faith."

"Correct," Master Deivon noted. "It is a special organization, one that is quite rare in the modern world."

"Why is that?"

"It is one of the few states that completely rely on esoteric technology and eschews Martial Art," Master Deivon replied with a complicated expression.

"What?" Rui's eyes furrowed. "There exist states like that?"

The man nodded. "Yes, for better or worse. The state evolved from what was initially an association of research and development organizations that were looking for a foundation. Due to certain circumstances, they were unable and unwilling to rely on external Martial Artists. These led to the increasing amount of self-sufficiency and independence, allowing them to become one of the few truly powerful states with no Martial power."

Rui couldn't even believe what he was hearing. Rejecting Martial Art in the age of Martial Art absurd, it was like trying to reject technology back on Earth while still trying to be competitive as an organization.

It was not possible, technological supremacy reigned the world.

The same was partially true for Martial Art in the Panama Continent, it was unthinkable for a nation to reject it.

"What's it like?" Rui asked with curiosity.

"I have found it to be a strange and alien place, personally," Master Deivon replied with a wry smile. "It's rather uncomfortable, but they truly are independent."

"The Virodhabhasa Faith has an organization that eschews Martial Art for a partner?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "That sounds unexpected."

"It is indeed controversial," Master Deivon admitted. "There are factions within the religion who wish to alienate or even vilify the research confederation, but they are mostly outweighed by more sensible voices that it is against our interests to pointlessly make an enemy of one of the greatest technological powers across the continent. Instead, the majority of us have agreed to develop a sort of symbiotic relationship with the confederation."

Rui raised an eyebrow. "I thought they eschewed Martial Art."

"Within their own power blocs, yes," The Master nodded.

"But given that you mentioned cutting-edge research often employed the aid of Martial Artists of the Upper Realms, it is unwise for them to refuse such a service from the Virodhabhasa Faith." Rui quickly inferred.

"Indeed, however, it should be noted that they are much less dependent on Martial Art research aid than other research and development organizations."

"I would imagine that bolstering their researching prowess is one of the greatest avenues of research to the nation to minimize independence on Martial Art." Rui mused.

"We can only hope that they never succeed," Master Deivon shook his head. "Thankfully, even if they do make progress, it is not as though we are stagnating in regards to the capabilities of Martial Artists. You have contributed to our cause in that regard, and the Virodhabhasa Faith recognizes that."

Rui immediately deciphered what he meant. "You mean the Riemannian Echo technique, and its ability to allow Martial Artists of the lower Realms to gain senses that they never could otherwise."

"Indeed," Master Deivon nodded. "The principle of the technique is, frankly, unbelievable. It is difficult for us to conceive that a Martial Artist came up with this technique himself. If not for the fact that we have confirmed that this technique is truly yours alone, we would not have believed it."

He threw a curious look at Rui.

Rui shrugged. "Just got some spontaneous inspiration, I guess."

"Right," Master Deivon smirked. "Regardless, we keep making progress in this field, ensuring that they never stop depending on us."

Rui shrugged. He didn't particularly care about the high-minded stuff, especially when he wasn't at a stage where it mattered to him, or he mattered to it.

All he wanted to know was if he could get what he wanted.

"Is it possible for the Virodhabhasa Faith to negotiate a deal to get the information from them?" Rui asked.

"That is going to require the expenditure of genuine capital, more than you have earned even from my patronage," Master Deivon shook his head.

Rui sighed. It was at times like this that he missed the convenience of the Martial Union. As an external member of the Martial Union who had contributed to them in ways more than any Martial Squire could, he had earned its goodwill and a pretty decent relationship with them. Especially when he was an extraordinarily gifted Martial Artist from their perspective with immense potential.

I bet the Martial Union has a lot more information to offer.

It had quite respectable research and development capabilities even on the international stage. The only issue was that it too was a Martial Art organization.

Maybe I can persuade Julian to help me negotiate a deal with the Kandrian Institute of Technology when I return.

If that did end up being the plan, then he could put it aside for now since it wasn't a thing for the near future.

"Are you that eager to get your hands on it?" Master Deivon raised an eyebrow.

"It's not the most immediate priority. I know that I have fulfilled all the conditions to break through to the Senior Realm any time now. My highest priority is triggering the activation of the Martial Heart. Throwing myself against hurdles that challenge the core of my Martial Art and Path is the best way to go about it for me particularly."

Master Deivon nodded. "You have your priorities right. You have an immense amount of momentum on your side, it is best to ensure that it doesn't die in front of the barrier to a higher Realm."

#### Chapter 1256: Drive

Seeing that his options for gaining information were limited, Rui ultimately decided to set it aside for now. It truly was looking to be a long-term project, given the difficulties of even obtaining information on the topic, let alone the actual substance itself.

He wasn't too eager to set out on a massive undertaking such as this. The Master was correct, he had momentum on his side, and he didn't want to stall it with a project that was probably as difficult as his initial Metabody System, and would take a few years to complete at minimum.

"You're right," Rui shook his head. "I do not intend to drag this out. I truly hope the final tournament will be enough to push me to my limit."

In particular, he had high hopes of one particular Martial Artist that would be competing tomorrow.

Master Deivon knew exactly what he was thinking about. "She is a Virodhabhasa seed as well, you know?"

Rui raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That's... interesting."

He wasn't too surprised even. He could feel that her incredibly strange and esoteric Martial Art had the potential to be a Martial Art that could overcome all others. It was no wonder that the Virodhabhasa Faith declared her as a seed when it saw her Martial Art.

"As for her Martial Art..." Master Deivon paused when Rui shook his head, putting his hand up.

"I don't want to know. It is already hard enough for any Martial Squire to pressure me, the more I know ahead of time, the harder it will be for her to pressure me enough to trigger my Martial Art."

Rui firmly declined any information from Master Deivon surrounding her Martial Art, it was also why he avoided paying too much attention to her Martial Art. He was almost afraid that he would subconsciously create predictive models if he spent too much time observing her.

"I must say, that is quite the step to take," Master Deivon remarked. "That decision may very well cost you victory against her. Your Martial Art has become a lot less opaque to Martial Masters like myself, as well as the one that is patroning her. I can promise you that she has already learned much about your Martial Art. Especially the body morphing techniques that you have displayed."

Rui shrugged. "If that increases her ability to pressure me, then that's fine. I have already secured the medical treatments that I originally came here for. And now that that matter is out of the way, winning the Martial Contest is no longer a genuine priority compared to becoming a Martial Senior."

Master Deivon couldn't help but smile at the determination that Rui demonstrated. Yet at the same time, he couldn't help but marvel at the ripples that his breakthrough would send across the Martial world.

If Rui broke through any time soon, he would be the youngest Martial Senior in history, and it wasn't even close. He would break the pre-existing record by a whopping decade.

Rui had informed Master Deivon that he had broken through to the Squire Realm at the age of seventeen. While this was certainly a highly impressive and optimistically young age, it was not groundbreaking. The youngest known Martial Squire ever was merely twelve years old, after all.

However, the path to the Senior Realm after becoming a Martial Squire was long and difficult. One needed to continue developing a tower of individuality that would eventually reach high enough to touch the skies; the Senior Realm. Ordinarily, even an ounce of individuality required considerable exertion.

Rui was the only Martial Squire he had ever met who breezed through this process with ease in a matter of seven years.

"Assuming you succeed... What do you plan to do when the contest is over?" Master Deivon asked.

Rui considered the question. "...Bid the Floating Sect farewell and then make preparations to grow even stronger."

"...Why do you fight?"

The air grew a little heavier.

"You originally came here to procure a treatment for that woman. But you have acquired what you want. So what is it that drives you forward?" Master Deivon couldn't help but be curious.

Rui remained silent. This was the first time that Master Deivon inquired about such a personal topic. He wasn't sure whether to humor it or not.

Then again, Master Deivon had been a comfortable patron this entire time. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing to reduce the distance between them just a bit.

"I... fight for ambition. My Martial Path is my greatest ambition and dream. And I fight for my family, to acquire the power needed to protect them. I am far too weak as I am right now," Rui's voice grew more solemn.

Master Deivon's powerful senses and intuition managed to gain a much deeper understanding of his circumstances.

Unbeknownst to Rui, Martial Masters also possessed the ability to evaluate the quality of the breakthrough procedure performed on a Martial Squire. While the core basics were often the same, the more sophisticated procedures from more powerful organizations and nations resulted in a more powerful Martial Body.

Rui's Martial Body was incredible. More naturally powerful for his age than any others, he could match older and more powerful Martial Squires, as well as other Martial Squires that had consumed a lot of performance-enhancing potions, despite having consumed only one in his entire life, according to the analytics of his blood that Master Deivon had had the medical department conduct.

Such a Martial Body could only emerge from a particularly powerful nation or organization, almost certainly a sage-level nation.

If he truly was from such a powerful nation or organization, then it begged the question of why he wasn't relying on them for the female Martial Senior's treatment. Furthermore, his native organization or nation never seemed to be an option when it came to fulfilling his needs such as his most recent one centered around primordial seed.

This allowed Master Deivon to piece together a rough and ambiguous hypothesis that wasn't far from the truth.

Chapter 1257: First

"I see. Know that you can consider me as someone you can depend on," Master Deivon informed Rui. "I don't know what your circumstances are, but I'm willing to wager I have the power to offer some assistance if the need ever came."

Rui smiled. "I appreciate that. I will be sure to keep it in mind."

He didn't intend to enlist his aid, however. Assassinating an important political figure of the Shionel Confederation was not something Rui could expect him to help with since the Shionel Confederation was a political partner and ally of the Virodha Theocracy.

And that was fine, he had always intended to do the deed himself.

He was actually quite eager to do the deed himself.

Chairman Deacon was one of the few people who could evoke genuine bloodlust from Rui.

Eventually, their conversation came to an end as Rui headed to his assigned training chamber.

Many tens of thousands of people were dying to witness the final tournament with their own two eyes.

The first three rounds were exciting, but ultimately, they were merely a setup for the finale. The eight finalists were eight of the truly most powerful Martial Artists that Squire Realm could possibly offer. They were the cherry on top of the cream of the crop. The best of the best.

The winner had the capital to claim to be the strongest of them all.

"Who do you think will win?"

"It's gotta be Champion Meera."

"I put my money on the dark horse."

"He's going to lose."

"He already beat her twice, you know."

"Hah, those little competitions are not comparable to actual combat," One man snorted. "Just you see, my Meera will prevail!"

Regardless, many people had a strong vested interest in witnessing the conclusion of the finale of the contest.

Rui found seven Martial Squires waiting for him in the contestant stand-by room. Once again, he would be forced to wait for the contest to unfold with his competitors just around the corner.

There was no reason to make things so tense, yet he was convinced that the organizers simply wanted to milk the drama to get as much out of it as possible.

Most of the contestants were stoic and composed, though none of them could miss the tension in the room.

The only one who seemed immune was Squire Meera, who actually had the audacity to apply some final touches to her makeup in front of everyone.

Rui found her to be quite incomprehensible. She was quite the deviant as a Martial Artist, it took one to recognize another, after all.

He had long noted her incessant obsession with aesthetics, he had long speculated that it was tied to her Martial Path.

A Martial Path centered around her own subjective sense of aestheticism. It pushed the boundaries of the kind of things that could become a Martial Path. Before this day, he had thought that Martial Paths were limited to fields of combat, they could not be centered around fields that had nothing to do with combat.

Not even Tokugawa Ieyasu or Rui himself broke these rules. Imitative evolution and adaptive evolution would be considered fields of combat even if Martial Artists did not exist.

She, however, broke this rule. The fact that one's subjective sense of beauty could become a Martial Path showed that there were no strict limitations. She was so deviant from the norm that she fell outside of known paradigms.

It was probably the reason that she was made a Virodhabhasa Seed.

Even at this very moment, while his mind was at its absolute peak, he was unable to gauge her true strength.

Shockingly, she felt like she was a low-grade Martial Squire at the moment, but he would be an incompetent fool to even consider that she would perform at that level in the tournament.

From what he could tell, it wasn't that she was trying to actively hide her power like a more stealth-oriented Martial Squire like Kane. It was more likely that her performance was greatly affected by her sense of beauty.

He had no idea how it worked. He had a feeling he would never be able to peer into the depth of her Martial Art.

Her weak facade actually made him more wary.

He glanced around at the rest of them.

He couldn't help but smile when he saw the grandma from day one standing among them. He was accurate when he felt like she was one of the strongest. She was also probably the only Martial Artist there who was truly older than him even mentally.

Her eyes reflected depth.

One could very well lose themselves in the depth of experience that she had gone through as a warrior. The amount of time she had traversed her Martial Path was many times greater than the eleven years that Rui had been a Martial Artist.

She was the next most significant contestant in Rui's eyes. He did not underestimate the power of experience. The insights and prowess that her mind would have internalized likely surpassed his imagination.

That did not mean the rest of them were not eye-drawing.

They each possessed depth that could only come with the perseverance to self-actualize the potential that lay buried deep within the Squire Realm.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" An announcer cried. "We have arrived! This is the day that you have all been waiting for. The final tournament to decide the strongest of the strongest! The contest to decide the next champion of the Virodhabhasa Contest!"

The crowd cheered loudly. One could almost taste the excitement that seemed to manifest radiating from the crowd.

Multiple large boards were pulled into the colosseum around the announcer's podium, facing every segment of the audience.

"Without further ado, I present to you the tournament matchups and brackets!"

The boards were unveiled, revealing a pictorial representation of the matchups and rounds.

The contestants paid attention to the live feed that they existed within the room.

Rui narrowed his eyes as beheld his match.

His match was the very first.

Chapter 1258: Challenger

[Contestant Falken versus Contestant Ran Al Venin]

Rui glanced at another figure in the room.

She met his gaze briefly, before closing her eyes. She too was a masked contestant like he was, it appeared that he was not the only one who found the fame and attention to his identity troubling.

But unlike him, she did not go to great lengths to conceal her identity by procuring a Master-level mask that could hamper even the senses of Martial Masters. He was able to sense her appearance through it.

But it wasn't her identity or appearance that he was concerned about. He quickly studied her Martial Body.

Powerful lower body. He immediately noted.

That alone allowed him to rule out many possibilities.

He definitely did not get the sense that she was an ordinary Martial Artist as far as her Martial Path was concerned.

There definitely were clues that she most likely was not a simple offensive, defensive, or maneuvering-oriented Martial Artist.

He recalled that she had been quite close to being eliminated by the abyssfeeder creature. That did not give him a good impression of her, but he didn't necessarily underestimate her because of that.

He didn't even bother considering the other match-ups at the moment, the tournament would soon begin, and he was going to have to face her in combat, he did not have the luxury to care about other people's match-ups.

"...And with that, it is finally time to begin! We now call upon Contestant Falken, the dark horse of the Martial Contest! A man who came out of nowhere, participating in the contest for the very first time, and reaching the top eight out of nowhere! Will he be able to overcome his opponent, a dangerously powerful warrior, and veteran of the Martial Contest known as the Unearthing Dancer?!"

The crowd cheered.

The two of them headed out toward the colosseum together.

The tension was palatable.

So much so that one may very well have been able to cut it with a knife. He could feel her wariness tingling on his skin.

It couldn't be helped. His performance in the previous round was domineering. He was the only one who defeated the abyssfeeder. He was also the first one to break out of Master Carian's technique.

Her muscles were taut with tension.

Her eyes were sharp.

She couldn't even hide her gritted teeth from him.

Rui, on the other hand, was a lot more nonchalant.

This couldn't be helped either.

Even though he was a newcomer to the Martial Contest while she was allegedly a veteran, neither of them had any doubts about the power dynamics of their fight.

She was the challenger.

It was up to her to prove that her comparatively lackluster performance against the abyssfeeder was not an accurate measure of her formidability. The abyssfeeder was an oppressive challenge that made many Martial Artists look weaker than they actually were.

She was not the only one who was determined to show the world what she was made up of.

Barring Rui and Squire Meera, each of them had something to prove in their upcoming matches.

"I look forward to a good fight," She abruptly broke the silence.

"Likewise," A small smile broke on his face.

"But I will win."

Her declaration was as strong as her tone. Rui could even feel the conviction in her voice.

He didn't even bother responding.

They had arrived at the entrance of the colosseum.

Words no longer mattered.

"Wooooo!"

"Go Falken!"

"Kick his ass girl!"

The crowd erupted in cheers as the two of them entered the colosseum heading toward the center.

By the time they had arrived, the colosseum was already prepared for the battle. The podium and the boards were all gone. Even the announcer and commentator was gone.

A single Martial Senior awaited them at the center.

"I am Senior Priest Deril," The man informed them. "I will be serving as the arbiter of the tournament."

The two of them bowed to him, expressing the deference that a Martial Senior was worthy of.

"Repeat after me... 'As a contestant of the Virodhabhasa Contest, I solemnly swear not to ...'"

Each of them was made several oaths regarding fair play and abide by the few rules that there were.

"It's time," The man informed them. "Take a distance from the center of your pleasing, and take your stances."

She chose to take a close-range distance, clearly indicating that she was a close-range Martial Artist.

All eyes were on Rui. People expected him to take a long-range distance given the long-range prowess that he demonstrated in the previous round.

Yet Rui merely smiled, walking towards her, and standing right in front of her.

This sent a wave of murmurs across the crowd even as Squire Ran narrowed her eyes.

"Underestimate me at your peril," She coldly remarked.

"I consider myself proficient at not underestimating," Rui replied.

She replied by taking a strange stance. She stood on her toes, like a ballet dancer, before lifting one folded knee up, like a Muay Thai stance. Her hands balled into fists, propped before her.

She did not so much as shift a millimeter despite balancing on the edge of a single toe.

Her balance is abnormal. Rui noted

He closed his eyes, honing his mind. "Fuuuu..."

He propped his arms with equal weight towards offense and defense with an evenly distributed weight open to maneuvering or planting himself at any time.

It was a simple and flexible stance, the most common stance there was.

Yet, what was abnormal was the peril that Rui radiated.

The very air seemed to curl as Rui honed his focus on her.

The land beneath them seemed to rumble beneath his weight.

A maelstrom of pressure crashed into her, threatening to crush her.

Yet she gritted her teeth, as her eyes flashed with determination.

"Begin!"

She immediately lashed out at him violently. "RARGH!"

She threw a spinning kick at him, an attack empowered by immense torque generated by the entire body crashed into him.

BAM!

Rui narrowed his eyes as he applied Flux Earther to dispel the impact.

BAM BAM BAM!

She continued to blast him with spinning attacks one after the other.

BOOM!

She pushed him back a bit with a charged kick, drawing the cheers of the crowd.

"That's right, beat him up!"

"He can't even do anything!"

Yet she wasn't pleased. "Tsk."

He was unharmed.

He simply stared at her.

He didn't utter a word or so much as twitch, yet she understood what he was saying.

Show me what you have.

Her eyes flared with indignation. Careful what you wish for.

Chapter 1259: Balance

Rui simply waited impassively.

He had, of course, already begun creating a predictive model on her. One that he was quite optimistic about given the fact that she had many vibrant patterns in her attacking.

Too many patterns, even. He narrowed his eyes. So much so that there is no way she does not notice them.

He didn't quite understand, but he continued studying the strange rhythm in her movements that existed in the undertone of her movements, blocking every attack with Flux Earther.

He didn't feel the need to use the Metabody System. There was no need to divulge his cards if he didn't need to. Although people had seen Void Forestep, and Hypertrophic Surge, he had managed to hide Nemean Blossom and Weaving Blood.

He calmly took a neutral stance once more, simply challenging her to do more.

She was not pleased by this outcome. Her body twisted even as she splendidly balanced on the edge of a single toe, generating an immense amount of torque as a result.

BAM BAM BAM!

She continued to bombard him with a barrage of powerful kicks. Each attack was quite heavy and struck him hard.

Yet they did nothing.

Rui always managed to effortlessly disperse and drain the impact away with Flux Earther. It had been more than five years since he had come up with the technique, and his proficiency with it only kept growing and getting smoother. It didn't matter if she had a supreme sense of balance that allowed her to effortlessly employ rotating attacks with immense torque.

Rui resolutely dispersed every single attack with even better timing.

She threw ferocious attacks, yet every time they touched his hand or arm, she could feel them growing weaker and weaker until their power was completely gone.

BOOM!

Rui effortlessly dispersed another attack, furrowing his eyebrows in comparison. He had to admit that he was a little surprised by the level of power that she was displaying.

He was not impressed. She made such a big deal about challenging him that he thought she would be capable of a lot more.

Still, she is hiding something. He could tell that much.

She was preparing something that was probably different from the attacks that she had been hitting him with.

BOOM!

He couldn't help but wonder why she was maintaining the monotony of these kinds of attacks when he had already proven that they didn't work against her.

Yet even he couldn't help but feel something was wrong. The patterns that she displayed tugged at his mind. He strangely felt like he was watching a kaleidoscope.

Something was off.

BOOM!

Rui didn't even budge when he caught her kick in his hand. "Is this the best that y-"

Rui froze when he looked at the bottom of her foot. Why is the bottom of her foot a dark purple color?

He immediately leaped back, wary, wiping his hand.

Poison.

Yet even before he could do anything, he felt something strange stirring within him.

A ferocious grin sprung up on her face. "Too late."

Suddenly, the world shifted in Rui's vision and senses. What?!

He couldn't help but stagger on his feet in surprise. The very world around him rocked like a ship traveling through a storm! It spun and rotated, he could feel each of his senses detecting a torque that seemed to emerge with this strange rotation.

No, it's not. This is the effect of the poison.

It was not an ordinary poison. It affected all five of his normal senses in addition to Seismic Mapping, Tempestuous Feel, Primordial Instinct, and even Riemannian Echo!

BOOM!

A powerful attack collided against him as he barely managed to put up his guard, blocking the attack. Squire Ran grinned as she managed to launch Rui flying back, rolling across the ground.

"Woah!"

"What just happened."

"She suddenly began beating up on him."

Rui, however, maintained his composure even as she began unleashing a flurry of attacks against him. His mind began swiftly analyzing this predicament as he judged the nature of what she was doing.

It's not just poison. He felt his mind being burdened by another element. She's also employing a bit of hypnosis. That was why she had so many patterns. They weren't glaring holes in her kicking combos, she was sneakily setting up an offensive mental technique to complement the poison!

He was starting to get a clearer picture of what was going on. Yet he could only grimace as the world began shifting against him. He felt like he was a normal human trying to ride a bull. The sheer amount of torque that his senses experienced made it difficult for him to make any movements.

Let alone movement, he could barely stand in place.

BOOM!

Squire Ran roared triumphantly as she launched him flying. He was unable to leverage his strength to maintain his footing because of how messed up his sense of balance was.

Yet despite his predicament, his insight had already begun gaining ground.

This isn't an ordinary poison. Rui's eyes narrowed. It doesn't function by targeting sense organs. Riemannian Echo is being targeted, and it doesn't come from a sense organ. Furthermore, the Primordial Instinct exists within the mind rather than a sense organ in the body. Which means...

The unpleasant truth had arrived. It's a poison that's inhibiting the part of my brain that generates my sense of balance.

Yet he had not forgotten what he learned about poisons that targeted the brain. They were extremely difficult to condition one's self to, that included the user. Thus, there was only one conclusion to draw.

She's not unaffected by it herself. His eyes widened. In order to ensure that almost nobody could possibly resist it, she chose a poison that affected the brain rather than any other part of the body. In exchange, she herself is affected by the poison. But...

He had not forgotten the splendid sense of balance that she had displayed. Every single attack she launched was launched balancing on the verge edge of her toe, she performed complex pirouettes, spins, and all kinds of complicated maneuvers within milliseconds, generating immense energy and torque without so much as twitching even a micrometer off trajectory balancing at the edge of a single toe.

Rui's eyes widened as the truth about her Martial Art fully dawned on him. She isn't a poison-oriented Martial Art or an offensive Martial Artist. She's a balance-oriented Martial Artist who has forcefully turned this into a competition of balance! A competition that she cannot lose.

## Chapter 1260: Challenge

Rui hadn't come across too many, but most balance-oriented Martial Artists were supplementary in nature. They simply focused all their efforts on strengthening their balance to the absolute maximum to gain as much of a boost from it in combat as possible.

It allowed them to stabilize their combat to the absolute maximum, increasing their offensive prowess by allowing them to maximize the rate at which they attacked without any need to worry about balance all that much. It increased their maneuvering considerably, allowing them to attack and evade in ways that other Martial Artists were unable to.

It also improved their aerial maneuvering where balance became considerably more important. Martial Artists did not float in the air by leveraging some special energy to keep them stationary in midair. They pushed down against the air by stepping on it, thus balance was always and especially important when sky-walking.

It was in these ways that balance-oriented Martial Artists generally leveraged their strength.

However, it appeared that Squire Ran was not quite satisfied with passive supplementation. This was the first time that Rui had seen someone leverage balance in such a manner.

He could instantly gain insights into her character and personality for developing such a Martial Art and having such a Martial Path.

An aggressive desire to dominate her opponents with her greatest strength. Rui mused even as she began launching an aggressive offensive against him.

The nature of balance was not intrinsically offensive. Yet she was determined to leverage it offensively and leverage it to dominate her opponents.

It appeared that she had settled on a bizarre solution.

She decided to forcefully turn the battle into a battle of balance!

And she did that by poisoning both her opponent and herself. It was an absurd notion, but it did succeed. At the moment, Rui was struggling to retain his sense of balance even while she did her best to pummel him to the ground.

Had she been a poison-oriented Martial Artist, perhaps she would have found a way to sabotage only her opponent's sense of balance, but she wasn't a poison-oriented Martial Artist, and thus the potency of the poisons she could integrate into her body was limited.

Thus, she settled on a guaranteed mutual sabotage by employing a poison that targeted the brain and changed the settings of the fight, such that balance became the most important parameter by far.

Such was the nature of balance. It was incredibly important to not just Martial Art, but all coherent physical movement. It was absolutely foundational. However, its significance decreased the more proficient it became over time. It offered diminishing returns the greater balance one possessed. Thus it was rarely trained above a certain level.

However, by guaranteeing a successful sabotage of his sense of balance at the cost of her own, both of them had lost that high-level sense of balance, reducing them to a fraction of their original balancing capabilities. It became less important the more proficient at it one was, but conversely, it became more important the less proficient at it one was.

And they were most certainly not proficient at it any more thanks to the poison, meaning it became the most important parameter in the battle.

One in which she still held an overwhelming advantage against him.

And it reflected.

**BOOM!**

She launched him flying across the colosseum even while he guarded his head. He could not afford to let her get a clean attack on his head at this juncture, it would simply mean a clean KO.

Never before had he gained such an appreciation for balance. It was only in situations like these that one remembered how important something that they took for granted was.

Everybody knew the importance of breathing. Yet only an asthmatic patient felt the value of breathing every second.

He knew that from experience.

BAM!

The crowd cheered as she gained a decisive advantage against him. Rui stood up uncertainly, relying on muscle memory for the time being. She swiftly lashed forward without any inhibitions, he cautiously tried to throw an attack, only to sorely regret it.

WHOOSH!

His attack missed her wildly but she ignored it, stepping forward to blast him with some more powerful kicks.

BAM BAM BAM!

Tsk, this isn't going to work. Rui grimaced as he brought up his guard, sloppily dispersing them due to his messed-up balance. He felt like he was stuck in a quagmire, every movement he made, let alone techniques he executed, was severely hampered.

It became clear that if he let this go on, it would be game over. He needed a practical solution.

Nemean Blossom and Weaving Blood came to mind.

Too costly, too ineffective.

They did not solve the root of the problem, they simply put a bandaid on the symptoms. A bandaid that had a time and energy limit.

He needed to find a solution that targeted the problem head-on.

I need to regain my balance.

Could he somehow get rid of the poison?

No. I don't have any means to do that at the moment.

His eyes narrowed.

There was only one answer.

His Martial Path was adaptive evolution. Thus, he needed to adapt to it.

This isn't something that the VOID algorithm can help me with.

The VOID algorithm could not allow him to overcome an inhibited sense of balance, it only allowed him to predict and time extremely well-adapted movements against his opponent.

For this... I need something new. His eyes narrowed. A ground-up, systematic approach to adapt to the inhibitions she had inflicted upon me.

It was a tall task. In the middle of combat, he would need to come up with a new system of thought to be able to adapt to his new inhibition.

Right here.

Right now.

In the middle of combat. In the middle of being attacked by his powerful opponent, in the middle of the disorientation and the mental torture of a shaking and rumbling dystopic world.

All while simultaneously developing the predictive model for when he did return to normal.

It was an absurd notion.

If he did succeed, then the odds would be even, and he would also be adapted to her.

If he failed, then it would be game over.

Had it been anybody else, failure was a guarantee.

Yet, before Rui, even the most insurmountable of barriers was reduced to a fun challenge.

"Heh... Haha..."

A chuckle escaped his mouth.

Squire Ran felt a shiver crawl up her skin.

She didn't understand.

Wasn't she winning?

Hadn't she been pummeling him around for the last minute?

Anybody with a brain and eyes could tell that she was winning.

Yet her stomach churned when she stared into his eyes. A dark void seemed to emerge from behind his silver iris.

Three words escaped his mouth.

"You are strong."

Yet, those words only made her feel weaker.

In that moment, a single instinct reverberated across her mind.

I need to finish this... before it's too late. Her eyes flashed with determination.

The battle escalated as Squire Ran pushed herself to the absolute limit.