

Martial Unity 1261

Chapter 1261: Crack

The battle escalated in intensity. The spectators cheered every time Squire Ran bashed Rui with her powerful kicks!

"Go get him!"

"Tsk, all that hype and this is all he's amounting to."

"Man, I wish she would suffocate me in between her legs."

Yet, while the normies mindlessly consumed the entertainment, the Martial Artists frowned.

Something was off.

She was winning, but the air of the battle was strange.

It was the opposite.

Her gritted teeth. Her desperate aggression. Her increasingly fatigued appearance.

Rui, on the other hand, simply stared at her. His body was wounded, he had yet to land even a single attack on her.

Yet when people saw the look in his eyes... They couldn't bring themselves to bet against him.

A variety of different opinions, judgments, and evaluations flew through their minds, yet none of them mattered.

Certainly not Rui.

His mind had already kicked in top gear.

The margins of error caused to my sense of balance by the poison is no longer skyrocketing like it was when the poison was kicking in. He sharply noted. Diminishing returns. She cannot endlessly poison me, it has already reached a saturation limit. Especially given that she does not specialize in poison.

That meant that as bad as things were, they were unlikely to get worse. This was a good thing, this meant that he did not have to worry about a developed solution being too outdated due to the problem escalating.

Focus. Rui's eyes narrowed as he finished evaluating the problem.

A sense of balance was the ability to measure the torque that a body was experiencing. It was simply a measure of the net forces acting on a body. If a person held weights in only one hand, there would be an imbalance of force on that side, and the sense of balance would allow one to perfectly compensate by shifting one's body weight to the other side to ensure that the person did not fall over.

It was this sense that was being disrupted by the poison.

Objective; creating a system of thought to help me adapt to inhibited balance. His eyes narrowed. I have already verified that the inhibition is static. The next step is to measure the degree of inhibition of balance. Given that I know that the disorientation in my balance is a chemically induced illusion inside my brain, I can measure the degree to which it occurs by comparing how disoriented my sense of balance is even when I perform movements I know are balanced based on muscle memory.

There were some movements that Rui had executed so many times that he mastered them in and out. He knew for a fact that these movements and maneuvers were perfectly balanced because he had performed them for nearly ten years.

These movements alone weren't enough to overcome the deviation in his balance, but they allowed him to measure how much his sense of balance was being deviated when he performed those movements. It was no different from weighing objects against known weights to find out how heavy they were. These

short muscle memory movements with perfected balance served as a measure of how messed up his sense of balance was.

Once he knew to what degree his sense of balance was being deviated, he could essentially calculate a correct sense of balance by looking at his poisoned sense of balance.

It was simple subtraction. Subtract the deviation from the deviated sense of balance, and one was left with a pure sense of balance.

If it turned out that his balance was being disrupted by fifty percent, then he could account for that calculate what his normal sense of balance would be, and make sure that his movements matched up to the calculated correct sense of balance.

The issue is the means and the reliability of measuring how much my sense of balance is messed up. Rui narrowed his eyes. I'll essentially have to rely on my own senses since I do not have an objective measuring tool.

The process had already begun. Even as he defended from her attacks, he threw in maneuvers, combos, and other short-burst movements that he knew he could trust and simply observed the chaos that his sense of balance was.

He swiftly measured and registered the deviated readings, before comparing them to his perfected-balance movements.

It's being deviated by a factor of four-point-eight. His eyes widened.

Such high deviations required massive overcorrections. Furthermore, different movements resulted in different deviations in his sense of balance, complicating the matter even more

He would need to process an immense amount of information in a short amount of time. A hopeless task for any sane Martial Artist.

Yet Rui didn't even hesitate.

He felt a sense of excitement. An enormously challenging and interesting mental exercise with exciting constraints was something he enjoyed more than most.

Even as his mind raced, a grin broke out beneath his mask.

Yet, Squire Ran did not intend to make it easy for him by any means.

BAM BAM BAM!!!

She pummeled him with powerful attacks, launching him across the colosseum. Yet she didn't intend to let up in the slightest. She immediately shot after him, launching an incredibly powerful kick to his head.

If she could land even a clean kick to his head, it would be game over.

WHOOSH!

Her eyes widened.

Something had changed.

Rui successfully evaded an attack cleanly for the first time.

"Not too bad eh?" Rui laughed as he glanced at Squire Ran.

Squire Ran's expression grew more severe.

She knew more than anybody else the significance of what had just unfolded.

BOOM!!

Her body coiled as she gritted her teeth, propelling her leg forward with extraordinary momentum, crashing into Rui. She didn't stop bombarding him with attacks.

She couldn't.

Not when Rui began successfully dodging even more attacks. A trump card that had gotten her to the top eight of the Martial Contest was more hollow than she had ever imagined.

A trump card she had dedicated everything to.

Yet... it was more hollow than she had ever realized.

Fear and frustration gripped her heart like a vice as Rui returned to form, curbing her ruthlessly.

WHOOSH!

Rui cleanly crouched, launching a swift and crisp low-sweeping kick.

How can he overcome it so easily?!

With each passing second, his maneuvers became sharper.

With each passing minute, his blocks became cleaner.

With each passing attack, he grew more comfortable.

What took her years to accomplish, he seemed to accomplish in a matter of minutes. An attack that confounded every single Martial Squire that it had ever worked on, was slowly being consumed by him.

She knew how difficult it was to overcome it. She herself had subjected her to it for years before she regained complete combat proficiency.

It was more than just a technique.

It was the core of her Martial Art and Path.

She gritted her teeth as an overwhelming sense of despair emerged deep within her.

"HAH!!" She roared as she launched a furious attack on his temple. A heavy attack empowered with torque generated with every cell of her body.

BOOM!

A resounding impact reverberated across the colosseum.

Rui's fist buried itself in her gut as a powerful Flowing Canon crashed into her.

His first attack of the fight.

She gazed into his eyes even as she coughed blood. Cruel eyes that saw right through her. Eyes that saw right through her as though there was nothing to be seen. Her Martial Art, her Martial Path may as well have been nothing.

His attack may have struck her solar plexus, yet it hurt something much deeper.

CRACK!

Chapter 1262: Restraint

Master Deivon's eyes widened in shock as his sharp senses managed to detect what was happening. He got up, stunned in silence at the magnitude of what he was just witnessing.

He was not the only one.

The three Martial Masters overseeing the Martial Contest stirred as they beheld something they had never seen before.

The invisible cracks in the Martial Path were audible to the ascended senses of the Martial Masters!

At that moment, Master Deivon's expression turned grave. He didn't need to even look at Master Uma, Carian, and Greminga told him that they were each having the same thoughts.

It was hard not to.

I'm going to need to have a word with him. Master Deivon's eyes narrowed.

The four Martial Masters hadn't even exchanged a single glance, yet their senses were not to be underestimated, not only had they noticed, but they knew that their peers noticed.

The four of them were the only witnesses to what happened. An air of tension emerged between only them, unbeknownst to anybody else.

Master Deivon clenched his fist as his eyes sharpened

He just hoped that this wouldn't escalate the situation.

Down in the colosseum, a fifth person followed suit. Rui's concentration broke when he detected a familiar hint of despair. Images of the same hint of despair in the eyes of his opponent flashed through his mind

The signs were the same. They were no different from the last this had happened. Unlike last time, he actually had an awareness as to what this actually meant.

He refused to let it happen.

He gritted his teeth as he made a swift decision.

BAM!

A clean swift kick to the jaw knocked her out on the spot. His expression grew severe as he feared for what had happened. He wasn't sure to what extent the damage had occurred. It had only happened for a moment before he knocked her out to ensure that she was no longer conscious.

He didn't know what else to do, he had a feeling that no matter what he did, he would have only made things worse, thus he simply ended it by knocking her out. One could not experience conscious despair if one was not awake.

He could only hope that by the time she woke up, she would be fine. Or at the very least, able to continue practicing Martial Art.

The crowd watching this, of course, did not understand what had happened. They simply mindlessly cheered as Rui seemed to make an abrupt comeback before knocking his opponent out.

"And the winner of the first match of the first round is Contestant Falken!"

He couldn't even be bothered with his victory as he headed back to the contestant hall with a pensive expression.

This was not how he wanted to win. As a Martial Artist, he had a great amount of appreciation for other Martial Art. In his opinion, all Martial Art were a blessing to the world and were things that ought to be celebrated. Abilities like destroying Martial Paths, he did not want such a thing, he wished it did not exist.

It was frustrating because it made him have to be careful about going all out. It made it hard to enjoy a fight with a Martial Artist weaker than him because he realized that he needed to be careful about getting too emotionally invested in the fight. Even if those emotions were positive, it did not bode well for his opponent for Rui to feel this way, unfortunately.

That was something that he had to contend with, he had forgotten about it after Senior Xanarn had informed him about it. But now that he had become the strongest, he needed to be wary of it. back then he was just a high-grade Martial Squire who was a cut or two below grade ten. However, he was much too strong now.

Furthermore, he had added the Metabody System to the VOID algorithm, making it much more powerful than it used to be back then. If the VOID algorithm was the cause of this strange psychological phenomenon, then it certainly was going to be even more dangerous than it used to be.

Thank god I didn't use the Metabody System. Rui shook his head, sighing as he walked back to the contestant hall.

In a way, she was lucky that she was too weak to force him to use it. The outcome would have been much worse than just the pattern recognition system alone.

I hope she's okay. He truly did. The reason he knocked her out the moment he realized what was happening was to sort of push the kill switch on the strange mental phenomenon.

He just hoped it had worked.

I guess I'll go check up on her when she wakes up.

He glanced at the rest of his competitors with a careful glance. Thankfully, it didn't appear that they had realized what was happening.

For now, he returned his focus to the tournament, looking at the rest of the matchups properly for the first time. He hadn't gotten a chance to properly consider them before.

Interesting... Rui mused as he saw that Squire Meera was on the other side of the tournament, in the final bracket while he was in the first. It meant that they could only meet in the final round.

He would not be surprised if that was done on purpose. It didn't take a genius to figure out that they were the two strongest out of all of the eight, thus the most suspenseful tournament ranking was one where their fight was settled only after the others.

Regardless, it didn't matter all too much. He was going to fight her at some point, and he didn't intend to hold back. She was not weak enough for him to have to worry about her.

"And in the next match, we have Contestant Frinjschia, the oldest veteran of the Martial Contest and a consistent top ranker in the Virodhabhasa Martial Contest! Her elder experience gives her a massive edge over her competitors!"

Rui watched the remarkable granny getting up. It appeared that he would be getting to watch her fight.

Chapter 1263: Prince

"And on the other hand, her opponent, a prominent figure from the Kandrian Empire, the seventy-sixth Kandrian prince, Contestant Reese Von Kandria!"

Rui was belatedly glad that the gargantuan man was too focused to notice his reaction because he had been caught too off-guard to hide it.

He had, of course, noticed the man with golden hair and eyes, if only for his strength, but he had not realized that the man was a prince of Kandrian Royal Family!

Even when his name had been called when he passed the third round, only his first name had been used. Rui was not familiar with all the various Kandrian princes and princesses to recall the man's face and name.

Shit...

The presence of the prince indicated the presence of the Kandrian Royal Guard, it certainly meant that there was a lot of attention from the Kandrian Empire. That made him nervous. It wasn't that the Kandrian Empire was his enemy, certainly not, but it made him nervous nonetheless.

Thankfully, the Kandrian Royal Family did not have the kind of information on him as the Martial Union did. He knew that the two organizations weren't the best of buddies, and even had conflicts of interest. The Martial Union did its absolute best to conceal the confidential information on the profiles of each of its Martial Artists since these Martial Artists were its only militaristic power.

Furthermore, ever since Rui became a Martial Squire, he had undertaken a lot of missions under various aliases, courtesy of the safety measures for Martial Artists to protect their identity from potentially hostile clients and enemies they made while fulfilling commissions. He had also completed most of them outside of Kandrian territory.

Immediately after that, he served a little under two years as a diplomat for the Martial Union at Vilun Island where he grew much stronger after having mastered several new techniques. The Kandrian Empire certainly was not exposed to his growth there either.

Furthermore, the Martial Union most certainly would not reveal the growth that he had undergone in the Shionel Confederation to the royal family either.

And there was no way they had any idea how much stronger he was in the past three years he had spent after leaving the Shionel Confederation.

This means they would have absolutely no idea who Contestant Falken was. They would simply be too unequipped to possibly link him back to Rui Quarrier. Especially if he used techniques like the Metabody System, which would give anybody a completely misleading impression about what his Martial Path was.

He grew more relaxed as a result of making those insights. He didn't need to be nearly as fearful as he was. Furthermore, even if the Kandrian Empire found out, they were most certainly no friend of Chairman Deacon. Selling out its own military assets to the grudge of a weaker foreign power was not something that it was willing to do.

Once Rui calmed down a bit, he studied the matchup. He wasn't sure who would win, but he would face the winner of this match in the second round.

He was unable to discern who was stronger out of the two of them based on his evaluation of their threat level, it was too close.

This means that we're going to get a good fight.

The two contestants walked side by side as they headed towards the centre of the colosseum.

It wasn't too long before they had completed all the initial formalities.

"Take your stances."

The Kandrian prince took a rather strange stance, he crouched, stretching one leg as far back as he could on the ground while the fingers of both hands touched the ground before him.

His sharp eyes fixated on Squire Frinjschia.

Interesting... Rui's eyes lit up with intrigue. An offensive Martial Art that relies on accumulated momentum to inflict damage?

Not the most unique or creative Martial Art he had ever seen, but it certainly was a formidable offense. Its clear downside was the fact that it was inflexible and more predictable, but its upside was that its offensive power was almost certain to be unmatched. Every collision would be damning, especially given the weight class and the muscle mass of the man. Rui wouldn't be surprised if he was capable of fighting Hypertrophic Surge head-on.

Squire Frinjschia, however, was unperturbed. She simply adopted a neutral stance, much to Rui's surprise. She's an all-rounder? Interesting.

That made him even more curious about her Martial Art.

The air grew more tense as the Senior priest let the atmosphere mull for a moment.

And soon, it was time.

"Begin!"

RUMBLE!

Rui's expression lit up with an impressed smile as the Kandrian prince blasted forward, the sheer amount of force he exerted shook the very ground beneath him as he propelled his gargantuan body forward at incredible speeds!

The sheer amount of power in his attack was undeniable!

Rui would need both Nemean Blossom and Flux Earther at maximum effort to be able to eat attacks like that head-on. As expected, the final eight were not to be underestimated.

They were different from the rest of their peers.

He shot forward, boiling the air with the sheer friction he generated, arriving at his opponent in an instant!

And yet, she had already departed.

WHOOSH!

His eyes widened as he swept across an empty image. He swerved to the right as his instincts warned him of an incoming attack.

BAM!

Her elbow crashed into his neck as she spun, bolstering her attacks with as much torque as she could generate. Yet, her eyes widened as her elbow could barely dig into his extraordinarily dense and tough muscles.

A single word escaped his mouth.

"Weak!"

He swung wildly, throwing a wild haymaker, yet his attack missed its mark as she effortlessly evaded it, stepping away.

The first bout ended as the two of them momentarily paused, sizing each other up.

The crowd, however, loved every second of it!

"Woooo! Go, Prince Reese! Blast her away!"

"Show him the younglings the power of experience, granny!"

Rui smiled, for once, he agreed with every sentiment they expressed.

Chapter 1264: Risk

The two of them had already gained a lot of insight into their opponent based on the first exchange.

She's fast. Prince Reese narrowed his eyes. It didn't feel like plain speed.

His defense is as high as his offense. Squire Frinjschia stared at him with an impassive expression. Hurting him is going to be difficult.

It hadn't taken more than a single exchange for the both of them to not only get a foundational grasp on their opponent but also a good grasp on the dynamics of the battle.

Unless she has some absurdly powerful grade-ten defensive techniques, she cannot withstand more than one attack from me. Prince Reese realized. My win condition is getting a single hit on her.

His circumstances were a lot more straightforward and simpler than hers. Specialized Martial Artists were usually less flexible than all-rounders, but it meant that they did not have the predicament of choice. There was a much lesser probability of making the wrong choice because they had very few choices in the first place.

It was different for all-rounders. By definition, they had all the choice in the world. It gave them more flexibility than any other class of Martial Artists. But it also meant that the difficulty of choosing the right choice was greater.

This was something that every all-rounder had to tangle with.

Rui regarded her empathetically. Of course, he had an entire system of thought that he had personally researched and developed that dealt with this dilemma, in addition to his extreme strategic intelligence, so he didn't suffer due to that problem all that much.

He glanced back between them. He had an inkling of what her Martial Path was, but he would need to see a little more for confirmation.

At the moment, she had two choices on how to proceed strategically. She could either choose to aim to take him down by accumulating damage with countless strikes over a longer period of time, or she could hope to rely on particular circumstances with her most powerful technique and knock him out in one go when she got the opportunity.

Both options had their merits and demerits. The former offered stability and lowered the risk of loss while executing it, but it also had a lower probability of victory.

Unfortunately, weight classes mattered, it dictated raw power barring truly exceptional circumstances. She would need to accumulate minute damage bit by bit over an absurd amount of time and effort. It was a herculean task, but as long as she relied on the maneuvering capabilities that she had demonstrated, it was not impossible. It also made it more difficult for him to take her down.

Knocking him out in one go required a lot less effort. This was because the mechanics of being knocked out were fundamentally different from damage to tissue. It caused blunt force brain trauma, causing a forced shutdown of the conscious brain.

It didn't require as much damage as hurting his absurdly tough body enough to take him down with actual injured. But this approach required her to be a lot less passive, she would need to fight more aggressively and take more risks in order to exploit more openings and create a circumstance where she could launch her most powerful attack at the right place and time.

That moment would not arrive if she went with the conservative strategy of statically trying to accumulate damage.

The two strategies were largely mutually exclusive with each other, making it mostly impossible for her to try a combination of both. She would merely tire herself out while not executing either strategy properly.

The air grew taut as a pivotal point of the fight had already arrived.

The decisions they made here would likely decide the outcome of the fight. They were too close in overall prowess, a wrong choice would give their opponent an unshakable advantage.

Rui watched in rapt attention. He too did not know what was the right choice, the issue was that he didn't have a good grasp of what either side was capable of. It all depended on how confident she was on her strongest attack, and whether she was evaluating his defense accurately.

Soon enough, the moment arrived.

Interesting... Rui realized her decision before everyone else.

WHOOSH!

She flashed forward with incredible speed, racing straight at him fearlessly!

He smiled enthusiastically.

She had chosen the high-risk, high-reward strategy!

This was an unexpected choice to Rui, given her age, he had expected her to be a lot more conservative and composed in her approach. Yet she didn't seem to care about such considerations.

She wanted to win!

Even at her age, she was not resigned to losing to her juniors who were in the prime of their lives.

Instantly, he had gained a lot more respect for her. It took a truly unshakable conviction and drive to push through for decades without losing her fire. She was cut from a different cloth from the Squire instructors back in the Martial Academy. While he respected Squire Kyrie and was quite grateful for her training and tutelage, she did not have what it took as a warrior to even be worthy of the Senior Realm.

Squire Frinjscia, on the other hand, was perhaps the most worthy candidate for the Senior Realm. He had initially speculated that it was her lack of drive that prevented her from entering the Senior Realm.

But now he knew that was nonsense. That meant that there was another reason, perhaps her body was too weak?

He shook his head. No.

Then it could just be horrible luck that she didn't run into the right challenging circumstances that pushed her enough?

Perhaps.

Or it could be an issue with the individuality of her Martial Art. The stronger he got, the more he realized that individuality was important. Techniques needed to be individualistic because the Martial Path and the Martial Body were individualistic, the same source of individuality was needed to be compatible, synergetic, and attuned. if there was an element of incompatibility, then it could not draw out the true power of the body; the Martial Heart.

He had a feeling he knew what it was.

Chapter 1265: Thoughtless

Regardless, he wasn't too sure about it. It could be one of the two, and it was unlikely that he would find out just by watching her fight. At the very least, he would need to fight her himself in order to figure out whether it was just a matter of bad luck of not being forced to overcome the right kind of challenge, or whether it was an issue in her Martial Art.

Regardless, Rui put the matter aside as it was not particularly relevant. His attention was already fixed on the fight ensuing in the colosseum.

"RRGH!" The Kandrian prince swung at Squire Frinjschia as she approached.

WHOOSH!

She narrowly avoided a blow to the head, using her momentum to land a powerful blow into his gut in a fashion similar to Flowing Canon.

POW POW POW!

She followed through with a series of swift blows to the rib, before throwing a powerful doubles-fist strike at his jaw.

She didn't hide her desire to knock him out.

BAM!

"Tsk." She tutted, leaping away to avoid an attack after hers failed.

Yet she wasn't done. The very next moment, she raced forward yet again, fearlessly entering his striking range.

Yet the Kandrian prince could only grit his teeth in frustration when every attack he struck her with cleanly missed!

He found it unnerving that she could avoid him so well, despite her raw speed not being too impressive. How was she able to avoid him so well and move so sharply?

Not many people were able to comprehend the underlying mechanics behind her movements.

'It's her Martial Art.' Rui realized. 'It's not that she's fast... It's that she's managed to eliminate thought as a time-consuming variable in her movements by relying on muscle memory alone.'

Rui recognized this because he had seen a similar case before. 'Hever.'

Hever too had mastered his technique to such a point, that he could perform them using muscle memory alone. Of course, this was not a feature of his Martial Art, it was something that he inadvertently accomplished with incredible single-minded dedication and focus.

Thought was something that accompanied all movements before, during, and after they occurred. It was needed to time the movement, coordinate, and pace it appropriately.

However, it could be replaced with muscle memory, when the movements were completely and totally baked into the blood of the body, such that it could be accomplished with little to no effort, and no lag from thought.

It was the difference between someone typing on a keyboard for the first time, and a proficient typer with many years of dedicated practice and hard work.

The latter was always far superior. But was it because the anatomical speed of their fingers was superior to that of the former?

No.

The only difference was that the latter could type without needing to perceive, process, and decide when it came to typing, getting rid of an important element that hampered the former.

That was why while Squire Frinjschia's movements were not the fastest, she could effectively move as fast as a speed and maneuvering-oriented Martial Art.

'Furthermore, she could go much more extreme with it than Hever ever did, because her Martial Body is obviously attuned to her Martial Art.' Rui narrowed his eyes.

That meant that she definitely had fewer constraints and restrictions. At the very least she could achieve greater results for the same amount of effort that Hever did.

However, unlike him, she applied to a much broader combat style, while Hever had hyper-specialized in counter-offensive grappling, making his task easier and more pliable.

As far as Rui could see, her entire combat style made use of muscle memory replacing thought. Every single movement, every single set of movements, completely eliminated thought as a shackle.

'Impressive.' Rui regarded her with respect. She moved so fast that even Rui had to exert his attention to keep up with all of her movements. 'She can pressure even the likes of Kane when it comes to maneuvering.'

That was especially impressive because she was not a maneuvering-oriented Martial Artist. She was an all-rounder, and her offense, while much weaker than the Kandrian Prince's titanic offense, was consistently solid.

He hadn't gotten a chance to see her defense since the Kandrian Prince had yet to put even a scratch on her, but he was quite confident that it too would not fall behind. He could already tell that she relied more on passive defense with extensive signs of conditioning across her aged flesh.

It made sense, since active defenses often required thought, or at least were heavily reliant on it. It was a lot more difficult and risky to eliminate thought in techniques that required thought. Thus it was entirely logical to rely on conditioning.

Regardless, it appeared that she wouldn't particularly be relying on it this fight.

BAM BAM BAM! WHOOSH!

She struck his liver with a swift combo of knuckle strikes, striking him with the second knuckle on the index finger, before just barely evading a swift sweeping haymaker from him.

POW POW! WHOOSH!

She barely managed to squeeze in two strikes to the vital points of the floating ribs before sharply ducking to avoid a powerful swift blow from the Kandrian prince. She somersaulted away cleanly, and yet...

FLICK

It was just the tiniest of nicks with the knuckles on his fist, and yet, a wound was a wound. A small cut appeared on her cheek.

It was nothing worth mentioning, yet it spoke for itself.

She was cutting it close, extremely close. This was the downside of her approach, it certainly allowed her to be more aggressive in pursuing opportunities to land that finishing blow that she was looking for, but it also came with risks.

Had she chosen a more conservative approach, this most like would never have happened.

STEP

He crouched once more into a sprinter's position, before launching himself at her.

BOOM!

He propelled himself forward with tremendous momentum only to be effortlessly evaded by his opponent.

Yet it appeared that he wasn't interested in repeating the same song and dance in vain.

Chapter 1266: Difference

The moment she stepped away, he too shifted. His legs immediately changed directions, planting themselves into the ground, as he managed to conserve momentum, altering his direction towards her.

Her eyes widened in shock as he once again shot himself against her, this time nearly point blank!

POW!

What followed unfolded so fast, that even Rui had trouble keeping up. He launched himself at her nearly point-blank range.

In an ordinary case, victory was but guaranteed. But not against an opponent that seemed to have eliminated thought!

POW!

He grinned as he felt the impact!

Yet his expression soured when he turned back.

She was conscious. Her arms were intact, yet they were bruised visibly. And she had already rushed back towards him with a powerful charge!

'She mitigated the impact with a well-timed retreat and shift.' Rui mused. 'That would have been impossible without her ability to move without thought. She would have been too slow and he would have broken her arms and mangled her body, to say the very least.'

The battle escalated to a higher echelon of intensity as the Kandrian prince refused to let the battle return to its previous state!

Letting his opponent take all the initiative was something he could not allow. While he was confident in his defenses, he had to admit that he had admitted her ability to hurt him. Letting that continue with as little resistance as before was no longer an acceptable choice.

"RARGH!" He rushed forward with a determined expression.

And yet, much to everyone's surprise, the elder lady, launched herself at him fearlessly.

While many others would have chosen prudent passivity in her place, she rushed forward in the face of an attack that could cripple her without even the slightest hesitation of inhibition.

WHOOSH!

His attack missed her face by a millimeter!

Yet hers didn't.

BAM!

A powerful knuckle punch dug itself into his solar plexus. An expression of pain flashed across the Kandrian prince's face as he stepped back to charge at her with his entire body.

Yet his eyes widened in shock when she refused to let him open the distance even a slight inch!

Every step he took, she took, almost before he himself did. Her movements were not inhibited by thought, and her reactions were always at the peak of her reflexes at all times.

He could never open up the distance before she kept up with him every step of the way.

"GET AWAY!" He launched a sweeping attack with both hands.

And yet...

WHOOSH!

She was already behind him having casually evaded it!

POW POW POW!

Three strikes to the kidney and the coccyx were only the beginning.

The battle entered a new phase where the Kandrian prince was unable to even open the distance between himself and her.

She refused to let him!

She boldly stood right in front of his face. Boldly avoided every single attack just a moment before it struck her to maximize the amount of striking time she had!

Her knuckle punches abused his vitals. They were the only areas where she could hurt him, after all. She overcame all of his paltry attempts to crush her, growing more aggressive with her attacks by the second.

She was searching for an opportunity to end the battle even harder than at the start of the battle!

Rui only grew more impressed as he watched her fight. The difference between the two warriors was stark.

She was a fighter who had truly done her absolute best to squeeze the potential of not just her body but also her subconscious mind.

Rui did not know what the conditions for the higher Realms were, but he had a feeling that she was most likely on the right track.

It was unfortunate that she was still stuck at the Squire Realm.

Rui narrowed his eyes.

The more he watched her, the greater the suspicions he had on why she hadn't broken through despite being such a fierce warrior whose determination had persevered for a lifetime.

It was a pity, but it made sense if his hypothesis was true.

In comparison, the Kandrian Prince's flaws were more glaring and visible.

'You have a powerful body. Yet you suck at maximizing its potential.' Rui shook his head.

The act of developing a Martial Squire's Martial Art with individuality was the same as squeezing the most out of the potential that the body had to offer.

'Yet, instead of maximizing the potential of what your Martial Body has to offer. You have only explored its most basic application in regards to your Martial Path.' Rui shook his head.

While it was true that his Martial Path was probably centered around momentum, that did not mean that that was all his body was capable of. The closer Rui got to the Martial Heart, the more he realized just how much it took to access the Martial Heart.

Every part of the Martial Body had to be put to good use. The full combat potential of one's Martial Body needed to be realized in order to access the hidden power buried deep within it.

Until one did that, one was unworthy of the Martial Heart.

That was the difference between the two of them.

And that difference proved to be just enough.

POW POW!

Squire Frinjschia lunged forward, jamming her thumbs at the base of his ears.

The Kandrian prince's eyes widened as he felt a wave of dizziness wash over him for just a moment. The world turned upside down as it spun to his senses.

For a moment, all the muscles in his body relaxed as his guard dropped when his attention was drawn away from her.

That opening was all she needed.

Her eyes sharpened as she activated a special breathing technique.

BOOM!

An incredibly powerful impact rocked his jaw as her high kick landed squarely on his lax jaw. The blunt force trauma it caused just barely exceeded the threshold.

And yet it did.

His eyes rolled backward as his body went limp, collapsing

THUD

For a moment, everyone was stunned. It occurred so abruptly that it caught many people off-guard. It took a few seconds for the commentator to remember that he was hired for a job.

"AND WE HAVE A WINNER! SQUIRE FRINJSCHIA PASSES TO THE NEXT ROUND AFTER A STUNNING VICTORY!"

Rui smiled. She was to be his next opponent, and he was itching to fight someone of her caliber.

Chapter 1267: Religious clash

He was glad that she was the one who won. She was a more sophisticated fighter than the blockhead who wielded his Martial Body like a caveman. Furthermore, he would rather avoid fighting the Kandrian prince.

He might get into political hot waters if it came to light that a Martial Squire of the Martial Union crushed a Kandrian prince. These kinds of Martial Artists were particularly vulnerable to Rui due to their lack of sophistication. In fact, Rui would need to be extremely careful to ensure that he didn't annihilate the man's Martial Path, or else he would be accused of treason.

He didn't exchange any words with her when she returned. There was time for that later.

"And for the next round, we have Contestant Janeu Meren! A powerful Martial Squire native to the Virodha Theocracy, known as the Fangfeeder! His opponent will be a junior monk of the Daeshun Temple, Contestant Xaasha representing Daeshunism!"

The crowd cheered loudly as a wave of excitement spread through them.

'Oh boy, a religious conflict.' Rui sighed, shaking his head inwardly. 'Because those always went well back on Earth.'

Yet it appeared that the people of the Virodha Theocracy were quite enthused about this matchup. It appeared that they looked forward to a battle between their own representative of the Virodhabhasa Faith versus a representative of Daeshunism.

This was a religion that Rui did not know much about.

Yet the junior monk did indeed resemble what Rui pictured when he imagined monks.

'Maybe Daeshunism was like the Buddhism of this world and the Daeshun Temple is like the Shaolin Temple of this world.' Rui speculated.

He wasn't too interested though. Getting entangled with one religion was enough of a headache for Rui.

It appeared that there was indeed friction between the two of them.

"This isn't the soft and peaceful Daeshun Temple old man," Squire Janeau smiled viciously. "If you are soft, you'll get consumed."

"May Gaia take pity on your being," The man emphatically replied. "I shall excise you who has surrendered yourself to the beast."

The crowd roared in approval as the two of them were firmly opposed to each other.

Rui could already tell what their Martial Art were without even needing to look at their stances or their combat style. Squire Janeau had absurdly sharp canines for all his teeth, looking like a mutated beast version of a human.

Furthermore, the nails of his hands and feet were thick and long, curling into razor-sharp claws. Rui could see that he had conditioned his elbows into a sharp edge as well when flexed. The same had been done for his knees.

Only a fool would not be able to gauge his Martial Art at first glance. However, that did not mean it was weak. It was quite likely that his Martial Body had been adjusted to accommodate such conditioning with greater ease and less resistance if not outright granted with them from the start.

He could not imagine what kind of conditioning could change an incisor or molar tooth to a canine.

The monk's Martial Art was also quite obvious with the long spear that he held in one hand.

"Take your stances!"

Squire Janeau took the most beastly stance that a human could possibly take standing on two legs. Rui was sure that the man would rather have been born a predator beast or monster than a human, at this point.

The monk, on the other hand, took the most natural and expected stance of a spear that one could expect from a spear wielder.

What was unexpected was the weight of the pressure that he exerted.

It was silent, ordered, and honed.

On the other hand, Squire Janeau resembled a hungry predator eying its prey.

"Begin!"

Squire Janeau lashed forward with a wild grin. His hands turned into claws, one reaching for the monk, while the other was pulled back, coiled, and ready to lash out.

Rui had already predicted the paradigm of the battle even before it began.

If the spear wielder failed to take him down, or at least ward him away, before the beast entered close quarters, then he would lose.

There was no way a Martial Artist dedicated to the spear was overcoming a lethally offensive close-quarters Martial Artist at that range. He needed to ensure that it never got to that point.

And it appeared that he had no intentions of letting that happen.

The second that Squire Janeau entered the range of the spear, the spear flashed forward at blinding speeds!

FLICK!

If anything, Rui was impressed that Squire Janeau managed to evade that with only a small scratch. Yet, he was not deterred.

He rushed forward again with a wild grin, unperturbed. Yet, he hadn't gone in without a plan, unlike the impression he gave.

WHOOSH!

He grinned as he managed to duck in time, evading the spear.

It was a simple tactic. Spears were an inflexible weapon, it meant that they generally had limited attack patterns, in exchange for offering the user solid range. Thus they were easier to predict than weapons such as swords that were much more unrestrained.

He rushed forward with a wild laugh. "You're dead!"

'Fool.' Rui shook his head.

BAM!

Just the briefest moment after he evaded the spear, a foot had already crashed into his face, launching him away.

'Expecting a spear wielder not to have taken measures to compensate and mitigate for the most basic weakness of a spear is stupid.' Rui mused. 'Then again, the Kandrian prince did not have any real measures with his Martial Body to mitigate the weakness of his Martial Art and Body.'

Both of them were short-sighted. It was always best to assume, or at least be prepared for, the worst at their level.

The monk had already begun the kicking motion even before the spear attack had been fully evaded. Rui could instantly tell that that was one of many combos that the man had mastered to an extremely high degree of perfection. In fact, the spear attack was half-intended to be a set-up for the kick.

Overcoming such a defense was not going to be easy.

Chapter 1268: Awaited

Yet it appeared that he wasn't one to give up so easily, either. He immediately lashed out, rushing in towards the spear wielder. The moment he stepped into range, the spear flashed forward racing to impale him.

Yet Squire Janeau leaped diagonally to the side, avoiding the spear, and closing the distance a bit.

Because spears had lesser flexibility, they could not easily attack targets that weren't directly ahead within their striking range. This was what Squire Janeau hoped to use to close the distance between them.

Yet, it appeared that he was still underestimating the monk.

The moment the latter saw the maneuver, the spear as he rapidly shifted it from hand to hand towards the approaching Squire Janeau.

THWACK!

The powerful weapon slammed hard into Squire Janeau. The man gritted his teeth as he blocked the powerful weapon with both arms, only to be launched backward with the force of the impact.

"I won't let you get your claws on me that easily, beast." The monk declared confidently.

Squire Janeau gritted his teeth. "I'm going to tear you apart!"

Rui watched with vague interest as the two of them continued their fierce competition. Squire Janeau continued applying as many possible solutions to getting past the man's annoying counter-offensive and defense. The monk instead did everything he could to keep Squire Janeau away.

Rui had to respect how far he had taken spear-wielding. Every time he moved the spear, it almost disappeared in Rui's vision. It was incredibly fast, and even more lethal. The edge of the spear was sharper than Rui could even sense. He doubted that even Nemean Blossom would be able to withstand

the offense without taking any damage, the offense was too focused, powerful, and lethal for that to possibly happen.

Squire Janeau, on the other hand, reminded Rui a lot of Nel. The two of them had the same wild aggression that resembled what one would expect from a predatory monster as opposed to a Martial Artist.

He knew better than to underestimate someone like that. The man's speed was incredibly high, allowing him to dodge the spear routinely. Rui didn't even want to imagine what it felt like to get hit with either those razor-sharp claws or the fangs in his mouth.

However, as much of a wild beast the man seemed like he was, he did display a respectable amount of strategic and tactical intelligence. He didn't just blindly stick to one approach even if it failed. He showed that he was capable of adapting his approach if that was what was necessary.

It was an interesting fight, but not one that was too important as far as he was concerned. He almost certainly would not be fighting either one of them in the final round. They would need to overcome the winner of the next match to reach him.

He had a feeling that that was not going to happen.

Regardless, the outcome did catch him by surprise.

SPLAT!

The spear pierced through the top of Squire Janeau's shoulder... but that wasn't enough to stop him from ripping off a good chunk of the monk's forearm.

"Rgh!" The monk grimaced as he immediately tried to contain the bleeding.

Squire Janeau, on the other hand, was ecstatic. "Hehehe..."

The piece of flesh that he bit off, fell from his mouth. "I told you didn't I...?"

The man appeared to be unperturbed by the spear wound. "...This ain't your little Daeshun Temple. You'll get torn apart if you're soft!"

What followed was inevitable.

The size of a spear meant that it needed to be wielded by both arms. It could not be used to anywhere near its full potential with only one functioning arm. With one arm losing a huge chunk of its forearm, the man could not effectively use it to manipulate his spear.

He had brought this upon himself.

'Why would you not take measures to protect your arms?' Rui shook his head.

If the arms were the most important part of the Martial Body when it came to one's Martial Art, then Rui would most certainly have gone to extensive means to protect them. At the very least, he would have conditioned them to hell and back.

'Then again, it's highly doubtful that anything short of a full-fledged defensive powerhouse could stop that man's fangs and claws.' Rui shrugged.

"I forfeit!" The monk exclaimed once Squire Janeau's claws were just an inch away from his throat.

"We have a winner! Contestant Janeau of the Virodha Theocracy passes on to the second round of the Martial Contest!"

The crowd cheered ecstatically as much of it was comprised of the natives of the Virodha Theocracy.

Rui grew more attentive as the next round soon arrived.

This is what he had been waiting for.

"And in the final matchup of the first round, we have Contestant Feoul, the renowned Breathless Demon of the Feriung Clan at the frontier of Human Domain! A powerful newcomer to the Martial Contest!" The announcer exclaimed, before pausing for a moment. "And on the other hand... We have the champion of the Martial Contest! The Devil's Beauty herself! Will the newcomer be able to dethrone the queen of the Martial Contest?!"

The crowd cheered loudly as two women appeared in the colosseum. Rui watched carefully, unwilling to miss even a moment of the fight. He had already resolved not to make predictive models on any of them to give himself as much of a challenge to potentially trigger his Martial Heart, but that did not mean he would not take ordinary measures when it came to observing them.

"Take your stances!" The Senior priest instructed them once the formalities ended.

Contestant Feoul took a low crouching stance with her hands ahead of her, poised for action.

'Grappler... Interesting.' Rui glanced back at Meera, who simply stood there. 'And on the other hand... stanceless.'

Squire Feoul released a tremendous amount of pressure, one that would any Martial Squire on edge. It appeared that she was as impressive as one would expect from a first-timer entering the top eight of such a wide and powerful contest. One look at her, and Rui knew that if he wasn't careful, it wouldn't end well.

Chapter 1269: Heart

Meera, on the other hand, did not exert any pressure. She truly was a confounding Martial Artist. The pressure that Martial Artists, or any entity for that matter, exerted, simply arrived from the threat of their existence being conveyed once they expressed it by taking a stance and focusing their minds.

Yet, one could not feel any overt threat when one looked at her. One would never have guessed that she was the champion of the Martial Contest at first glance.

Yet despite that, Rui felt vaguely more discomforted at the sight of her than any of the other Martial Squires. Perhaps it was the fact that she could hide her strength so seemingly well that made him feel wary.

"Begin!"

STEP!

Squire Feoul launched herself at Meera with a shoot maneuver, her arms positioned for a takedown even before she reached her.

Yet, Meera did not move.

Squire Feoul's eyes widened when the two of them locked eyes.

Despite being a moment away from being part of a takedown, she was relaxed.

She may very well have been relaxing atop a hill overlooking a valley, taking in the view.

Her body was relaxed.

Her stance was unperturbed.

And yet, at that moment, Squire Feoul felt a boundless chasm of power lurking deep behind Meera's sparkling eyes. She gritted her teeth as she forcefully paused her maneuver, leaping back, putting some distance between them.

"Oh? Squire Feoul has pulled back! Could it be she saw something that we didn't?" The commentator wondered.

"It appears that I underestimated you," Squire Feoul spoke with a grave tone.

"Eh?" Meera tilted her head in confusion. "I didn't even do anything."

"I am not a fool," Squire Feoul coldly retorted, before adopting an even deeper crouch than before, reducing her size even further.

Her expression intensified as the air drew towards her, growing taut.

Literally.

Rui's eyes widened as he felt something strange with Tempestuous Feel.

Something was off.

The air around her gravitated towards her... before disappearing into her?

'What?' Rui's eyes narrowed as he studied what was happening.

Tempestuous Feel could feel not just the air around her, but even the air from the skies above drifting towards her, before eventually disappearing into her being!

'What is this?' Rui watched with shock.

It was as though her body was consuming the very atmosphere itself.

Tempestuous Feel was unable to tell him what was causing this. Neither was Seismic Mapping or Primordial Instinct able to inform him on what exactly was happening.

It was only when he peered into her body with Riemannian Echo, that he understood what was happening.

'She's breathing in the atmosphere through her skin.' Rui's jaw dropped as he beheld something he had never seen before. 'Skin breathing. But this is not supposed to be possible in mammals.'

It appeared that her body continuously grew heavier as she absorbed an immense amount of air within her body. The atmosphere seeped into her at a drastic pace, even the size of her body grew larger in response.

Rui's eyes narrowed.

Whatever she was doing, it was something big.

Even as she made preparations, her sharp eyes were fixed on Meera. She refused to lose sight of her even once. Her body began bloating in an unsightly monstrous manner, erasing her femininity.

It was a choice that Meera disapproved of.

"How disgusting," She murmured.

the air grew tumultuous.

The audience froze.

Something had changed.

The commentator was at a loss for words.

The remaining contestants narrowed their eyes.

An avalanche of pressure had erupted from Meera, crashing into all of them. It had a darkness to it that one would never expect looking at her.

Yet only a fool could miss the bone-chilling malevolence that flavored her power.

"No one is going to steal your heart as long as you wield that technique, you know?" Meera murmured.

"You can have both your heart and your victory stolen." Squire Feoul snarled coldly.

She was ready.

"Poor thing..." A smile that didn't reach her eyes formed on her face.

Squire Feoul deepened her shooting maneuver, leaning almost flat on the ground.

"If no one is going to steal your heart, then..." Meera continued like nothing was happening.

Squire Feoul had no intention of letting her ramble on any further.

BOOM!!!

Rui's eyes widened in shock as she launched herself at a speed that was second only to Kane's Godspeed technique!

The tremendous velocity she leaped towards Meera at should have incinerated the very air around her. She should have torn apart the very atmosphere with the momentum of her shoot.

Yet nothing happened.

She seamlessly sped forward, employing her normal breathing to inhale air from the front before exhaling it backward with her skin breathing.

Air resistance did not exist in her vocabulary.

Not only did the air not impede her, it propelled her forward.

In just a small fraction of a millisecond, she had already arrived.

And then, the world went black.

Her chest felt cold.

So cold.

Ordinarily, she would have charged into Meera, grabbing hold and never letting go.

Ordinarily.

Rui had witnessed many ordinary things in his life.

What he saw next concretely fell into the extraordinary category.

She completely flew past Meera crashing into the other side of the colosseum.

No one understood.

Why hadn't she charged into Meera? Or grabbed a hold of her?

Why did she fly past her?

The answer presented itself.

BADUMP

...

BADUMP

...

"...If no one was going to steal your heart then..." Meera blushed as a bashful smile appeared on her face. "I hope you don't mind if I do."

The bloody heart she held in her hand continued beating even after Meera extracted it from within Squire Feoul's chest cavity.

Nobody moved.

Nobody wanted to.

Everybody stared at Meera with a mixture of horror and shock.

A medical team had already appeared on the colosseum, quickly administering a whole slew of healing potions to the collapsed Squire Feoul. They disappeared away from the colosseum along with Squire Feoul as quickly as they had appeared.

Chapter 1270: Choice

Rui didn't even know if she could be saved. Losing a heart was usually a nigh-instant death. It all depended on how good her body's endurance and healing were. Those were the factors that would determine whether the medical team made it in time.

He turned back towards Meera with narrowed eyes. 'She's a lot less sane than she looks.'

It was an eerie realization.

Earlier, she had struck Rui as a quirky and eccentric Martial Artist. Now she was clinically insane in his eyes.

However, her strength was real. Squire Feoul's technique was easily grade ten. She was an incredibly powerful Martial Squire who definitely belonged in the top eight based on the power she displayed.

Rui was confident he would have been able to definitively defeat her, it was still extremely impressive for Meera to be able to take her down so quickly.

Her match had impacted all those who witnessed it.

This was the strength of a champion, one who stood at the very pinnacle, above hundreds of thousands of Martial Squires.

It was overwhelming.

Almost none of the remaining contestants possessed the confidence to win against her. Not even Squire Janeau's aggression seemed to be able to retain its vigor after witnessing that overwhelming performance.

Only one of them retained his confidence.

Not only did he retain his confidence, he retained his hope. It even grew stronger after witnessing that performance.

Rui's hand inadvertently pressed against his chest as he felt his excited heartbeat. It was a reflection of his true emotions on the matter.

'If anyone can push me to the limit...'

He eyed her longingly.

Yet, he had another obstacle to overcome before he could reach her.

It was only after several seconds that the announcer once again recalled what he was hired for.

"And the winner is Champion Meera! She moves to the second round with a shocking performance!"

Meera simply turned around as she simply returned to the contestant waiting room, unperturbed by the eyes that fixated on her.

Rui, however, no longer focused on her.

His attention had turned back to his next opponent.

"And now we move on to the semi-finals! We have four remaining contestants. Squire Falken! Squire Frinjschia! Squire Janeau! and Champion Meera!"

The crowd roared with approval and enthusiasm.

The fights thus far had been quite special. Not a single person in the spectators wished for a refund. They got to witness shocking spectacles that they would seldom get to witness otherwise!

"Without further ado, let us jump into the first match of the semi-finals!" The announcement exclaimed.
"We have the domineering newcomer Contestant Falken! and the eldest veteran Contestant Frinjschia!"

Rui and Squire Frinjschia headed towards the colosseum together.

"May I ask you something?" Rui asked, politely.

She glanced at Rui. "...Why do you persevere after all this time?"

"...Yes."

She faced the colosseum ahead of them. "It's all I have ever known. It's all I know to do. It's all I will do until I pass away."

Rui raised an eyebrow.

That was unexpected.

He thought she would have persevered for a specific goal of some sort. Maybe she had a family she wanted to obtain the power to protect, or maybe she wanted to obtain the power needed to extend her lifespan a bit.

But it appeared that he had a wrong read on the situation.

She did not need a reason to persevere.

She needed a reason not to.

'Behavioral inertia.' Rui mused inwardly.

Certain behaviors, when religiously engaged in over extremely long periods of time, became highly ingrained within a person.

Her words indicated that she had dedicated her entire life to persevering for power singlemindedly. If that was the case, then he could see why the very act of pursuing power was the reason she pursued power.

Perhaps it was the only normal she had ever known. Perhaps this was the only thing that could bring her comfort and happiness, regardless of the success.

'But is it enough to break into a higher Realm of power?' Rui wondered.

He didn't know, he still didn't understand the most detailed nuances of the breakthrough to the Senior Realm.

Was pursuing power because it was the only way of life that anchored her mind and staved off despair strong enough of a desire to activate the Martial Heart?

He didn't know.

'It could also be that it is strong enough, but that she simply hasn't met anything that could challenge that threaten and challenge that desire. After all, the worst thing that could generally happen in a fight is death.' Rui mused.

He turned back towards her. "Do you fear death?"

"Hmph," She snorted mirthfully. "I fear life. Death is peace."

'Figured. So even the threat of death or loss isn't enough to challenge her Martial Heart. No wonder she is still a Martial Squire after all these decades.'

He started to understand her predicament. She was just in an unfortunate position of pursuing her Martial Path for a reason that was particularly difficult to challenge. It didn't help that she didn't seem to have a strong attachment to life on top of that.

'For a circumstance to help her activate her Martial Heart... It would need to threaten her ability to pursue her Martial Path without actually killing her.'

A grave thought entered his mind.

He was inadvertently faced with a choice. One that he had never expected he would be faced with in his entire life. He didn't know which one of them was the right choice to make. He could consider the choice as rationally as he wanted, but unfortunately, he was unable to separate his emotions from his considerations this time.

He entered the colosseum with a clouded mind, his eyes wandering in uncertainty.

"Take your stances."

She adopted the same neutral stance she did last time.

"Focus." She instructed him with a sharp glare. "You cannot overcome me with a scattered mind, young man."

Rui stared at her for a moment, before a small smile bloomed on his face.

He made up his mind.