

Martial Unity 1291

Chapter 1291: Throne War II

Rui needed a moment to process what he had heard.

He had not expected this. Kandria had undergone significant shifts in the time that Rui had been away from it.

He didn't even need Commissioner Reze to explain any further after providing this bare basic contest, he quickly gathered all the facts, organizing them properly before analyzing them and deducing conclusions premised on them.

"DiViliers Industries is a powerful supplier of restricted technology, I believe," Rui recalled. "Charles DiViliers is unable to supply to restricted strategic Martial technology to anybody besides from the Martial Union and the Kandrian Military. If he is as much of a businessman as I remember, then these royal sanctions probably frustrate him. Which means..."

It meant that he had an interest vested in whoever was the next ruler of the Kandrian Empire. He would much rather the next ruler of the Kandrian Empire be a libertarian than anything else, removing the sanctions that were currently on him.

"Not just that... With the amount of power that an industrial powerhouse like Charles DiVilier has... He can play kingmaker to a certain extent. At the very least, he can bolster any one of the princes and princesses vying for the status of ruler and give them a real shot at ascending the throne."

"Correct," Commissioner Reze nodded. "Chairman Deacon will be a powerful ally. Obtaining his support means gaining the full power of the Deacon Industries as well as the support of the alliance and political power base that Chairman Deacon has steadily built over decades. That will allow Charles DiViliers to much more effectively bolster a Kandrian Prince or Princess of his choosing."

Rui finally understood the big picture. Chairman Deacon was still focused on killing Rui and his family. He had failed to find Rui and failed to kidnap his family, thus he decided to increase power within the Kandrian Empire to accomplish those. He did that with extensive support and aid from Charles DiViliers, in exchange for an entire dungeon floor and Chairman Deacon's political support for the Throne War.

"What a mess..." Rui sighed.

Rui did not particularly care about the Throne War. He was not a prince, after all. As long as the next ruler was not a psycho, he didn't care who it was.

"Indeed," Commissioner Reze sighed. "The Throne War has already begun tearing apart the nation into factions. Not even the Martial Union has been able to resist being torn apart. Different factions have chosen to support different princes and princesses based on their interests or political ideologies. The entire organization has become more disunited than it has ever been since its inception."

Rui could easily understand why that had happened.

He had already been introduced to a few of the factions within the Martial Union over time. Senior Colonel Geringar was part of the Merger Faction that sought to dissolve the boundaries between the Kandrian government and the Martial Union. To dissolve the boundaries between the Royal Family that ruled over Kandria and the Martial Council that led the Martial Union.

He had also met Commissioner Derun of the Martial Supremacist faction who had deployed him to Vilun Island. Her faction was diametrically opposed to the Merge Faction. This faction would probably choose to support a Kandrian prince or princess who was a Martial Artist.

He wouldn't be surprised if there was a Martial Artist prince or princess who had chosen to join the Martial Union, that had earned the support of a good chunk of the Martial Union.

He wouldn't be surprised if several princes or princesses had attempted that.

The one to ascend the throne would be he or she who had accumulated as much power as possible. Political power. Support of powerful stakeholders. This included people with high authority in high offices within the government or the military. It included economic and commercial powerhouses like Charles DiViliers. It included international powers with a presence inside the nation and geographic proximity to the Kandrian Empire. It included all Martial Artists, the higher the rank, the higher the political power. It included the underworld and the powerful Kandrian mafia. It even included the civilian population.

The strongest one would be able to wring over the highest amount of support of the relevant stakeholders that comprised the nation, becoming the next ruler.

Just thinking about the conflict gave Rui a headache. Now, he was almost happy that he had left the Kandrian Empire for a while. Compared to such a dangerous mess, he would much rather be traveling to places of significance to Martial Artists that could help him grow stronger.

However, he had his family to think about. If not for them, he wouldn't mind leaving the Kandrian Empire for a decade before returning after this storm had blown over.

For now, the only thing he could do was grow stronger. Becoming a Martial Senior was the bare minimum, and the ideal was to be much stronger. To protect his family from Chairman Deacon, and to protect his family from the storm that was brewing over the Kandrian Empire.

"According to our analysis of your performance in the Martial Contest, you have reached nigh unprecedented levels of power within the Squire Realm." Commissioner Reze smiled at him. "We did expect that you would grow stronger, but this is beyond our wildest expectations. We estimate that you are on the very brink of becoming a Martial Senior, a shocking discovery considering your youth, but one that is true nonetheless."

"I will break through." Rui declared with a composed yet confident voice. "I do not intend to remain in the Squire Realm for long. For the sake of my ambition and the ones I care about."

"We have faith that you will." Commissioner Reze smiled. "By every measure and analysis, you truly possess the capital to ascend to higher Realms. We hope your journey to the Senior Realm will be unhindered."

"No hindrance can stop me. I will overcome every impediment no matter what."

Chapter 1292: Contribution

The two of them continued discussing a few more matters. It had been a while, and Rui was curious to learn everything that he had missed.

"Your siblings are doing well," Commissioner Reze informed him. "Our intelligence indicates that they were distressed at your disappearance, but have come to terms with reality. They voluntarily graduated from the Martial Academy a few months ago, and have begun completing open Apprentice-level commissions."

Rui smiled melancholically when he heard that.

Though his heart ached when he heard about the pain he had caused them, he was still pleased to hear that they had been doing well.

"I'd like to make a contribution to the Martial Union." Rui pulled a small booklet from a pocket in his gaudy attire. "I prepared this for you when I saw you at the first banquet."

Commissioner Reze raised an eyebrow with interest. "Oh? This is unexpected."

"This is Hungry Pain. It's a powerful Apprentice-level technique," Rui explained. "It substantially increases the power of the Martial Body produced by the Squire evolution breakthrough process. I want you to give this to Max and Mana, and get them to master it before they become Martial Squires."

Commissioner Reze's eyebrow rose. "That is a bold claim, we would need to see substantial evidence of that."

"I do have evidence." Rui grinned. "If you recall, my Martial Body started off at grade two."

Commissioner Reze narrowed his eyes. "There were statistical anomalies and discrepancies with the predicted performance parameters and your actual power. Are you suggesting..."

"Yes," Rui affirmed. "It was thanks to this technique."

"Do you have proof of that?" Commissioner Reze asked with a hint of skepticism. "The Martial Union has a high standard of evidence for confirmation of the capabilities of a technique. Not even the Martial Sages can bypass this with their words."

"I have proof," Rui smiled. "You told me that Nel and Hever broke through to Martial Squire a few years ago, right? They will have used this technique that I shared with them indirectly. Their Martial Bodies are also a product of this technique, I'm certain that their Martial Bodies also started out at grade two."

Commissioner Reze looked intrigued and surprised. "To think you had been planning this for so long. You are far-sighted as ever, Squire Quarrier. I am not intimately familiar with the profiles of your friends as I am yours, so I will need to verify that their Bodies are as you claim them to be and that they actually used this technique. However, as long as there are no problems, then we will accept your contribution."

He accepted the booklet, skimming through it. "...If this technique is as powerful as you claim, then this will be a truly significant contribution. A single grade is a significant boost, and in the long run, it can increase the power of the Martial Union by eight percent, possibly nine percent. Truly incredible. For the Martial Union, even a single percent of Martial growth is extremely precious, that is how powerful we have become."

A look of genuine appreciation appeared on his face. "We were not wrong to invest in you. You have proven your value to not just us, but to the entirety of the field of Martial Art. You can consider the Martial Union your staunch ally. We will not allow so much as a hair of your family to be harmed. Naturally, we will ensure that your siblings master this technique."

"I appreciate that, Commissioner Reze." Rui smiled. "I'd love to chat more, but I should be getting back to the Banquet before people think there is more going on than meets the eye."

"That is prudent," Commissioner Reze agreed. "Good luck, Squire Quarrier. We sincerely wish you the best of luck in your endeavors and journey. I hope that the next time we meet, it will be in open circumstances."

After the two bid farewell amicably before Rui quickly returned to the banquet. Commissioner Reze declined to return immediately, most likely pouring through every detail of the brief yet dense technique explanation and training methodology. Thankfully, Rui had been able to pass on the technique quickly because it was based on an existing technique, so he didn't need to explain much.

The moment he returned, he was once again crowded with all kinds of important dignitaries among the guests.

Rui was gracious enough to perfunctorily give them non-committal answers while accepting their offers of means of communication. He only got some space to breathe when the first wave of dignitaries were satisfied and left him alone.

"Congratulations on your victory, Champion Falken." A familiar voice behind him wished him.

"Squire Ran..." Rui murmured with a surprised expression behind his mask as he turned to get a good look at her.

"I am not surprised that you won the tournament. I was certain that you would after fighting you myself," She remarked.

Rui simply stared at her with eyes of concern, studying her. "Have you... recovered?"

She didn't respond immediately. "...No. But I am working towards it. I do not bear any resentment towards you, Champion Falken. I came to the Martial Contest prepared to lose my life as a risk. You took mercy and prevented a much worse outcome from unfolding."

Rui's eyes lit up. "So that means that you've still retained your Martial Art?"

She nodded with a weary smile. "Broken bones heal to become stronger. I intend to follow their example when it comes to my Martial Path. I will overcome this challenge and become a stronger warrior. Rest assured, neither I nor my clan intend to cause any problems for you."

It was only then that Rui recalled that she was some famous Martial clan. It was good to know that he didn't make another enemy.

She briefly chatted with him before leaving him alone.

Yet it appeared that she wasn't the only familiar voice to reach out to him.

"Champion Falken, I have something important to convey to you." Senior Frinjschia's grave voice spoke from behind him.

Chapter 1293: Departure

"Senior Frinjschia..." Rui smiled with a puzzled expression. "...You seem in a hurry."

"Listen to me, young man." She whispered. "You need to leave this place. You have drawn too much attention. There are powerful forces beyond your comprehension that have taken interest in you."

Rui narrowed his eyes. "...What?"

This was not how he pictured their reunion.

"I'm saying this for your sake." She narrowed her elder eyes. "After our match, I-"

She froze.

Rui narrowed her eyes.

They both experienced a wave of targeted pressure in their direction.

Senior Frinjschia glanced in a direction over Rui's shoulder. When he followed her gaze, he found the source of pressure. He spotted Senior Priest Deril warning her with his gaze and aura.

"...I can't say anymore. I am deeply indebted to you so please, just heed my advice and don't remain in this place for much longer. If I were you, I would accept the offers made by one of the powerful organizations that are soliciting you at this banquet. Pick a powerful sage-level organization or nation. Goodbye. May we meet again."

Rui's eyes sharpened even further as his danger instinct spiked.

Why would he need to pick a Sage-level nation as opposed to a Master-level nation?

The answer was obvious, especially to Rui.

Just this knowledge was enough to terrify him.

Yet he managed to retain his composure. The series of events that had unfolded after he won meant that nothing was going to happen while he was riding his glory and attention as arguably the greatest Virodha Champion.

If anything dared to happen to the honored Virodha Champion who was supposed to be wholeheartedly supported and uplifted by the Virodhabhasa Faith, then the credibility of the entire religious state would take a heavy blow.

Martial Artists would heavily reconsider participating in the contest ever again. If an honored champion was not safe, then they had no business putting so much faith in the Theocracy's measures.

'That's not going to last for long. Trying to forcefully convert me before or during the banquet is definitely political suicide.' Rui narrowed his eyes. 'However, the more time I spend here, the greater the likelihood that something will change. I need to leave. I have spent enough time here, I have humored enough people and shown enough deference.'

He glanced at Master Deivon who immediately noticed his gaze. A single glance conveyed everything that he wanted to. The two exchanged a brief nod before heading out and into a special carriage that belonged to Master Deivon.

"It seems you're done." Master Deivon remarked once they both got into the carriage.

"Yeah, I don't want to stick around." Rui sighed. "Even if I am the celebrated champion, this place has become too dangerous."

"Mmm, prudent," Master Deivon nodded. "I'm getting an ominous feeling as well. It's a shame you'll have to forsake all this power."

"Political power is a means to an end. Nothing more," Rui shook his head. "I have no need for it now. I came here for medical treatment and stayed for an opportunity to break through. Now that I am done, I want to head back to the Kaddar Region."

Rui didn't feel even the slightest shred of regret for abandoning the power bestowed upon the Virodha Champion. It was said that the Virodha Champions gained enough political power from the state to take over an entire nation, even if a small one.

'Besides, once I get strong enough to secure my own safety, I can return and use it if need be,' Rui had a lot of patience when it came to these matters.

Master Deivon nodded. "I have prepared an extensively obscured route and means to the Kaddar Region to ensure that it will be almost impossible to track you after the fact. I will also keep my senses to their limit to make sure that we are not being trailed."

Rui nodded. "That is quite reassuring."

A Martial Master's senses were extremely powerful. Only a Martial Sage or a stealth-oriented Martial Master could evade his senses. And the probability that either one of those would was astronomically low.

The carriage began accelerating at top speed as it left the town, the region, and eventually the nation. It moved at extraordinary speeds, so much so that even Rui would be unable to hold a candle to it on foot.

It was only after an hour into the journey that Master Deivon felt safe enough to strike up a conversation.

And even then, he was discreet.

"Your true identity was a shocker to me," Master Deivon remarked, careful not to say his name. "I didn't do any direct research since it was too dangerous, but what I discreetly uncovered by doing research on related topics was rather shocking."

Rui smiled wryly, taking off his mask. "It isn't all that special."

"Not to you, perhaps," Master Deivon remarked. "But by any reasonable standard, you are a monster by all measures. The Apprentice who won the Serevian War with his own might. The Apprentice who defeated a Martial Squire. And most recently... The Voider."

Rui did not react. He partially expected Master Deivon to learn about that.

It was also an experiment. If Master Deivon had learned about his true identity, then it meant that Chairman Deacon had been extremely aggressive in his efforts to find Rui, so much so that his targets could not be hidden. If Master Deivon didn't know about it, then it meant Chairman Deacon was being more discreet about it.

He was essentially using Master Deivon as a litmus test to measure Chairman Deacon's aggression. That was one of the motivations for revealing his identity to Master Deivon, one that he preferred keeping silent about.

'This doesn't bode well,' Rui concluded. "So you managed to learn about that."

"It seems that you anticipated this," Master Deivon raised an eyebrow.

"Partially. It was a pretty big event, after all." Rui sighed.

"You've been on the run ever since the Shionel Dungeon exploration ended three years ago," Master Deivon concluded. "Looking to gain as much power as you could to protect yourself."

"What can I say? People don't seem to be willing to leave me alone these days," Rui sighed wearily.

Chapter 1294: Escape

The two of them continued conversing for some more time. It was the first time that Rui had truly opened up to Master Deivon. It was just a shame because the two of them knew that this would probably be the last time they would meet in quite some time.

Rui would not return until he gained the power to protect himself from crazy Martial Masters, most likely. It was too much of a threat and Master Deivon couldn't protect him at all times.

That was why Rui had an earnest back and forth with the good Master. Ordinarily, he didn't trust people all that much, but Master Deivon had proven himself. Rui wasn't entirely sure what the reward was for finding the Virodhabhasa, but it could not possibly be small.

Anybody who found the Virodhabhasa would likely attain a religious status that was on par with the Transcendent Prophet.

Nigh limitless political power. It was an enchanting deal, anybody in their right mind would have sold Rui out in a heartbeat if there was even a ten percent chance that he was the Virodhabhasa.

Master Carian and Greminga were highly agnostic and were far too unconvinced that this Martial Squire was a Martial deity to act on it, but Master Deivon knew him more intimately and had spent more time around him.

Furthermore, he had come to learn about Rui's true identity and had access to greater knowledge that only bolstered how astonishing a person he was.

Yet he chose to forgo the possibility of extraordinary political power for what he believed was right.

That was a concrete course of action that could not be denied. No number of sweet words or empty talk could match up with silent action. That was why Rui was willing to be more candid about himself.

"...I see," Master Deivon murmured with an incredulous expression. "So you already have met the seventieth champion."

"That's right," Rui narrowed his eyes. "He challenged me to a death match upon my return before I left. I accepted, and I intend to see it through."

Master Deivon heaved an impatient sigh. "It's a pity that I can't be there. I would loved to have witnessed that fig-"

He froze.

Rui furrowed his eyebrows. "What's the matter?"

The next moment, he disappeared.

"Urgh!" The carriage shook as a gust of wind washed over Rui.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then, an extraordinary wave of horror washed over Rui.

It possessed a depth that was unlike anything Rui had ever experienced in his entire life.

It possessed an intensity that he didn't understand.

One he wasn't qualified to understand.

His heart shook.

The hair on his body stood on edge.

His nerves tingled electrically.

His knees felt jittery.

He breathing strained, almost as if he was in a vacuum.

His vision blurred dizzily as he felt himself losing his balance.

BOOM!!!

"Urgh!"

An extraordinary explosion of titanic magnitude erupted. It was so extraordinarily loud that it left him deafened with ringing ears.

Rui couldn't even begin to fathom how much power it possessed. It was as though someone had set off a nuke in the vicinity!

He got up groggily, opening the door of the now stationary carriage, before peering out.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Master Deivon bellowed with a fierce tone.

Rui's eyes widened at what he saw.

Master Uma stood high up in the air peering down at Rui.

Master Deivon positioned himself exactly in between Rui and her.

"Master Uma..." Rui's eyes widened with shock.

"I originally didn't intend to do this," She spoke with an impassive tone. "But after witnessing your final fight, I had a change of heart."

"What...?"

"I realized that guiding you to your destiny is more important than my well-being." She spoke. "If I get beheaded for attacking a fellow bishop without authorization, then it is an acceptable outcome so long as I get to mold you in the shape of the Antithesis before that happens. It is a worthy sacrifice, and it is one I am willing to make."

"I'VE HAD IT WITH YOU AND YOUR INSANITY!" Master Deivon bellowed as he activated his Martial Heart.

It blazed into power, shining with an intensity unlike anything that Rui had ever seen from a Martial Senior.

"I have memorized every word, every sentence, every chapter of the Virodhaveda," She said to Rui, ignoring Master Deivon. "I have read all the existing theological literature on the Holy Book. I have spoken with the Transcendent Prophet, and gain insight directly from His Holyship himself."

She peered deep into Rui's eyes. "There is nobody more qualified to guide the Virodhhabhasa, Your Godship. Accept my guidance with an open heart."

"RUN AWAY!" Master Deivon instructed him. "I'LL HOLD HER BACK!"

"I won't allow that!" Master Uma narrowed her eyes.

Rui had already begun turning.

Yet he stopped.

He couldn't help but stop.

What else was he supposed to do when he saw a Martial Master activate a power that he didn't quite understand? What was he supposed to do when her very being morphed before his eyes?

One moment, he saw an incredibly elderly woman gazing at him with determination and devotion.

The next?

Her entire existence seemed to change, becoming a pure blade in his eyes. A blade made up of wind.

Master Deivon narrowed his eyes as he followed suit. His form altered, becoming a mighty fortress in Rui's eyes.

'What... What is this?' Rui gaped in wonder. 'Is this the power of the Master Realm?'

He couldn't believe his eyes. What he witnessed was so absurd that it was straight out of a fairy tale!

It didn't compute with his understanding of reality.

"I SAID GET AWAY BOY!" Master Deivon bellowed impatiently once more. "I CAN KEEP HER TIED UP HERE. DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME AND GET OUT OF HERE!"

His words jolted Rui back to reality. His wonder for Martial Art was one of the strongest emotions he felt, yet now was not the time to let it overcome his rationality.

He gritted his teeth as he turned around, before activating Outer Convergence and Gale Force Breathing and sprinting away at top speeds.

He didn't know what was going to happen. Master Deivon had told him that he was weaker than Master Uma, but had reassured him that he could hold his ground.

He could only hope that that was true.

Chapter 1295: Weakness

He didn't know how long the battle would continue, or who would emerge victorious, but he did know that if Master Deivon fell too quickly, it was game over. Martial Masters operated in a different dimension of speed and cognition.

Master Deivon had traveled the distance between the Virodha Theocracy and the Seonmun town in less than half a day, a distance that Rui would take weeks to travel.

That meant that he needed Master Deivon to stall Master Uma for quite some time if he wanted to have any chance of getting away. He had already known that Martial Masters possessed sensory ability that was extremely powerful. Their senses were to Martial Seniors what the latter's were to Martial Squires. They were two orders of magnitude higher than Rui, at bare minimum.

The combination of their speed and their senses meant that running away and hiding from them was essentially impossible for Martial Squires unless they had an enormous headstart.

Rui was worried that even a day's headstart would not be enough. She could cover that distance in less than half an hour.

'I just need to have faith in Master Deivon.' Rui gritted his teeth, clenching his fist. "Damn it. Damn it all."

He hated everything about what had just happened.

He was running away.

Again.

All because he was too weak.

So what if he was the strongest Martial Squire? So what if he was the Virodha Champion?

Those titles were worthless.

They simply meant that he was a larger ant than the rest of his peers.

But ant was an ant nonetheless.

He hated it.

He hated every second of it.

He hated being forced to leave behind people he cared for because of his weakness.

He hated his inability.

He hated his insignificance.

'I need power.' His eyes blazed with furious determination and desire.

Never before had he yearned for power in the way that he did at that very moment.

In fact, at that moment, he hardly cared about anything else.

He realized that Project Water was a luxury.

A luxury of the strong.

This was not Earth.

This was Gaia.

In a cruel world filled with violence and war, the weak had no right to pursue such lofty ambitions. Only the strong did.

'If I want to protect myself, my family. If I actually want to fulfill an ambition inherited from another world and another life. Then I need power.'

Every cell in his body roared in agreement as he pushed himself to an absolute limit.

His furiously kicked into action as he rigorously analyzed the most optimal course of action for the current circumstances.

Running away was a mindless action of fear and panic. But to Rui, it was a problem that had an optimal solution.

If he was to get out of this predicament he needed to do everything he possibly could.

'I need a course of action that maximizes the probability of not getting caught by Master Uma regardless of how long Master Deivon manages to stall her.' He sharply analyzed. 'That requires not ever being in the same vicinity as her, since she will be able to distinguish me as a Martial Squire even with a Mind Mask on even if am in disguise.'

Master Deivon had noticed Rui's Mind Mask technique when he was in close proximity to Rui. Thus it stood to reason that Martial Masters possessed a high ability to sense mental techniques at close proximity.

Of course, there was the possibility that they could sense it from much greater ranges as well.

'They also managed to detect Squire Ran's Martial Path cracking.' Rui narrowed his eyes. 'Thus the hypothesis that they can sense abnormal mental phenomena within a radius of a kilometer or so stands to reason.'

It did not mean that they were limited to that, but it was also true that when they did sense the Martial Path cracking, they were already focusing on Squire Ran since their fight was ensuing. That likely made it easier to notice. Based on his interactions with Master Deivon, the nature of the relationship between awareness and consciousness did not change in Martial Masters, they would be too inhuman psychologically if that was the case.

'With that condition set, I need to maximize ways to ensure that she doesn't identify me either through mental means or physical means.'

He glanced at his attire. 'This needs to go.'

If she did manage to eventually defeat Master Deivon and manage to reach close enough to detect Rui, his attire would be a dead giveaway.

'Ironically, this mask needs to go too.' Rui noted. 'It's a liability.'

She knew that he wore a mask that could hamper even Master-level senses. She would be looking for someone who wore that mask.

'I also need to change my hair color, again.'

Those were good measures that he could take to prevent her from identifying him immediately if the worst-case scenario did happen and he did end up within her sensory range.

However, he also needed to take measures to ensure that he didn't end up within the range of her senses in the first place, which meant ensuring that his direction and location eluded her.

'This is much harder.' Rui narrowed his eyes.

At this moment, he was still within the senses of both Master Uma and Master Deivon. He was relatively certain about that.

If he chose to go in a permanent direction at this point, Master Uma would merely need to follow that direction later on at top speed.

Thus, whichever direction he did decide to go, he needed to make sure that he chose to go in that direction after he exited their sensory range. Until then, it was best to just keep running as perfectly straight away from them.

It wasn't until he was a thousand kilometers away a little under fifteen minutes later that he finally paused in a dense jungle, panting as he caught his breath.

Running at the absolute pinnacle top speed that he could muster was very exhausting.

He heaved a sigh, he had a decision to make, and he needed to make it quickly.

Chapter 1296: Measures

He was quite certain that he was well outside their sensory range. Furthermore, Master Deivon was fighting her head-on, she needed to dedicate attention focusing on him if she did not want to lose.

Still...

RUMBLE

He nervously glanced at the quivering land beneath him. He already knew what was the cause of this seismic activity. Two calamities in human form had begun clashing a great distance away, and the indirect remnant ripples of their power reached him more than a thousand kilometers away.

It was absolutely incredible.

Yet now was not the time to marvel at them.

'Now, it's time to choose what to do.' Rui narrowed his eyes. 'I need to pick a course of action that will minimize the probability of her detecting me even if she does chase after me.'

One thing that was an advantage was the fact that he roughly knew where he was and even the broader geography of his surroundings. He even knew the directions to the Kaddar Region because he had memorized its location as well.

'The good thing is that she doesn't know that my destination is the Kaddar Region.' Rui mused. 'Since Master Deivon had chosen to obscure that fact, he was able to make sure that she couldn't learn that. This was probably why she attacked me before he obscured our travel through some convoluted path or means.'

That meant that as long as he got to Ajanta Island, he won.

'I need to plot a straightforward path to Ajanta Island if that's the case.' Rui noted. 'It's best I take some precautions if she does somehow manage to end up tracking my trail.'

Based on the map inside his Mind Palace, there were many suitable locations along the way, as well as suitable trading paths where he could disguise himself while traveling.

What he was truly afraid of was that if he took a remote path with no other human presence, she would easily identify him if she happened down a path where he would enter her sensory range.

If he could get rid of his attire and the mask, and perhaps alter his appearance with some sort of appearance mask, that would be perfect. Even if her senses detected him, she was likelier to miss him as a traveler among many.

'Alright. So the next destination is directly Ajanta Island. Will travel there directly and fast, but will take measures to ensure that she will have more difficulty identifying me even if she detects me down this path.' Rui decided.

He immediately began running in the general direction of the Kaddar Region. There were many general traveling paths that he could get on to travel to the region. But his first stop was certainly going to be a commuting town along the way. His attire was way too attention-drawing.

He still hadn't even gotten rid of the fancy attire that he was expected to wear as the Virodha Champion. He would draw way too much attention in it.

The good part was that it was multi-layered, so he could get rid of seventy percent of it and still have clothes on that were still less ostentatious.

BOOM!

He dug a huge hole, tossing in the absurd fur coat among other things, before covering it up.

"And now that that's done..." He murmured.

He quickly traveled to the closest town along the way a few thousand kilometers away. He ignored the attention he drew walking in.

He knew that he looked like the lost and stranded son of a noble of some sort. That needed to change.

"I need new clothes that will help me blend in as a traveler," Rui spoke the moment he entered what looked like a cheap clothes shop.

"Ya sure are in need of them," The shopkeeper laughed before providing Rui with a set of clothes.

"Thanks," Rui told him after donning them before putting a Shionel gold coin on the table. "Keep the change."

The man's eyes widened. "That's too much!"

Yet Rui was already gone. He came and went like the wind. He didn't speak with anybody else, or leave any other trails. The greater the impact of his presence, the greater the likelihood that something would go wrong.

That was the reason that he had already moved on from the town, minimizing his presence with Mind Mask. The technique wouldn't work on Martial Masters, but it worked fine against normal people.

Rui continued traveling in a straight line toward the Kaddar Region with an absolutely unerring momentum. He didn't take rest stops or slow down for anything. He just continued sprinting at top speed in the direction of the Kaddar Region without caring for anything.

The initial journey was the most important. More important than any other phase. The Kaddar Region was a considerable distance away from the Virodha Theocracy, even on a continental map scale.

He knew for a fact that even a Martial Master could not possibly search a whole continent. That was the kind of absurdity that he would expect from a Martial Sage or the mysterious Martial Transcendents.

Which meant that as long as he got even halfway through, he knew he had successfully gotten through.

His rationality was in overdrive as his mind furiously evaluated and analyzed circumstances looking for anything that could make his circumstances more favorable in his regard.

So much so that he disregarded his emotions.

His heart had been beating heavily and furious ever since Master Uma showed up. The thought of being caught by her and being brainwashed and trained to become a religious deity made him sick to his stomach. He would rather kill himself than to allow that to happen.

He hated everything that she stood for. But he also feared her power, the power that he saw the two of them wield was beyond his understanding. But what he did understand, and truly felt in his bones, was that he was insignificant compared to her.

No wonder she didn't care to respect his will. He was too weak for it to mean anything.

'One day I will become a Martial Master. And when I do...' Rui narrowed his eyes.

He was going to have a little chat with her that day.

Until then, he needed to make sure that he evaded her eye. Thankfully, that wasn't too hard. The continent was absolutely gigantic, just its size was greater than Jupiter. On top of that, it was highly disconnected compared to the human civilization of Earth. There were many places to hide where she could never find him.

That was why she had chosen to attack them before it was too late and before Master Deivon obscured Rui's path through whatever means.

It was a race, and it was one that he could not afford to lose.

Chapter 1297: Shackled

RUMBLE!

The land shook. It may very well have been the end of the world for the people in that region given its intensity. The dark heavy clouds that formed in the skies above the region were ominous as well. The storm that had risen out of seemingly nowhere was a source of great terror to the mortals that were, unfortunately, enough to be in the region.

Yet none of them compared to the forces at the epicenter of all the maelstrom. A blade made up of wind rested in the skies as if it belonged there. It was an unbelievable sight. If the residents of the region focused hard enough, they could swear that they caught an image of an elderly woman through the illusion, yet it was difficult to say.

It didn't help that their attention was divided between it and the opposing fortress in the sky.

None of them understood what was happening.

No, they could only helplessly pray that the gods ceased their wrath.

Master Uma inhaled deeply as she activated a breathing technique, before timing her exhalation with seemingly strange arm movements. Her arms churned against the wind drifts that her powerful breath created, creating countless sharp blades of wind that coalesced to form what resembled a hurricane in its totality.

One moment, it merely loomed over them. A moment later, it surged towards Master Deivon as though it had come to life.

Yet he was unfazed.

His eyes narrowed as he straightened his stance, shielding himself with arms with balled fists while his legs planted themselves into the sky, unyielding.

BOOM!!!

The attack crashed into him, generating a mighty wind blast that spread as far as the eye could see. The sheer force of the generated wind blasts shredding everything within a five-kilometer radius.

Had they not elevated their conflicts to the skies high above them, it would wiped out all life within a certain radius. Yet the two Martial Masters abided by the unspoken rule of the higher Realms to not tangle ordinary humans into their conflict. It was beneath them.

The dust cleared and the outcome became evident.

Master Deivon's stance had not so much as budged. Had Rui been there he would have recognized the stance as the Sanchin Kata, a stance in many styles of Karate that focused on stability of defense. Back on Earth, it was a stance that was only suitable under highly specific circumstances and was obsolete in the UFC, but here in Gaia, Master Deivon had made it the foundation of his defensive Shackling Fortress style.

Master Uma narrowed her eyes with a displeased expression. She had not expected Master Deivon to be able to withstand that attack that well.

"It appears that I underestimated you," She murmured. "The gap in our status within the Theocracy is greater than the gap in our Martial prowess."

"Flattery isn't going to get you anywhere." Master Deivon coldly remarked. "You're going nowhere. You will remain here, as long as needed to ensure that the boy is completely out of your reach. I will personally hold you here even if costs me my life."

Master Uma stared at him impassively as she considered her circumstances.

It was unfortunate, however, that she was at a disadvantage when it came to the Virodhabhasa.

She was confident that she could defeat Master Deivon by the end of their battle. There was no doubt about this, they both knew that she was stronger. The issue was that this was not a Martial Contest. She did not give a damn about winning against him.

She was there to collect His Godship and isolate themselves as she maximized his potential and molded his mind to match the Virodhabhasa, even if it came at the cost of his current self.

He was fighting to prevent that from happening. The inevitable outcome of the battle did not matter to either of them. What mattered most was whether she would be able to overcome him in time to catch His Godship.

'I won't... Not at this rate...' It was frustrating to admit, but Master Deivon was more than strong enough to prolong the battle for quite some time. She estimated that it would be quite some time before she overcame his defenses and put him down. As Martial Masters, they tapped into power beyond merely the body, they could on for much longer than Martial Artists of the Lower Realms.

This was a highly undesirable outcome.

With every step that Rui took away from her, the area within which he could be increased exponentially. If she took too long to overcome Master Deivon, then by the time she began chasing after Rui, the possible areas within which he could be at the moment would have far exceeded what she could realistically search and hope to find him within.

She had seen the speed at which he sprinted away. If he could maintain even half that speed for even a portion of an extended fight, then the area within which he could possibly be would exceed that of multiple large countries put together.

She had already tried taking down Master Deivon with powerful extravagant attacks, but his defenses were solid enough for him to ignore the wounds. She did not want to test his ability to be a meatshield all day long.

Instead, she chose the more pragmatic approach of simply bypassing him altogether.

BOOM!!!

A powerful hurricane made up of slicing wind converged into Master Deivon once again, releasing an extraordinary wind blast.

Yet Master Uma didn't even care to register the outcome.

She immediately activated her greatest maneuvering and supplementary techniques, accelerating to speeds that exceeded even that of lightning itself.

And yet...

BAM!

Master Deivon speedily appeared before her, using her own momentum to inflict damage on her as she crashed into him.

She glared at him in anger. "Get out of my way!"

"Hehehe..." Master Deivon grinned wildly. "I'm afraid not. My Martial Art is centered around the concept of an oppressive defense. Hard to hurt. Even harder to get rid of. I shackle my foes with my defense and take them down after I have thoroughly worn them down."

Master Uma gritted her teeth as she unleashed an onslaught of power to take down the tenacious Martial Master as quickly as possible!

The battle scarred the region as it escalated in intensity.

Chapter 1298: Shift

As time passed, a greater vice gripped Rui's heart. The endorphins from the initial attack of Master Uma had long passed, and now he was feeling a lot more stressed than before.

His mind constantly went back to the fear of Master Uma appearing out of nowhere he couldn't help but be on edge at every moment. He hated it, but he knew that it was too arrogant of him to not be afraid of a Martial Master.

Even as an hour passed, he was unable to lower his guard. He didn't possess the capital to relax. He continued running mindlessly, pushing his body to the absolute limit.

He applied Final Breathing together with the Reaper's Poison, allowing him to sustain his stamina for incredibly long stretches at a time even if his speed was reduced. It was more important to spend every second traveling as far away from the two battling Martial Masters as possible.

The journey was almost mind-altering.

Perhaps it was because he had been exposed to fear that stemmed from his own weakness and inability that it caused a shift in psychology. Being forced to confront his weakness every second for hours on end was nothing sort of torture.

He couldn't ignore it. He couldn't focus on anything else. He was confronted by the fact that he was insignificantly weak, and was forced to run in fear because of that.

It was maddening.

He had yet to notice the intensity of his eyes.

His eyes, within which one could once get lost, had turned sharp.

They could see only one thing.

The power of a higher Realm.

That was the only thing they sought. Nothing else mattered at the moment. Nothing else could matter at the moment.

He discovered that he was unable to relax even once the implicit pressure of Master Uma started declining.

Half a day passed. He had been running for half a day and had covered an enormous amount of distance. It would be an extreme challenge even for a Martial Master to find him under these circumstances even if they had already begun. There were too many possibilities after a day of travel.

Yet even as the pressure of the Martial Master inside his mind decreased, his mentality was unable to return to what it used to be.

It was as though that sustained pressure had already left its mark on his mind while it was there. It was as though he had already been molded by it, like a sword being shaped by the pressure that the hammer exerted on it with every strike

It didn't even feel unnatural.

Rui Quarrier. Hungry for power. At all costs.

It didn't used to fit. Yet now it was the most apt description. It could be seen in his eyes. He didn't like how he felt, but it felt natural. Inevitable.

How could he possibly maintain his pure frolicking exploration of his Martial Art after experiencing everything that he had experienced in the past three years?

The fiasco of the Shionel Confederation had been the first step, but even something as large as that had not been enough. It had caused a dent. The passage of time made his deadline arrive sooner and sooner, putting more pressure on him.

He had briefly been satisfied with his progress after the Metabody System, yet all that satisfaction had long gone away after the Martial Contest and the emotional experience of feeling how insignificant he was, happened.

All of these factors culminated in the mental shift that he experienced today. Only an uncaring fool could possibly not be affected by what he had experienced. He had initially set out to procure medical treatment because of concern and care for Senior Xanarn.

Yet he increasingly cared less. The treatment had long been procured, and it had already escaped his mind. An entirely different, and much deeper desire and hunger had taken root in his mind.

That was why he didn't even feel relief as time passed.

Hours. Days. Two weeks.

He crossed towns, countries, mountains, valleys, inland oceans and seas.

He never once stopped for more than the briefest respite, consuming all the portions that he had.

Master Uma never once appeared.

Yet he never once heaved a sigh of relief. If he did feel relief, it was buried somewhere deep under his frustration.

STEP

Rui paused as his eyes fixed on a small figure that floated in the sky.

An island.

He had finally arrived at the Kaddar Region after a long journey across the continent.

He took to the air, as he briskly sky-walked to the floating island, making sure that he was well away from the territory of the Kaddar nations. He didn't know what happened since the year he went away, and wanted to make sure that he didn't make any careless mistakes.

His impatience only grew the closer he got. Admittedly, it was not just because the opportunity to gain the power he sought, but also to meet his best friend after a year of staying away.

STEP

A familiar weight burdened his body, a rich and nourishing atmosphere invigorated his breathing.

"...I'm back..." Rui heaved a sigh.

He sensed an approaching presence, feeling déjà vu.

"Welcome to the Floating Sect, I am Guardian Rel-Ivon of the two hundred and fiftieth chamber." A woman addressed him.

Yet she froze when she glanced at Rui's eyes. She felt a deep sense of peril just looking at him. In that moment, she knew that she stood no chance against him in a fight, he would crush her effortlessly.

A nervous expression overcame her face. "...The Floating Sect doesn't accept Martial Seniors."

The smallest of grins cracked at the edge of his mouth.

Suddenly, an incredibly swift figure moved in their direction from deep within the island. One that radiated far deeper power than even Rui.

STEP!

"It is a pleasure to have you back..." Senior Sarak smiled. "...Squire Falken."

Squire Rel-Ivon's eyes widened when she heard that name.

She recognized it.

She stared at him with awe.

"Come..." Senior Sarak said as he got a closer look at Rui. "It appears that we have much to talk about."

Chapter 1299: Reunion

In the battle arena of a colosseum, stood a man.

A man surrounded by many Martial Artists.

All of them were unconscious.

All but one.

"You've truly grown stronger," He murmured softly.

His pitch-black eyes peered at the blue-haired Martial Artist wielding two daggers, standing before him amidst a sea of bodies. "Then again... you did manage to become the guardian of the second chamber in just a year..."

Kane stood before him, panting. His body was heavily bruised and cut, in sharp contrast to his opponent. Out of all the one hundred guardians of the first class, he was the only one who had managed to remain standing.

In the past year that Rui had left, Kane had resolved to develop a powerful foundation with daggers. It turned out that his previous inhibitions with the issues that came with adding an element that completely altered a Martial Art were unwarranted.

He experienced a shocking growth in lethality. Especially when he chose a dagger made out of esoteric substances that could conduct electricity, allowing him to employ the current that his Fulminata technique generated.

In the past month, he had challenged guardians one after the other, he had even managed to usurp the second-ranked guardian in an extremely intense fight. The successes had validated his choice. The lethality that his dagger presented him allowed him to become a major threat to others without needing to learn powerful techniques.

Of course, just holding a dagger prevented him from being able to use other forms of offense, but he wasn't an all-rounder like Rui, so he didn't care if his flexibility fell. Ultimately, the decision turned out to be worth more than its weight in gold.

And yet.

'He's too damn strong!' Kane gritted his teeth.

He had managed to just barely get the better of the grade-ten Martial Squire that used to occupy the second rank, but against Ieyasu, he was helpless.

Ieyasu paused, turning his head as he peered in a particular direction with sharp eyes.

A small smile broke onto his face.

"Let us put an end to this battle. I do not care for this dull battle anymore." Ieyasu turned his back towards Kane uncautiously, heading towards the exit.

"What, you're just gonna walk out and let me slander you instead of just beating me?" Kane frowned.

"An important development has just occurred. Important to both you and me. If I were you, I would accept this mercy gratefully. Your friend would not be pleased to find you battered and bruised the moment he arrives." Ieyasu spoke. "Then again..."

He turned towards Kane, almost whispering. "Maybe that is all the more reason to kill you."

Kane's eyes widened as he felt his hair standing on edge, chills crawled up his spine as he saw himself in the black of the man's dark eyes.

Pure peril oozed out from the man, clogging the air around them.

"Do not make me repeat myself." He turned around, walking towards the exit.

Kane heaved a sigh as he relaxed, furrowing his eyebrows. 'Friend...'

His eyes widened as he belatedly realized who he was talking about, feeling stupid. The bloodlust had overshadowed his words there for a moment, delaying Kane's realization. A grin emerged on his face as he shot out of the battle arena himself, rushing out the battle arena.

Meanwhile, Rui was getting up to speed on the circumstances of the Floating Sect. Much had happened, and Senior Sarak had begun explaining everything to Rui without compunctions "The medical team did their due diligence alright, I made sure of that. If not for the fact that they bore the seal that I gave you. I would not have allowed them to operate on Senior Xanarn."

"And the result?" Rui asked.

"See for yourself." Senior Sarak smiled as they entered a chamber.

Rui briefly smiled when he saw a lone figure standing at the center of the chamber.

Her Martial Heart blazed into life as streaks of glowing red lines coursed throughout her entire body from her chest. The power of a Martial Senior radiated from her unabashedly.

The sight of it was bittersweet for Rui. He was happy that she had regained the power that she had earned with her own efforts. But he was not in a state of mind where his burning desire for it could be prevented from clouding his happiness.

She maintained it for several seconds before switching it off, heaving a deep sigh.

She opened her eyes, which was uncharacteristic for her. The two of them gazed at each other wordlessly.

"Ahem, I shall give you some private time." Senior Sarak smirked as he closed the door to her training facility, leaving them alone.

Yet, neither uttered a word.

"In the many years that I have been a guardian of the Floating Sect..." She began. "I have stepped forth to protect it many times. I have stood guard over it for many, many years. It is not a duty that I will shirk away from. Yet as a result... I have almost forgotten what it feels like to be protected."

A smile bloomed on her face as she bowed deeply. "Thank you for protecting me. Thank you for saving my life, and more importantly, my ability to pursue my Martial Path... Words cannot convey the weight of my gratitude."

Rui could sense that.

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I did it because I wanted to. That's all."

For a moment there was silence.

She didn't know what to say.

She walked towards him, putting her hands on his cheeks and leaning in until their foreheads touched. "...What happened?"

"Hm?"

"You... have changed. Your voice has grown sharper." She murmured. "So much so that it almost hurts to listen to. Like a chalk on a blackboard."

"Ouch," Rui murmured. "Ruthless."

She smirked in response.

"You've grown stronger, too."

"Hardly." His eyes sharpened.

Her smile fell.

She didn't know what to make of those words.

"Do you yearn for power that much?"

"More." Rui's voice came out sharper than he intended. A melancholic expression occupied her face.

"I do not know how to help you with that," She murmured. "However, now that I have regained my power... you can treat it as your own. All of it belongs to you. My life would have ceased had it not been for your efforts, it may very well belong to you. That... is the weight of my conviction. Only then can I possibly pay off my debt."

She leaned in, planting a soft kiss on his lips.

It was a soothing gesture, one that he reciprocated with greater vigor than he had expected to be able to muster up. As much as he wanted to head out and fight Ieyasu to the death, he was too tired after a week of non-stop travel. He couldn't help but indulge in the soothing relief that she offered him as their bodies entangled.

Chapter 1300: Reunion II

Rui woke up, feeling a touch of peace that he hadn't experienced in what felt like forever.

Yet it wasn't enough.

His eyes hadn't lost their edge.

Senior Xanarn did not fail to notice that.

"Woken up yet?" She asked with a melancholic tone, her head resting on his chest. She had hoped to be able to soothe his mind, yet she had underestimated how deep his dissatisfaction was.

It was not something that could be resolved with the pleasures of the flesh.

"How long was I asleep?" Rui asked.

"About nine hours." She replied softly. "You must not have slept in days."

"A week." Rui heaved a sigh, getting up.

"Are you still not going to tell me what happened?" She asked.

"..." Rui paused for a moment before he shook his head. "It's not something I wish to recount just yet. I came to understand how insignificant I am. That's all that matters at the end of the day."

She pouted unhappily. "What do you intend to do?"

"Gain power." His words were sharp as his eyes narrowed.

An air of peril formed around him.

It was volatile. Yet Senior Xanarn could only watch unhappily as he refreshed himself before leaving.

His fist clenched as the intensity in his eyes only grew.

He itched to rush over to Ieyasu and unleash an intensity of bloodlust unlike anything he had experienced before, but there was something that came before that.

STEP

He paused as he arrived at the second chamber of the Floating Sect. He almost couldn't believe it when he had been informed Xanarn, yet even he couldn't help but smile. Time and time again, Kane proved that he was a genius in Martial Art.

"Kane." Rui called out to him before simply waiting.

Suddenly, the door opened.

"Rui!" He grinned as the two clasped hands, exchanging a hug.

"You've grown stronger," Rui smiled. His words were kind, yet his tone betrayed his true thoughts.

Power within the Squire Realm didn't matter to him anymore, and it was hard for him to hide that.

Especially from someone who had known him for more than a decade.

Kane stepped back, furrowing his eyebrows, as he sized Rui up. "...Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry for not coming to see you sooner." Rui apologized with sincerity. "No matter how tired I was, I should have come to see you. But I was with Senior Xanarn and I ju-"

"Hey," Kane cut him off with an expression of concern. "...It's ok."

Rui's expression softened as a melancholic smile sprouted on his face. "...Thanks."

Their friendship was too deep for such superficial issues to possibly put cracks into it. Kane needed only one look in his eyes to realize that his friend was deeply disturbed.

"...What happened?" Kane asked with uncertainty. "You were gone away only for a year, and I know for a fact that you definitely spent an overwhelming majority of that time training."

He didn't have the heart to brush Kane off. Once the two of them gained some privacy, Rui recounted the entire story from the very start, not missing out on a single detail.

Kane's expression grew increasingly more incredulous as Rui continued.

"...And so I was forced to run away yet again while Master Deivon held back that crazy bitch." He needed to exert visible restraint to control his anger. "I ran for an entire week before finally arriving at the Kaddar Region. And now here we are."

Kane stared at him with an expression of shock. He was stunned speechless, his jaw had long dropped with incredulity.

He turned away, blinking for a few seconds.

He knew that Rui had been through something intense, but the story that he had just narrated exceeded every expectation that Kane had.

He actually felt a little guilty for feeling a little bad that Rui hadn't come over to visit him immediately. Especially now that he learned about the tribulations that Rui had overcome just to get back to the Kaddar Region in one piece.

It was no wonder.

He didn't even know what to say. The magnitude of the story he had just told him was more than what he could handle.

"...At the very least, we can be certain that she cannot get you anymore, right?"

"Nothing is certain. However, searching for the smallest needle in the largest haystack would be a trivial task in comparison, statistically speaking," Rui nodded.

"...Now what?"

"Now I grow stronger." Rui narrowed his eyes.

He had divulged everything to Kane, giving Kane a greater context to understand what he meant by that.

"I've fought him many times over the past year," Kane sighed. "He only defeats me with greater ease each time we fight, even though I have only grown stronger. Frankly, his Martial Art has helped me grow stronger. It's like I'm looking at an ideal version of myself in a way."

Rui raised an eyebrow at that. He would have brushed that off in the past, but now he had greater context on the man.

He was the seventieth Virodha Champion. Which meant that his Martial Art was undoubtedly exposed to the Virodhabhasa Faith. Could it be that he had endured similar issues due to possessing a potent Martial Path himself?

Perhaps one of the reasons that he ordered Meera to serve as a scout for people capable of forcing him to awaken his Martial Heart was because it was too dangerous for him to be in the presence of the dogmatic religion.

"What do you intend to do if it doesn't work out?" Kane asked.

"...I don't know."

He got up.

"Where are you going?"

"There is only one thing left to do," Rui replied.

"Now? You want to fight him right away?" Kane raised an eyebrow.

Suddenly, his eyes widened.

Almost in reflex.

Unadulterated dread gripped his heart as a chill crawled up his spine.

Power.

Pure refined power emanated from him.

Kane's jaw dropped with shock when he realized that the gap between them had grown despite his own growth.

'How can a Martial Squire be this strong?' He didn't understand.

Only one other person had made him feel this way.

A nervous grin appeared on his face as he realized that he and everybody in Floating Sect were going to witness something historic.