

Martial Unity 1281

Chapter 1281: Invalidate

THWACK!

Meera spun, gracefully redirecting his Flowing Canon attack with the back of her hand, elegantly pirouetting away.

Yet Rui was unperturbed. He kept lashing out, refusing to give up.

POW POW POW!

A flurry of swift and powerful strikes amplified with Outer Convergence and Reverberating Lance flew at her.

Yet not a single one of them reached her.

Her every movement was captivating. Her grace earned the admiration of thousands who beheld her beautiful form.

Not Rui, though.

It took more to impress him.

"Hm?" Meera raised her eyebrow as Rui changed. His hand had changed form, morphing into various different striking forms. From a chop to a knuckle punch. He adapted the form of his hand to the location that he was striking, to try and inflict as much damage as possible, and also to make it harder for her to redirect them.

This was Vital Pressure. One of the Apprentice-level techniques that he had ever learned in his entire life. He had come to naturally adapt this technique to the Squire Realm.

He pushed forward as Meera needed to exert herself to redirect all of his strikes.

"Hey..."

"Yeah..."

"She's getting pushed back."

STEP

Meera stepped back as she continued redirecting all of Rui's strikes.

STEP

Another step back.

The spectators watched as Rui's barrage of attacks had begun overwhelming her. They stared, absorbed, as they watched the balance shift.

What was the difference?

What was it that gave Rui an edge?

POW!

His fist firmly landed on her abdomen, pushing her back a bit.

The first strike of the battle had been landed!

'Your weight shifts in the direction of the flow of power just a beat ahead of the strike.' A knowing glint flashed in his eyes.

His mind had begun creating a predictive model as soon as the battle had begun. He had resolutely avoided any preparations ahead of time. It wouldn't have worked in the first place. She was so strong that she had basically not revealed any of her capabilities in the previous two fights.

Rui's plan was simple.

He would create a predictive model. Force her to show her best. And hopefully, she would be good enough to force him to activate his Martial Heart.

Yet so far, that plan had not been going as he hoped.

BAM BAM BAM!

The balance immediately broke as Rui gained an advantage in their little scuffle.

And yet...

"Elegant," She muttered.

Rui's eyes widened as he felt a wave of peril.

CLASP!

She caught his fist with just two fingers as her body twisted.

BAM!

She had intercepted his strike, throwing him down behind her from over her shoulder.

BOOM!

He narrowly avoided a powerful dropkick as he leapt away.

The first bout had ended.

"Falken," She addressed him. "Your Martial Path... It's adaptive evolution, isn't it?"

He narrowed his eyes. It appeared what Master Deivon had said about her getting aid from a Martial master on the analysis of his Martial Path was true.

"A truly beautiful Martial Path..." She smiled. "At long last, I have finally found someone who can help me complete the promise I made that day."

Rui had no idea what she was talking about.

"I wonder if he'll accept me now..." She murmured to herself, getting lost. "No... only if you are suitable. If not..."

'She's insane...' Rui watched her rambling on incoherently.

"Focus." He instructed her. "This is important."

She was one of the two people with whom he had hope. He had hope in her power. He had hoped that she would be able to push him to a higher Realm of power.

Yet, so far, she hadn't been doing a very good job at that.

Then again, the battle had just begun.

His expression intensified as he swiftly prepared several Mighty Roar Flash Blasts.

"...You're right," She murmured. "This is important."

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

The attacks were powerful supersonic sound bullets that were extremely difficult to sense once released.

Yet he could only widen his eyes in shock as she weaved past them in a manner that partially defied his predictive model!

The peril that she exerted on him began growing.

For the first time in the battle, she went on the offence. She rushed forward with a speed that beggared the imagination.

BAM!!

A powerful blow crashed into Rui's guard. He gritted his teeth as he used Flux Earther to disperse her impact to the ground.

Yet she wasn't done.

POW POW POW!

His guard rattled as her strikes continued growing stronger and faster!

Ecstasy flashed across her face as she continued hammering him with incredible blows!

Rui watched her with the eye of a hawk.

Her weight shifted.

His eyes narrowed as he predicted a lower hook in two beats.

POW!

His eyes widened as the attack a lot sooner than it was supposed to!

BOOM!

He grimaced as he barely managed to block an absurdly swift flying knee kick. Yet just a moment later, a powerful high kick flying at his head threatened to knock him out.

FLICK!

He leapt back. The edge of her foot had struck his forehead, cutting it open with the sheer friction it generated.

The wound itself didn't matter. His healing factor had already clotted and was slowly mending it.

What mattered was the fact that she had completely bypassed his predictive model.

Sure, it wasn't complete by any means, yet she invalidated it like it had been wrong from the very get-go.

This had happened before as well.

Somehow, she invalidated the prediction of his predictive model.

'However... She's only invalidating the timing.' His eyes narrowed. 'Not the action predicted. In other words, she simply underwent an inexplicable boost in speed on a fundamental level.'

He had noticed that he predicted the hook, the flying knee kick, and the high kick. The only thing he had gotten wrong was the timing. That could be fatal. If not for Primordial Instinct, he may very well have gotten knocked out then and there.

His sharp mind had noticed another pattern.

'She invalidated the timing of my prediction after the pressure and threat she radiated underwent a spike...' Rui's eyes narrowed.

A germ of an idea entered his head.

Chapter 1282: Eyes

The entirety of the colosseum watched in rapt attention as the volatile battle ensued.

They didn't understand.

They were unqualified to.

The battle has begun relatively even.

Then it had shifted in Squire Falken's favor.

And now, it had shifted in Meera's favour.

What had changed?

BAM BAM BAM!

Meera's eyes were fixed on him as she pummeled him with a series of kicks.

Rui's eyes narrowed as he barely managed to deal with them.

Her weight shifted.

He rapidly leapt back, avoiding a predicted swift front kick.

And again.

POW!

He gritted his teeth as he barely blocked the early attack.

BOOM!

She spotted an opportunity as she rushed forward, pressing both her palms into Rui while rushing forward a blinding pace.

WHOOSH!

"And Champion Meera launched Contestant Falken into the distance!" The commentator exclaimed. "Is Contestant Falken simply unable to compete?!"

The crowd's sentiment sunk as they watched Rui increasingly overwhelmed by Champion Meera.

After the previous fight, nobody wanted the champion to win the Martial Contest.

Many people had begun rooting for Rui in earnest.

It had not been pleasant to watch him get overwhelmed.

Rui, on the other hand, wasn't paying attention to the spectators. They may as well have not existed to him.

His eyes were focused on a single person.

He had expected her to be quite powerful, but this was different.

He had not expected that his pattern recognition system would fail. It was a blow that he had suffered twice in the Martial Contest. Yet it was understandable for a creature like the abyssfeeder to be able to invalidate it.

But a human? That too a fellow Martial Squire.

He hadn't expected to come across something like that.

Thankfully, it wasn't a complete invalidation. What she did was invalidate his timing.

Not that that was a good thing, timing was extremely important in general, but especially so when it came to adaptive evolution.

He needed to time his movements just precisely right when countering someone, or their effectiveness was greatly compromised. That was why despite predicting the actions, he was unable to counter them well because she made his timing go to shit.

The realization that this was the first human to invalidate his predictive model so directly was not light. It was a psychological blow. Project Water was founded on the premise that people had core patterns that could not be changed it was a manifestation of who they were as beings, in a sense. They were the shape of one's identity.

His eyes widened.

He gazed into her eyes as a chilling realization dawned on him.

'Her very identity as a being is incoherent.' His expression turned grave. 'The root of her mind is in a greater state of flux than even the body of an abyssfeeder.'

That was the source of the chaos within her. That was what allowed her to defy his predictive model.

How could such a being exist? It was said that the sum of one's life was what gave rise to a Martial Path.

What kind of life could have resulted in a monster like her?

He didn't know.

He didn't understand.

Yet, he didn't need to.

'I just need to win.' His eyes narrowed he steeled his determination.

His body brimmed with power responding to the force of his will.

'I need solutions.' He quickly thought even as he defended himself from her onslaught. 'Metabody System?'

It only took him a second to decide. '...No.'

Just like against the abyssfeeder, it was not something that could compensate for the failure of his pattern recognition system. It was too short-lived. It was meant to press an advantage on top of the pattern recognition system.

His eyes narrowed.

There was only one option left.

Yet it wasn't something that he could implement immediately.

His stance shifted.

One leg shifted back, bolstering his body.

His arms drew closer.

One did not need to be a Martial Artist to see what he was going for.

A fortress-style defense.

He had abandoned offense.

A sensible decision.

Yet the spectators couldn't help but feel disappointed.

Wasn't that the same as admitting defeat?

It appeared that Meera was less than amused.

"...Is that it?" Her eyes narrowed.

BOOM!

She blasted him with such a powerful attack that the ground itself shook!

Rui grimaced as he did his best to mitigate the impact as he was launched away.

"Is this the best you can do?" She asked as she immediately arrived in front of him.

Yet, she felt a strange sensation when she looked into his eyes.

They were fixed on hers.

He never once broke eye contact.

It was deliberate.

He was...watching.

She felt a profoundly faint sense of peril. It was as though his eyes captured more than just her body.

It was as though they could pierce right through her.

The profound disconnect between her instincts about him and the state of the fight was disorienting.

Something was off.

His eyes never left hers. Even when she launched him away, he positioned himself to ensure that he never lost sight of her eyes.

It was discomforting.

The same kind of discomfort one would feel if one was naked in public.

That was what she was before his eyes.

It was unpleasant.

"Your eyes..." She murmured.

A horrifying wave of pressure radiated from her.

The spectators watching shivered.

Chills crawled up their skin.

"...are violating."

Pure unadulterated malevolence emanated from her being.

Yet they were nothing compared to the words she uttered next.

"So don't mind if I pluck them out of your skull."

Hardly anybody could maintain their composure at her words.

And yet, Rui was one of them.

He may as well have not heard her.

No, that was not true.

A small smirk emerged on his face behind his mask.

He felt his heart stirring. If losing his eyes was the price of activating his heart, then he wouldn't mind it.

And yet...

"Take my eyes..." They bore into hers. "...If you are able to, that is."

One moment, nothing happened.

The next?

RUMBLE!!!

The very world around them shook as all hell broke loose.

Chapter 1283: Uncertain

One thing had become extremely clear to Rui the moment he felt her aura surge up close while uttering her ominous threat.

He had underestimated her. Not by too much, but he undoubtedly had.

Perhaps it had been because of his string of dominant victories recently. Or perhaps it had been because he had beaten the previous two top eight contestants without using the Metabody System.

Regardless, he had gained a wave of overconfidence, that nothing within the Squire Realm could overcome him.

That was the sort of attitude that was the downfall of Martial Artists.

Thankfully, once he recognized it. It had only taken a moment to correct it.

He immediately activated the Metabody System.

Previously, he had abstained from using it since it didn't have great stamina unless he used Final Breathing and held back a lot. However, now he realized that he didn't have much of a choice. In fact, the very notion that he could overcome her without the Metabody System was rather overconfident at best.

She was a warrior who managed to stalemate the abyssfeeder without letting it gain an advantage. What made him think he could beat her without it?

When she lashed out at him, he unhesitantly activated all of the Metabody System except for Hypertrophic Surge.

The time for offense would come, but for now he needed to address the issue of the failure of the pattern recognition system.

BOOM!

Her fist crashed into his guard with a powerful impact leveraging her momentum, yet to her surprise Rui managed to calmly deflect it away, standing his ground unperturbed.

'It's that thing again...' She mused to herself. 'He has that powerful body technique.'

Her eyes sharpened. Her muscles brimmed with power as she unleashed the entirety of all her power.

BOOM!!!

The powerful impact crashed into Rui, propelling him a good distance away. It looked impressive and flashy, but they both knew that it wasn't nearly as effective.

All that had happened was that Rui had lost some leverage, he didn't suffer any real damage.

A flash of displeasure appeared on her face.

His eyes narrowed he felt her power fluctuating.

She activated a maneuvering technique, rapidly shifting towards Rui as she left behind a series of afterimages.

WHOOSH!

Rui casually evaded her attack with Forestep, his predictive model predicted three swift kicks to the chest.

Her expression grew more ugly.

Her power fluctuated even more than usual.

POW POW POW!

Rui's eyes widened as her attacks deviated from his predicted model even more than usual!

The three kicks launched him into the distance as Meera rushed in immediately to exploit the opportunity to extract his eyeballs.

A dangerous circumstance.

He knew that.

And yet...

"Heh..." A smile appeared on his face. "I see. I understand now."

Her emotions fluctuated.

Then her power fluctuated.

And then the timing of her attacks deviated from his initial predictive model.

This had happened fourteen times in the short time that had passed after the initial invalidation of his predictive model.

The process of scientific induction was the derivation of a conclusion through propositional logic in conjugation with empirical data, the principle of uniformity of nature, the law of causation, and Occam's razor.

This was a fancy way saying one could learn things about the world around them by applying common sense to the things that they observed.

Fourteen times now, her emotions fluctuated, as visible by non-verbal cues, followed by a fluctuation in the pressure she exerted, followed by a greater deviation of her timing from the predicted timing.

There was only one conclusion to be drawn.

'They're connected.' Rui grinned. 'Her emotions are unstable. This seems to cause an instability in her expressed power affecting all her physical parameters. This fluctuation in her physical parameters invalidates my predictions of her timing. An attack slower than the one I based my predictive model on will have a later timing. A faster attack will have an earlier timing. Because that speed keeps changing, my predictive model is useless.'

His eyes narrowed as he glanced at her.

The more he fought her, the more he realized that she was a deeply disturbed individual.

Either she had been born with a cerebral deformity that caused her to exhibit traits that were otherwise humanly impossible or...

'Or she suffered an extraordinarily traumatic event early on in life causing severe PTSD and other extreme symptoms.' Rui tried to quash those thoughts.

It did not bode well to feel pity for an opponent he was at a disadvantage against.

He did not know what caused her to become such a damaged human being, but there was one thing he did know.

A grin emerged on his face.

"Hah... Hahaha!" A laugh of pure mirth rang across the colosseum. 'I can overcome this. I will overcome it!'

Normally, emotions did not affect the metabolic power outputted by the body, yet, in her case, it happened.

Then there was only one thing that needed to occur.

'I need to alter the predictive model to include her emotions as a variable!' Rui grinned.

By inputting her emotional state at any given point, he would be able to predict her metabolic output, which would allow him to correctly predict her timing.

And finally, the predictive model would return to being as effective as before.

'I can measure her emotions via the pressure that she exerts.' Rui noted sharply as his eyes narrowed, focusing on her.

Her emotions altered, both, the output of her body and the pressure that she exerted. He wanted could use the pressure she exerted as a measuring device for the magnitude of her emotions.

'However, I still need to measure the exact correlation between her emotions and her output.' He noted. 'Just knowing that they are connected is not enough. I can do this. But can I do that before the Metabody System times out?'

For the first time in a long time, Rui felt uncertainty about the outcome of a battle.

Chapter 1284: Time Was Up

The spectators watched, dumbfounded. The battle had been raging on for quite some time, immersing them in.

Many had gripped the armbars of their seats for stability and comfort

That was how intense the seismic radiation of the battle grew.

"Hey..."

"Yeah...?"

"We'll be alright, right?" One man asked with the quivering tone of uncertainty.

BOOM!!!

The seismic radiation near them intensified, scaring the already-shaken spectators.

"Oh my god!"

"Protect us, Lord Virodhabhasa!"

Neither Rui nor Meera cared about the mental health of the spectators.

Meera rushed forward at a blinding speed towards Rui.

Her hand reached out, her fingers uncurling towards Rui's.

Yet they were unable to reach.

THWACK!

Rui slapped them away before guarding his eyes, still staring into hers.

Her expression darkened.

Her pressure spiked to a greater level.

Her pacing accelerated.

She had ascended to an even higher level of power.

Her palm rushed forward, striking his abdomen with a blinding speed.

Rui's eyes widened.

BOOM!!!

He grimaced in pain as she launched him to the other side in the briefest split second!

Yet she had already arrived before he did.

Her palm blurred, curving towards him.

SPLAT SPLAT!

Rui's expression grew grave.

Two deep gashes appeared across his abdomen.

The contemptuous ease with which she bypassed his partial Nemean Blossom was more than concerning. Even if it was at partial strength, the fortitude of the technique far surpassed what grade-ten Martial Squires could harm.

Yet it may as well have not existed in Meera's eyes.

Yet, her displeasure grew more palpable as the partial Weaving Blood had already kicked into action, quickly healing the deep gashes at a remarkable pace.

Rui leaped away, his eyes fixed on her, absorbing every ounce of information it could. Greedily. Overwhelmingly.

One could only see two unending abysses within his irises.

Meera's displeasure only grew.

As did her metabolic output.

SPLAT SPLAT SPLAT!

Three more gashes appeared on Rui's body faster than he could defend.

And yet, they healed faster than they were deeper.

She wasn't done.

Rui continued leaping back at an extremely swift pace with a partial Godspeed, hoping to reduce as much time he was in contact with her. Yet, her output had already reached a speed that was not perturbed by the powerful grade-ten technique.

Her eyes radiated a malevolence that was unlike anything he had ever felt as a Martial Artist.

She was beyond determined to blind him.

And it reflected in her movements.

Her hands lashed out like whips, carving on the flesh of his body. Every time she hurt him, he felt his body growing weaker. Both Nemean Blossom and Weaving Blood relied on the Hungry Pain technique amplified by the Reaper's poison.

It actively harmed him in order to protect him from even greater harm. Yet it was a technique that was fundamentally meant to adapt to his opponent, it was incomplete so long as the predictive model was not functional.

That was why Rui was sacrificing the Metabody System.

All so that he could obtain the power he needed to fix the predictive model. There was no point in relying on a power whose foundations were faulty due to external disruptions. It was best to use that power to fix the foundations and rely on the foundations to fight.

The Metabody System almost came alive in a way that it never had before.

It pushed forward as if accepting its role.

The partial Nemean Blossom and Weaving Blood worked in tandem as they did everything in their power to stave off the lethality that Meera threw against them. Godspeed did its absolute best to keep him away from her for as long as possible.

Yet there was a limit to everything.

With each wound Meera inflicted on his body, Weaving Blood grew slower. With each wound, Nemean Blossom grew softer.

The difference was minute.

Not even Rui knew how many wounds it would take for the many minute differences to sum up into a large difference. He did not know how much time he had left.

His mind was not focused on the matter in the first place.

It raced at an incredible pace as he furiously processed all the information he was gathering from Meera.

Within his mindscape, the Mind Palace quivered as it was pushed to its absolute limit.

And yet, the long battle was now reaching a critical point.

SPLAT!

A wave of gasps rippled through the spectators.

Rui was almost a second too late to realize it.

He glanced down. Her arm was at his abdomen.

He wasn't able to see her hand.

That was because it had emerged on the other side of the body.

She had impaled him.

"Rgh!" He coughed some blood, instantly leaping back as he extricated himself away from her.

His wound had already begun mending, even if much slower than before.

Yet, she didn't seem to care.

Her eyes were fixed on his.

She activated a breathing technique and she stepped forward with a maneuvering technique. The very sky and earth seemed to propel her forward as she instantly reached him despite his best evasive efforts.

WHOOSH!

Rui gritted his teeth as he evaded her attack with Phantom Step and Gale Force Breathing stacked on top of the partial Godspeed. Yet her follow-up was even quicker.

SPLAT!

It couldn't be helped. He couldn't use Forestep because Forestep was Godspeed in conjunction with the VOID algorithm. Until he fixed the predictive model, his reflexes would not entirely be able to keep up with even a partial Godspeed. Primordial Instinct could only partially mitigate this factor.

The VOID algorithm was at the center of his combat style, when it was compromised, everything built upon it also suffered.

Rui's eyes widened as her hands blurred, sweeping at him. He leaped back as fast as he could.

And yet...

SPLAT!

His body lagged.

His flesh broke easily

The wound healed slowly.

Time was up. Godspeed, Nemean Blossom, and Weaving Blood committed their final contribution before leaving.

Time was up.

He was not the only one who realized this.

An expression of innocent ecstasy bloomed on her face as her fingers lashed out towards his eyes.

Nothing stood in her way anymore.

Time was up.

And yet...

WHOOSH!

Her eyes widened as he disappeared at her attack.

Time was up.

"Your time... not mine."

His voice behind her sent shivers up her spine.

BOOM!

A powerful attack slammed into her from behind, launching her away.

This was the second attack of the battle that landed on her.

Chapter 1285: Deja Vu

Not a single person watching was unperturbed.

Every man, woman, child, and pet.

Every civilian and every Martial Artist.

Every atheist and every theist.

Every spectator and every staff member.

All of them watched.

With shock and awe. And most of all...

Unadulterated admiration.

Not even the many Martial Masters that had gathered for this historic fight could maintain their composure when they witnessed what happened.

He was pushed. Pushed into a corner. Beaten down. His plummeting speed, power, and fortitude did not escape the ascended eyes of the exalted Martial Masters.

His defeat was nigh.

Time was up.

And yet...

WHOOSH!

"Your time is... not mine."

BOOM!

A powerful Flowing Canon crashed into her back, launching her away.

He should have been weak. Weaker.

And yet, they could tell.

He was stronger than ever.

An aura of invincibility radiated from his being.

Master Deivon grinned with excitement.

Master Carian and Greminga watched with expressions of awe.

They had been agnostic about Rui's status previously.

Now, the balance had shifted ever so slightly.

Master Uma was different from them all.

Had anyone noticed, they would not have failed to catch the devotion that she radiated from her entire being.

As well as the glint of madness within her eyes.

Rui didn't notice.

He couldn't.

They truly did not exist in his mind.

His mind was honed on one, and only one, person.

Meera skidded away as she landed on her feet. Her wide eyes turned towards him with a flash of displeasure.

STEP

STEP

STEP

Rui walked towards her nonchalantly.

Six words escaped his mouth.

"The high pinnacle of individual power."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I recognize your power." His calm voice reverberated across the colosseum. "Your power. Power born at the altar of madness. I cannot begin to fathom the circumstances that have culminated to result in your being."

His admiration was earnest.

"Yet an incoherent heart will never give rise to the Heart."

A profound sincerity had accompanied his composed confidence.

"You have sacrificed not just your mind, but also your Heart." Rui declared. "For as long as you live, you will never ascend to a higher Realm of power. For as long as you live, you will live shackled to the Squire Realm. The same madness that brought you to the peak is the same madness that will forever shackle you away from greater heights. Not even the Virodhahasa can free you from the prison of your own power."

An expression of pity appeared on his face.

Two words escaped his mouth.

"How ugly."

Meera stared at him.

Frozen.

For a moment, the entire world was frozen in shock at his words.

His eyes.

For a moment, all she could see were his eyes.

She felt more than naked

She felt transparent under his gaze.

She may as well have not existed.

Her mind flashed back to a distant memory.

A man with pitch-black eyes and hair had stood over her.

'Do you see your Martial Path in my eyes?' He had whispered. 'Do you see how broken it is? As broken as your soul is. How can one tread where there is nary a Path? You will remain at its edge forever. Unmoving. Realms of power await you. Yet you will be unable to take so much as a step forward. Not even the Antithesis can help you.'

A cold expression of contempt had appeared on his face.

'How grotesque.'

One moment, there was peace.

And in the next.

Her expression crumpled into pure unadulterated rage. Pure malevolence radiated from her being.

"AAAAAARGH!"

She lashed out with a velocity that beggared the mind.

So much so that Rui's eyes couldn't even see her.

And yet.

WHOOSH!

By the time she reached him, he was not. Her attack crashed into an empty image.

BAM!

Rui's fist crashed into her head, blasting him away.

Yet, she simply twisted, redirecting her impact. Her elbow spun towards him with an incredible amount of torque.

Yet he was already gone before she had begun.

POW POW POW!

His strikes were not fast.

Nor were they heavy.

Yet every time she tried to dodge them, they struck her nonetheless. Every time she blocked, they hurt nonetheless.

It was as though he knew where she was going to go ahead of time.

It was as though he knew how she was going to move ahead of time.

It was as though he knew what she was thinking.

BOOM!

A powerful kick crashed squarely into her throat, flinging her away.

She grimaced in pain.

Rui had already prepared his next attacks.

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

His attacks crashed into her one by one. Now that his predictive model was fixed, he could use the Pathfinder technique to its absolute limit. The ODA System kicked into gear as he unerringly nailed her with every attack no matter how she maneuvered.

If she rushed forward directly towards him, hoping to weather his attacks as she reached him, then he simply increased his intensity.

If she tried to use complex maneuvering trajectories to try and juke his aim, she found that he simply accurately struck her vital points nonetheless.

No matter what she did, he mercilessly sniped her or bombarded her with attacks.

Wounds began accumulating on her body one by one. Her active defenses failed before his accuracy and prediction, and her passive defenses were not strong enough to withstand his offense in the interest of beauty.

BAM BAM BAM!

She gritted her teeth as she pushed herself to the very limit.

Her bones cracked under the combined weight of his attacks, and her stubbornness. Her joints groaned, threatening to be displaced. Her muscles burned. Her flesh bled.

And yet she persevered.

She refused to let this happen a second time.

Yet try as she might... she was unable.

The end was nigh.

BOOM!

A powerful tier-five Transverse Resonance crashed into her, flinging her against the colosseum walls. She resolutely exerted herself and yet...

"Eh?"

THUD

She fell back into the ground.

She was unable to even stand up.

STEP

Rui appeared before her, a palm jab flew forward with Flowing Canon.

She closed her eyes.

...

Yet nothing happened.

His palm stopped just an inch away from her throat.

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her with a pointed look.

Only a moment later, her voice announced to everyone watching.

"I forfeit."

Chapter 1286: Wager

Not a single person was unperturbed.

How could they be?

For they had just witnessed the birth of the new Virodhabhasa Champion, after all.

One moment, everybody was silent.

And the next, the entire colosseum erupted in cheers.

"WOOOOOHOOOO!"

"MY MAN! I knew you could do it!"

"I'm so glad he beat that crazy freak!"

The colosseum released of all sorts and a festive day broke in the Virodha Theocracy.

"And we have a winner, folks! Squire Falken is the seventy-second Virodha Champion!" The commentator exclaimed with bubbling energy. "Stick around to hear what he has to say!"

Rui, on the other hand, simply stared at Meera, offering her a hand.

She sighed for a moment, before accepting it, struggling to get up under her failing body.

Thankfully, a medical team had already been transported to their locations, supplying them with several potions.

"Congratulations on your victory," Meera wished him with a pensive tone.

"Thanks."

Yet Rui didn't seem as pleased as everybody else.

In fact, he seemed quite displeased now that he had actually won the final match and become the Virodha Champion.

It couldn't be helped. After all, he had fought this battle for the sole hope of gaining the opportunity to activate his Martial Heart. But alas, it turned out that this would not be that opportunity.

Meera simply stared at him.

Her impulsive anger had been beaten out of her by Rui's overwhelming power, but she hadn't forgotten his words. She felt a profound weariness in her heart when she recalled what they were. He was just being honest, but the truth was much too painful for her.

She had no idea what to do after this. Should she continue training for the Virodha Theocracy? Even though she never made too much progress?

She didn't know. Yet she didn't want to simply sit around waiting another two years so that she could participate in the seventy-third Virodhabhasa Contest.

She had a lot to think about.

"Ah..." She murmured when something popped in her head. "That reminds me. You owe me a favor."

"What?" Rui tilted his head, consuming a potion.

"Remember our wager?" She smiled. "Now that you have won, you have to do me a favor as per the agreement."

"I never agreed to that absurd wager." Rui snorted. "Don't even try."

"I need you to go to a certain place, and fight a certain somebody," She said, ignoring his words.

Rui frowned, about to retort, yet her next words froze him.

"Ajanta Island in the Kaddar Region. Squire Tokugawa Ieyasu." She told him.

Rui stared at her with furrowed eyebrows.

"...What is your connection with him?"

"He was the champion of seventieth Virodhabhasa Contest," She easily revealed.

Rui had had a gut instinct when Master Deivon told him about the previous champion who defeated Meera, but he had dismissed it as a possibility after some logical consideration.

There were millions of Martial Squires across the wide continent, and the probability that the champion was Ieyasu Tokugawa was the champion was extremely low.

And yet, lo and behold.

It turned out that his gut instinct was right all along.

"Why do you ask this of me?" Rui raised an eyebrow.

"Well..." She began. "When I faced him in the finals, I made him a wager. If I won, he would marry me. That was my condition."

Rui furrowed his eyebrows "Marriage was your condition?"

"His Martial Art was beautiful," She sighed unabashedly.

'His Martial Path is imitative evolution though.' Rui frowned. 'So she basically fell in love with her own Martial Art reflected in him? That's so narcissistic.'

"He accepted the condition." She continued with a wistful expression. "His condition was that I would continue to participate in the Virodha Contest, and send anybody who defeated me his way. He himself went and perched in himself in the Ajanta Island, waiting."

Rui's eyes widened at those words.

Ieyasu had essentially converted the second-strongest Martial Squire he knew into a scout for powerful Martial Squires and filtered out the good ones, sending them his way.

It was a genius idea. This way, he didn't need to participate in the Martial Contest each time. He just needed to wait.

Perhaps he had done this for other avenues where strong Martial Squires gathered. Maybe he had scouts all over the place scanning the world for a powerful worthy opponent.

The fact that he had reached that level of power was truly amazing. Rui could relate, if not for Ieyasu, he too wouldn't have an opponent strong enough to force him to break through.

He would have to go hunting in the Beast Domain

Rui recalled what Ieyasu had said to him when he left the Floating Sect. His words back then implied that he had been waiting for an opportunity to break through into a higher Realm of power.

Rui heaved a sigh as he realized that this had been coming for some time. It was almost as though it was providence.

"I accept your demand," Rui replied.

"Wait, really? She raised an eyebrow. "I expected you not to care. I was going to contact him myself and inform him of the latest developments. So that he could track you down himself if need be."

"No need for that," Rui got up with a determined expression. "I'll fight him."

The latest revelation had completely drawn Rui's attention. The events that followed the immediate conclusion of the Martial Contest were a bit of a blur.

He received a trophy from Master Deivon himself while the other contestants received medals indicating them to be of the top eight.

The roars and applause from the spectators were deafening. They reverberated through the sky and earth. Yet they may as well have been silent.

He even gave a humble speech that seemed to earn the approval of the Virodha Theocracy.

It took a long time before he could extricate himself.

Much happened once the Martial Contest had ended, and he heaved a sigh, walking back with Master Deivon.

WHOOSH

Three people sky-walked in front of them, stopping them in their paths.

The three Masters that overlooked each of the first three rounds the previous day.

Suddenly, he felt as though the air had grown silent.

Ominous.

Chapter 1287: Surrender

Rui stared at the three Martial Masters with apprehension.

There was the fact that he knew the three of them had confronted Master Deivon about Rui.

And one of them apparently even believed that he was the Virodhabhasa.

He didn't even need to ask which one of them it was.

One look into Master Uma's eyes, and he could literally see the feverous devotion oozing out of them.

She gazed at him like he was destined to be the deity of her worship.

He should have felt flattered.

Honored that such a being worshipped him.

Yet he didn't feel anything other than terror.

'When she sees me, she doesn't see me, Rui Quarrier.' His eyes narrowed. 'She only sees the Virodhabhasa. I am a vessel of the divine or something, not a sovereign individual.'

"Congratulations Champion Falken," Master Greminga smiled.

"You have exceeded every expectation I had of you when I first met you," Master Carian laughed good-heartedly.

Thankfully, Rui detected their composure and calmness. It appeared that they were still not deep down in the rabbit hole. He didn't want to stick around to indulge them.

"Thank you, Masters," Rui bowed. "I appreciate your kind words, as well as the fact that you're taking time out of your day to speak to me. However, I am exhausted, and I wish to rest before what is surely going to be a tiring banquet."

Master Carian and Greminga nodded goodheartedly.

Yet Master Uma simply stared at him, before opening her mouth.

"Accept your destiny."

The air grew ominous once more as the three Martial Masters stiffened at her blatant disregard for politics.

"I'm sorry?" Rui stared at her as his apprehension escalated.

"You cannot hide forever," Her tone, while still reverent, became sharper. "You are a Godling. Destined to become the Antithesis in His full glory. You cannot hide your shine with a Master-level mask for much longer."

"What?"

"Master Deivon cannot protect you forever either." She spoke with sincerity and earnestness despite the edge of her words. "Rather than running away from the inevitable, accept it. Allow me to guide you. I will help shape Your Godship to the best of my ability, and mold you in the image of the Antithesis that the Transcendent Prophet spoke of. Surrender yourself to me, and I will help you realize your destiny."

"Enough." Master Deivon gritted his teeth.

"Do not interrupt me." She didn't even bother looking at him. "I am speaking to him. You are not his sovereign, you cannot speak in his place."

Master Deivon stiffened at those words.

He did not want Rui to get the impression that he was trying to control him by speaking in his place. He had taken great caution and care while interacting with Rui to not alarm the young man that he was out to turn him into a pawn.

He simply turned towards Rui with a cautioning glance.

Rui turned back towards Master Uma with furrowed eyebrows.

"I cannot accept your offer. I am not the object of your worship. I am no object at all. I am my own person with my own goals and ambitions disconnected from this religion. I cannot heed your words," Rui spoke with a determined tone.

"If you do not accept your destiny, then it will force you to. We will force you to. When we discover you naturally once more." Her tone was uncharacteristically soft. She was sincere in every word she uttered. "You cannot live a life of normality, you must not. You are destined for greatness. I implore you. For your own sake, for the sake of the world. Forfeit the life you have forged, the life that you will forge, and dedicate yourself to your destiny as the greatest Martial deity."

"Your words go too far!" Master Deivon snarled.

'She's insane. She reveres me as the sapling destined to become the Antithesis. She is willing to burn away my life if that is what it takes. I bet she wouldn't mind slaughtering my entire family if that is what it took.' Rui realized.

Rui realized that she was a bigger threat to him than even Chairman Deacon. At least Chairman Deacon had political constraints that prevented him from going too far. He hated Rui, but he was sane about the way he went about exacting his revenge.

Master Uma, on the other hand, did not have such considerations.

'If we were alone... She would kidnap me without any hesitation. I am an object in her eyes. A gemstone in the rough that needs to be polished to perfection.' A chill went down his spine as he narrowed his eyes.

Master Deivon and perhaps the other two Martial Masters were the only reason she had yet to make a move.

"Your Holyship... Please consider my words deeply." She said with a lingering hint of mindless devotion, before disappearing the next moment.

'Oh hell no.' Rui shook his head. 'This is why I dislike religion.'

The sheer amount of irrationality that she spouted made his stomach churn. The Virodhabhasa Faith had already begun morphing into a threat in his eyes. He highly doubted that Master Uma was the only religious zealot who was also a Martial Master.

'I need to get the hell out of here.' Rui realized. 'I need to get stronger. Way stronger. My current level of power isn't enough. Not even being a baseline Martial Senior is enough.'

He clenched his fist.

"Champion Falken, please do not fret." Master Carian tried to quell his growing anxiety.

"We will personally ensure that Master Uma does not engage in anything untoward during your time in the Virodha Theocracy. I swear this on my honor as a Martial Master and as a bishop of the Virodha Theocracy." Master Grevinga concurred.

Rui glanced at the two of them warily.

He didn't trust them.

But, it was better than nothing.

Truthfully, he wanted to leave right here and now. He wanted to run for his life. Far away from the Virodha Theocracy.

Yet he did not want to earn the ire of the religious state by shirking the entire nation during one of its most important banquets, in front of all its important guests. That could not be interpreted as anything other than an insult.

He might even get into more trouble doing that than he would by being the so-called Virodhabhasa.

Chapter 1288: Trust

'...Besides, there's still something I have to do during the banquet.' Rui narrowed his eyes.

Once he completed that, he would have no qualms about running as far away from the Virodhabhasa Faith as he could. Finally, the angsty meeting with the three Martial Masters ended as the remaining two also disappeared, wishing him a good day.

Rui heaved a sigh with furrowed eyebrows, glancing at Master Deivon.

He took looked weary. "Master Uma is not all up there. But she was right about one thing..."

He glanced at Rui. "I cannot protect you forever. You need to grow stronger. Gain power. Higher Realms of power. Only then can you exert your sovereign. The only reason you could even engage in a dialogue with her is because I was standing beside you. In the future, you must be able to do that by yourself."

Rui understood this dynamic quite well.

It was no different from caretakers and other staff assigned to care of an infant heir of a powerful emperor, tasked with shaping him into a powerful person worthy of succeeding the throne.

They essentially revered him as the future emperor, but they nonetheless would not accommodate his autonomy in order to nurture and train him to shape him to be exactly what a nation needed.

The resistance of a child was futile, in that regard.

Rui knew that something similar was going through the mind of Master Uma at the moment. A twenty-four-year-old Martial Squire may as well be a child in the eyes of a grandma who had lived for more than two centuries. She had addressed him as boy before she came to believe he was the Virodhabhasa.

'Power is all that matters in this world.' Rui narrowed his eyes.

Ever since he left the Shionel Confederation, his desire for power had grown. And now he could feel the true importance of it, especially in his circumstances.

A part of him yearned to go back to the simple days when he pursued his Martial Path purely for the sake of Project Water. But it was undeniable that he was a lot more driven now that he pursued his Martial Path for more than just the ambition of his previous life.

It meant that he would grow a lot more stronger than he would when he pursued his Martial Path for purer reasons.

But alas, this wasn't a webnovel. The real world was brutal. He needed to traverse it practically.

"Get some rest..." Master Deivon told him, earning a nod. "Ah, and one last thing..."

Rui glanced at him.

"No matter what happens. I am proud of what you have accomplished." Master Deivon smiled. "I am honored to be your patron. Not because of your connection to our religion, not because of your status. But because you are one of the most extraordinary Martial Artists I have ever seen. Your dedication to your Martial Art is inspiring. Your determination to tread your Martial Path is admirable. The individuality you have generated to propel yourself forward is humbling. Your devotion to those you

care about is heart-warming. You have truly earned my respect and my admiration as Falken, not as the Antithesis. So long as I am alive, I will not allow the Faith to take you against your will."

Master Deivon smiled, closing his eyes before walking away.

Rui stared at his retreating figure as he felt a surge of sentiment gripping his heart.

'I must be losing my rationality these days.' He sighed as he made a spontaneous decision after scanning the limits of the full-range Riemannian Echo for any espionage technology or spies, before whispering in a voice so soft and muted that even Martial Seniors would be unable to hear. "Rui Quarrier."

Master Deivon froze on the spot, turning ever so slowly. "...What?"

"That is my real name," Rui told him.

The man simply stared at Rui for a moment before his eyes widened in realization. "You... I see. I understand now..."

"Please don't make me regret this decision," Rui smiled wryly, before heading his own way.

"I will endeavor not to," Mastger Deivon laughed mirthfully. It appeared that the trust that Rui had extended to him had truly brightened his mood.

Rui went about his own day, as he prepared for what was shaping up to be a tiring banquet.

He collapsed into his bed staring at the ceiling, lost in his thoughts before slowly falling asleep.

Rui slept like a coma patient. He had truly stressed his mind to the limit in the tournament. He had gone above and beyond just the VOID algorithm in two of the three fights he fought, and while he most certainly enjoyed every minute, it did take a toll.

Especially when he had abused techniques like his increasingly powerful Mind Palace.

Thankfully, he managed to wake up in time with the prompts of the staff whose only task was to ensure that he was on time with the protocols that he was to fulfill.

"We have a grooming team ready to prep you for the banquet." His manager told him.

Rui sighed as he endured the torment of several men and women scrubbing him in a bath to their satisfaction, before dressing him up from nude. By the time they were done, he didn't even look recognizable despite the recognizable mask that he wore.

He wore an absurdly ostentatious garb that projected glory and power. It was so high-profile that Rui felt embarrassed to wear it. Yet this was one of the few things that the manager was unwilling to compromise on.

It was unacceptable for one of the most shocking and impactful Virodha Champions in the history of the Virodhabhasa Martial Festival to look anything short of resplendent!

His attire was so eye-drawing that every single one of the thousands of guests that had gathered turned towards him when the announcer announced his arrival at the banquet hall.

STEP

Rui paused, gazing into the eyes of the guests.

One moment, he was by himself with Master Deivon at his side.

The very next, he drowned in the sea of guests who wanted to speak to him!

Chapter 1289: Developments

He had known it would be intense. He had even taken some measures to handle it, preparing himself psychologically.

Yet nothing could have prepared him for the waves of people that bombarded him with all kinds of absurdly long greetings.

"The Royal Ambassador of the Jaerun Kingdom greets the Virodha Champion..."

"I bid you congratulations on behalf of the Dreemont Consortium..."

"On behalf of the East-Panamic Alliance, we celebrate your victory..."

Rui briskly and swiftly dealt with each statement as well as he could. Many offers came his way, and many were declined. He couldn't afford to give due consideration to all of them.

However, he did give consideration to some of the more powerful guests. The reason for that was not because he was actually interested in joining or partnering with them.

He just wanted everybody watching to think he was.

All so that when he did accept a private talk from a certain individual, it would not look suspicious.

"Champion Falken," A familiar voice greeted him with an unerringly polite tone and a perfect smile. "I am a Martial Commissioner of the Kandrian Martial Union, Commissioner Reze. I would like to discuss certain offers with you privately away from the banquet hall for just some brief time."

Rui stared into the man's eyes for a moment, as if considering the Martial Union's offer. "...Alright, I look forward to hearing the offers of the vaunted Kandrian Martial Union."

He glanced at Master Deivon, who gave him a knowing nod, before walking away from the banquet hall and towards an absurdly large and ostentatious carriage that pulled up right before the entrance.

It had the familiar and nostalgic emblem of the Martial Union.

Rui's senses couldn't so much as enter the carriage. To his shock, even Riemannian Echo was completely sealed. The only time this had happened was when he was on Ajanta Island due to its naturally bizarre gravitational field.

THUD

The door was closed on them, and a strange hum ensued. He instinctively felt an enormous amount of energy surging through the carriage.

"I personally arranged for a particularly high-grade sage-level anti-espionage system. It is an extremely precious resource." Commissioner Reze's formal tone was reduced in its stiffness. "It was extremely difficult to arrange this on short notice when our intelligence department detected your trace in the Seonmun Church town..."

Rui simply stared at him.

"So you can be yourself without fear, Squire Quarrier." The man smiled.

Rui heaved a broken sigh that quivered in relief.

Being called addressed by his true identity blasted him with a wave of nostalgia and sentiment that had been silently accumulating for three years. He hadn't realized how much he missed being addressed by his actual name, who he truly was.

"It's been a long time... Commissioner Reze," Rui replied, gathering his composure.

"...Indeed."

For a moment, there was silence.

"How is my family?" Rui's eyes narrowed.

This was the first question that he had decided to ask the Martial Commissioner if they ever did get to speak again.

"Alive and well," The commissioner promised with a firm tone. "They are unaware of the truth to this day."

Rui heaved another quivering sigh.

All this time, he didn't know the status of his family. He hoped they were well, and had taken some powerful measures to ensure that they were well, but he didn't know that they were well.

Now that he had gotten confirmation that nothing bad had happened in the past three years, he could go to sleep easier.

"How many attempts at kidnapping them in the past three years?"

Commissioner Reze paused for a moment. "... Twenty-six."

Rui narrowed his eyes, clenching his fist.

Twenty-six times, he had tried to harm his family.

A surge of energy threatened to break out of his control, requiring his full effort to control.

"...That's too high. He hasn't given up."

"Yes, he hasn't." Commissioner Reze sighed. "It is naive to expect him to give up."

Rui nodded with a grave expression, recalling the moniker that the man had earned in his years as a businessman.

The bloodhound.

Once he chose a target, he would chase them to the end of the world. Once he got a hold of them, he would never let go. Once he took a bite out of them, he wouldn't stop until he devoured them.

A perseverance that verged on madness.

That was the reason that he had risen to the highest echelons of the Shionel Confederation.

He had risen to power in his industry after spending nearly fifteen years dogging after his rival, the previous oligarch of the esoteric supply and technology industry. He tore the market away from him, tore away the stakes and stocks of his company before the man mysteriously disappeared after losing everything to Chairman Deacon.

In comparison to that, three years was nothing. Especially when he had the means to extend his lifespan beyond human limits. It would take far more to even consider making him give up.

"Give me an update on everything relevant." Rui narrowed his eyes.

"Very well..." Commissioner Reze nodded. "Once you left, he immediately began hunting the Kandrian Empire for the two doppelgangers that he believed were you and young master Arrancar. Simultaneously, Guildmaster Bradt applied more pressure on him when he proposed and successfully ratified the Dungeon Estate act of the year 426 PMA, which allowed for free colonization of the dungeon floors for private ownership. It forced Chairman Deacon to dedicate his burdened resources towards competing in what is now known as the colonization war within the Shionel Confederation."

Rui nodded, this made sense. Rui had already deduced most of this after deeply analyzing the few words that Guildmaster Bradt had exchanged with him.

"Because he was forced to employ much of his own capital towards the silent war within the Shionel Confederation, he was unable to employ much capital towards his personal vendetta towards you in the Kandrian Empire." Commissioner Reze explained. "He managed to overcome this impediment by forging agreements and partnerships with several industrial powerhouses and oligarchs within the Kandrian Empire with a complex set of agreements with many terms and conditions. However, they basically boil down to this..."

He paused for a moment, before continuing. "In exchange for the real estate within the Shionel Dungeon that Chairman Deacon managed to monopolize with his own capital, they would aid with helping Chairman Deacon build a powerful and solid foundation and base within the Kandrian Empire."

A look of horror emerged in Rui's eyes. "...It will allow him to conduct operations within the Kandrian Empire with greater ease, it may even allow him to shift power bases in the long run away from the oppressive guildmaster and closer towards his target..."

"...All so that he can hunt you down and kill you and your family." Commissioner Reze declared, completing his thoughts.

Chapter 1290: Throne War

Rui's heart sank when he learned about this development. He knew that Chairman Deacon hated his guts, but he didn't think that he would be so proactive in his efforts to overcome the security detail that Rui had commissioned from the Martial Union.

Not only had the man not given up in the past three years, he was taking big strides in the hopes of exacting his vendetta.

"What about his investigation into me?" Rui asked with a grave tone.

"We have successfully led him to believe that Rui Quarrier is within the Kandrian Empire for the past three years, you can rest assured of that." Commissioner Reze spoke with a smile.

"That is quite relieving to learn. I thought that there was a good chance that he would have figured out that I am not in the Kandrian Empire by now." Rui murmured.

Ultimately, it wouldn't have taken too long for him under ordinary circumstances. It was too great of a fact to keep hidden, and someone as competent as Chairman Deacon would have noticed the incongruencies.

"Do not underestimate the Martial Union's ability for covert sabotage," Commissioner Reze conveyed just a hint of pride. "With our Martial Artists, throwing an investigation off your scent by convincing them that you're in the Kandrian Empire is very much possible and feasible."

"That is quite relieving to know," Rui nodded. "Please continue with it. One of the reasons he hasn't noticed me is because he is not looking for me outside of the nation."

It was a good thing to know that the Martial Union possessed the ability to sabotage his investigation for three years straight. It meant that they could do it longer as well. Giving him the time he needed to accumulate his personal power.

"Tell me more about the measures that Chairman Deacon has taken as far as building up a base and foundation in the Kandrian Empire," Rui asked.

"He has largely increased sales of esoteric ore supplies, as well as manufacturing operations of esoteric technology." Commissioner Reze explained. "He has purchased a large showroom in the town of Hajin featuring his products while many large manufacturing complexes further down south in the poorer parts of the nation for lower taxes."

"Damn..." Rui's fist clenched.

The town of Hajin was extremely close to the Quarrier Orphanage. He could cross the distance in a few seconds, it was far too close for him to be at ease.

"Still, this is a lot of progress in just three years. When I left the Shionel Confederation, Deacon Industries was starting to crack and fall apart due to the heavy blow that he suffered due to the catastrophe within the Shionel Dungeon. You're telling me he fought a colonization war within the Shionel Dungeon thereafter, and then proceeded to aggressively expand into Kandrian soil?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "That is very taxing and burdening. You mentioned that he had received the aid of several industrial powerhouses within the Kandrian Empire, who are you referring to?"

"There are several, but the most prominent among them is Charles DiViliers and the DiViliers Industries." Commissioner Reze explained. "He has formed an ironclad partnership with Chairman Deacon."

Rui's eyes narrowed.

Charles DiViliers. He knew that name. This was the same man who held those Martial Art competitions known as the Martial Games at the Apprentice level. Rui had participated in the Martial Games many years ago, representing Nartha Freiers. He was also the man whose champion was a bandit that Rui had fought many years ago. A golden-haired and golden-eyed bandit who had tried suppressing trade between two different towns within the Kandrian Empire by conducting bandit raids on traveling merchant supply convoys.

"Charles DiViliers... That man has ties with the underworld." Rui narrowed his eyes as he voiced a conclusion that he had come to a long time ago.

Commissioner Reze raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That is true. However, it is not public information."

"I feel extremely uncomfortable that those two are colluding with each other." Rui narrowed his eyes. "Is the only reason that this is happening is that Charles DiViliers wants some real estate within the Shionel Confederation?"

"Well, no, not entirely..." Commissioner Reze admitted. "Of course, estate within the Shionel Confederation is quite valuable. The competition for estate within the Shionel Confederation is unlike anything else as I'm sure you remember."

Rui nodded. He and Kane had come across entire flea markets outside the Shionel Confederation comprised of small-time merchants who were unable to compete with the merchants within the Shionel Confederation, unable to own even a square foot of land due to how intense the demand was.

Owning an entire city, in the form of a dungeon floor, within the Shionel Confederation could make one rich unlike anything else.

"However, Charles DiViliers is most focused on the Kandrian Empire rather than the Shionel Confederation." Commissioner Reze explained. "The dungeon is good, but what he really wants is a powerful political ally, and a lobbyist so that he can increase the net political capital he has. All for the sake of the impending war."

"Impending war?" Rui furrowed his eyebrows, tilting his head in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Commissioner Reze paused for a moment, before sighing. "The war for the throne, of course. The war for power over the Kandrian Empire."

Rui's eyes widened. "What?"

"Emperor Rael Di Kandria... is bedridden." Commissioner Reze revealed with a grave tone. "He has been suffering from an extremely lethal terminal illness for the past two decades. Many a doctor has examined him, and while solutions have been provided, they are extraordinarily difficult, dangerous, or costly."

Rui stared at him with a stunned expression. "...What?"

"In the past three years, his condition has worsened," Commissioner Reze explained. "And from all the experts that we have consulted, it is projected to get worse. His time is nigh. In the next few years, perhaps a decade at the absolute most, he will most likely either announce his abdication or succumb to his condition, leaving the throne vacant."

"And a war that will engulf the entirety of the Kandrian Empire will break out..." Rui murmured.

Commissioner Reze snorted. "It will engulf the entirety of East Panama."