

Martial Unity 131

Chapter 131: Seismic Mapping

The Inner Divergence training regime was less elaborate than the Outer Convergence training session, but it was even more difficult.

Rui found it quite hard to fundamentally change how he deals with incoming attacks; this training required him to get rid of some of his muscle memory and built new muscle memory.

Furthermore, every time he failed, he would effectively be taking an attack head-on without any defense whatsoever. Since Squire Fare did not allow him to use Acute Edge or Elastic Shift during the training regime.

By the time a few hours passed and his first training session with Inner Divergence ended, Rui had completely lose count of the number of healing potions he had consumed in that one session alone.

('Thank fucking god the Academy doesn't charge the students for every potion we consume, otherwise I would be bankrupted to hell and back. Even becoming a Martial Master would not free me of the sheer amount of debt!')

This, of course, was an extreme exaggeration and Rui knew it. He didn't know any details, but he was sure that Martial Masters could earn such ridiculous money that even the amount Rui fretted over was too insignificant to even register in their awareness.

Rui sighed as he exited the defense training facility, scratching his head.

('Two down, two more to go.') He mused.

He headed over to the sensory training facility, a facility he had never visited before, since this ws the first time he was taking an Apprentice-level sensory technique.

He was quite curious and he wasn't sure what to expect. Once he entered the facility, he took a small tour of it before immediately jumping into training.

The facility was quite different from the others, it was larger and had many sub-sections and division within it. As he walked around, he would see training rooms with a single Apprentice within. Occasionally they were blind-folded, yet completely unperturbed the lack of vision. Other times they would have other sense restricted.

Rui figured these were part and parcel for improving sensory capabilities. After all, the best way to test whether a particular sensory technique was functioning well and as intended was to restrict the other senses and test one's capabilities despite that handicap.

The training for Seismic Mapping did include that to an extent. Though Seismic Mapping was meant to detect and sense things that couldn't be detected and sensed by normal senses in the first place.

"Squire Instructor Maxime." Rui greeted with a respectable bow for the third out of an estimated four times. "My name is Rui Quarrier, I'm a Martial Apprentice, here to learn the Seismic Mapping technique."

The man glanced at Rui for a second, then at the scroll in his hands, before nodding quietly.

"Come." he said quietly.

He directed Rui to a particular facility. "Do you know to do?"

"...Yes."

Seems the instructor wasn't particularly interactive. He didn't even bother explaining the technique or the training regime to Rui.

Not that Rui particularly needed them.

Seismic Mapping was a technique that trained the user's body to be able to interpret seismic vibrations and map a general topography and map of objects in contact with the ground.

The human brain frequently received a huge influx of information. However, it disposes of most of the information it receives without processing it rigorously. A lot of the time it mainly focused on what the eyes saw and not what the other senses perceived. This was true even for Martial Apprentices like himself.

After all this was a cognitive bias that was deeply ingrained in humans. Not even martial Apprentices could break apart the shackles of human flaws.

But training could.

That what the Seismic Mapping training regime aimed to accomplish. By restricting different senses in different ways in different circumstances, it aimed to force the brain to dig up the deeply buried information about vibrations that it mildly perceived, but had long subconsciously ignored because of focusing on vision.

Of course, only Martial Apprentices had the mental faculties to do that, which is why the technique was Apprentice-level; only Apprentices could master it.

There was only one stage of training. That stage focused on having the mind pay more attention to subconsciously dismissed micro-vibrations and then by sheer experience learn to slowly decipher those techniques.

There was no other way to learn it, Rui supposed. Only by trial and error and learning to correlate micro-vibrations with phenomena and understand what they meant, would he be able to master this technique.

This was easily the most difficult technique Rui had ever tried learning. At the very least with the other techniques, the training was relatively straightforward and as long as he persevered, he would be able to make visible progress.

But this was the first technique he had come across where he got the feeling that no matter how much time he poured into training it, he may very well just never make any progress, let alone fully mastering it.

It was incredibly challenging, especially when his knowledge and experience with combat sports did not help him whatsoever this time. There was simply no equivalent of this kind of training back on Earth, after all.

Blinded, initially he couldn't sense anything. He was just smacked around by dolls.

The worst part was the uncertainty.

At least when he was training Inner Divergence, he could see when he was going to get hit with perfect clarity.

Here, he couldn't even know that. He had a paranoia of being struck in the testicles more than anything else, so that also drained away from being purely focused on what he ought to have been focused on.

For a few hours, he did nothing but get struck in the darkness.

Never had he been more grateful and enthusiastic leaving a training session before. Never had he felt as depressed leaving a training session before.

('This is going to take genuine perseverance.') He sighed. Once he got back to his room he needed to figure what the heck he was going to do about this technique.

Chapter 132: Your Turn

Although Rui had immense difficulty with Seismic Mapping, he was quite excited to eventually master it. The technique had an immense amount of utility. If he had possessed the technique when undertaking missions there was a good chance he would have been able to save Bella Hier and a good chance he would have been able to ensure the bandit operation in the Shadow Trails would have gone more smoothly.

Furthermore, just being able to sense his surroundings to this degree would give him a lot of security and confidence. Only a Martial Artist with incredible stealth techniques and covert capabilities would be able to sneak past his senses once he mastered Seismic Mapping.

"Alright, enough about that." he said as he stood before the stealth training facility.

It was finally time for Rui get acquainted with the final technique he had purchased; Blink.

The stealth training facility was also unexpectedly large. Despite the fact that stealth technique was merely a sub-section in the miscellaneous section of the Apprentice library.

In many a way the stealth training facility was similar to the sensory training facility. There were specialized environments that he could see Martial Apprentices training in, and specialized forms of training for each technique.

"Squire Helen." Rui bowed respectfully for the fourth time in a day. "I am Martial Apprentice Rui Quarrier. I've come here to learn the Blink technique."

She was a short middle-aged woman with a demure stature, she turned around, glancing at him.

"Blink huh?" She sized him up. "Good choice." She said. "I hope you understand what the technique is capable of. Most people who purchase this technique have exaggerated ideas of how powerful the technique is."

"I believe I understand the technique well enough."

"Do you?" She threw a skeptical expression at him.

"It's a technique that exploits the opening created by blinking to achieve more than what they would otherwise."

"Correct, 'more', not everything." She replied. "This technique cannot end a fight in most cases. Nor is it something that is meant to be abused in a fight. Most Martial Artists aren't morons, if you abuse it too much they'll figure it out and will not only counter it but also use it to set up traps. In combat, this is a trump card, understand?"

Rui nodded. He was already aware that this technique would not make him invincible or allow him to end the fight instantly unless his opponent was a human or a careless Martial Artist. After all, the technique was priced at only three hundred and fifty

She relaxed a bit when she saw he didn't have any fancy considerations about the technique.

"The technique works best against humans. Humans blink for a longer period of time in combat than Martial Artists because of their slower cognition. Against humans, this technique is extremely effective and can allow you to effectively cross even a hoard of people unnoticed if you time it well." She said. "Against Martial Apprentices, it's more difficult and limited. Martial Apprentices have enhanced cognition in combat, they blink at a similar rate as you do."

Rui nodded in response.

"Against Martial Apprentices, you can only use it as a way to surprise them. In order to understand how this happens, you first need to understand how Martial Artists think in combat."

"Humans in general, but especially Martial Artists don't identify and react to an attack purely after it has been launched. In most cases, Martial Artists subconsciously analyze movements to partially gauge and partially predict what the opponent is about to do."

Rui nodded. This was a well-documented phenomenon in neurology. Even in the twentieth-century, it was well shown that the human brain was constantly in a predictive mode, trying to infer outcomes from phenomena.

This could be demonstrated with simple experiments. Why most humans flinch when an object approached them at high speed even at a distance. Because the human brain has already evaluated the motion of the object and plotted out its trajectory and inferred that there is a high chance the object would collide with the body.

"The brain subconsciously looks at the early signs of an attack and partially makes the decision to avoid the strike based on the early evaluation." She said. "When using Blink in combat, your aim should not be to attack when your Martial Apprentice blinks, but to hide the early signs of attack when your opponent blinks."

She paused, before continuing. "This way, when your opponent opens their eyes, they will not be able to rely on the partial prediction their mind makes subconsciously. This will hinder their reaction and in most cases you should be able to perform far better with the attack, at least."

"Hiding the initial signs of the attack during the blink is better than moving during the blink?" Rui asked.

"It's not about choosing which is better." She corrected. "You don't have a choice at all. You cannot begin, move and complete an attack in the middle of a blink of a Martial Apprentice" She said. "Martial Apprentices blink too quickly and you're not fast enough, as a Martial Apprentice yourself. Only a Martial Squire could do that, and maybe some extraordinary peak Martial Apprentices with a maneuvering style Martial Art."

"I see..." Rui nodded, engrossed.

"In the middle of combat, the technique should be used as an opening-creator. Outside of combat, it is best used as a surveillance-escaper. Against a human, the Blink technique, like all Martial Apprentice techniques, is invincible." She said as she put some distance between them.

"This what a well-executed Blink technique looks like."

Rui focused as he maximized his alertness. She stared at him for nearly ten seconds, motionless.

Then it came.

BLINK

One moment she was ten meters away, the next moment she landed right in front of him.

The abruptness of it all was so shocking that Rui tripped and fell backwards.

"Woah..." He murmured in amazement.

"Now." She said with a serious expression. "Your turn."

Chapter 133: Momentary Limitlessness

The feat she accomplished was amazing. The idea that Rui would be able to perform that feat on any normal human was great! He would be able to travel without any detection as long as he timed the technique perfectly well.

He would be able to appear and disappear, just like a ninja!

Rui did have a soft spot for ninjas, not as much as he did for martial artists, but definitely close.

He got up with a barely constrained grin.

"The training for Blink is rather straightforward." She said. "You train until you've mastered the execution, timing and placement of the technique. This facility has training resources that significantly make easier what is otherwise a significantly difficult technique to learn at the Martial Apprentice Realm."

Rui nodded, aware of everything in detail. He still listened to her explanations out of respect, she was far better than Squire Maxime who uttered only a total of five words to Rui across the entirety of five hours of training.

"The combat application of Blink is quite different from the stealth application of Blink, so we train those separately in two training stages that you will engage in simultaneously." She explained.

The first stage of the training was centered around mechanics dolls that blinked for periods longer than that of even an average human being. Rui was effectively supposed to play tag with these mechanical dolls, except he wasn't allowed to move except for when they blinked.

This did two things.

First, it forced him to be more conscious of the timing of the mechanical blinks, and secondly it forced his body to learn how to exploit the blinks properly. Since the training stage required him to not use any Apprentice-level techniques or even any of the techniques from the Exploration Stage, he was only allowed to maneuver using his raw physicality during the Blink.

The training stage would progress once he completely mastered the tag game at a certain blinking speed of the dolls. Then the blinking speed would progressively increase, just a tiny bit at a time, no more than a two-percent increase. Once the user adapted to it and managed to perform optimally, the blinking speed would be increased by two percent once more, and it would progress so and so forth.

It was predicted that in a handful of months of continuous dedicated single-minded training, the user should eventually be able to reach the desired level of mastery over the blink exploitation principle.

After that the training would drastically spike as the blinking speed surpasses human limits and reaches the Apprentice Realm, at this point the user would be allowed to use Apprentice-level techniques, and fight at his or her strongest.

This would allow the user to get used to exploiting blink timing in Apprentice level battles, which was the most important and also the ultimate goal. An Apprentice level technique that could not be used in Apprentice level combat was just a failure of a technique.

And once the Martial Apprentice got used to exploiting the blink timing optimally in conjunction with Apprentice-level techniques, then the training regime was complete.

This was normally supposed to take several months on average.

Every two-percent boost in blinking speed usually took at the very least a day or two, maybe even longer depending on the mental faculties of the user. This was something Squire Helen knew quite well.

('So why...?') She wondered. ('Why has this boy adapted to a four-percent increase in the matter of two hours???)

Rui had immediately grown quite interested and excited by the training regime, so he jumped right into it to get a taste of it.

She stared at Rui with amazement and shocked as he handled the training stage like it was a breeze.

('What is going on??')

Rui on the other hand was grinning with all the ecstasy he felt missing during the Seismic Mapping training.

('If this is how every stealth technique training regime is like, then I might just convert to a stealth-oriented Martial Art!') Rui thought to himself.

He had an incredible amount of fun adapting to the timing needed for Blink maneuvers for every increased blinking speeds.

A large part of his joy came from the fact that he was incredibly good at it, making for an astonishing growth rate.

It had taken him a while to realize why he was as good at this as he was. There were two reasons, as far as he could tell.

Firstly, his enhanced mental faculties due to the inherited mind from his previous life was greatly useful here, allowing his cognition to absorb experience and grow much more from it than any other individual at his biological age would.

Secondly, the cognitive processes needed to grow and adapt to the timing of the blink maneuvers were extremely similar to the principles and mechanics of the VOID algorithm used. It turns out that adapting to a Martial Art was quite similar to the learning process of adapting to Blink timings.

In fact, maybe he could expand the VOID algorithm to include blinks and Blink maneuvers in its counter-deduction system!

This was something he hadn't considered before. On Earth, blinks were inconsequential, thus the VOID algorithm had not been developed to process blinks as a variable. Why would something that could not be used in combat be relevant to the VOID algorithm?

This epiphany strongly motivated Rui even more.

He truly immersed himself in training to a degree far, far higher than ever before. Every cell in his body stood together aiding Rui in his pursuit, he could feel himself growing every second.

What truly shook him was that he felt as if he'd grown not just in regards to the Blink technique, but as a Martial Artist too!

He felt as if he'd traversed deeper into his Martial Path, exploring parts of his Martial Art and his mind he never had before.

He was in a state of momentary limitlessness, he felt as if anything could happen as he was now!

Chapter 134: Considerations

Rui had only intended to break the ice with each of the four techniques on the first day, before returning back to his room and figuring out how he's going to divide his time and energy. He didn't intend to extend beyond what was necessary.

But he had completely forgotten about that as he immersed himself into the training regime. He loved the sheer progress as he grew better and better at timing blink maneuvers. In the end, he lost track of time completely all the way until his stamina was drained.

"Twelve hours?" Rui couldn't believe it, it passed so quickly he wouldn't have been surprised if Squire Helen was pulling his leg.

She nodded in response. "You just kept going on and on, I thought you were aware of the time." She shrugged. "Apprentice training schedules are largely self-regulated, after all."

Rui nodded, still dazed in disbelief.

"How did you do it?" She asked out of curiosity. "How did you get so good at the technique so quickly? Your rate of growth is unheard of!"

Rui scratched his head awkwardly, unsure of what to say.

"Dunno" He shrugged. "Glad it's working out this well though."

He quickly bade her goodbye before she could inquire any further, and left the stealth-training facility as he headed back to the Apprentice dorms.

He nonchalantly strolled back as he grew absorbed in thought at the training sessions that he had undergone in the past twenty-four hours.

Just based off of the training sessions alone, he had come to realize that the priced techniques were not overpriced in any way. Each of the techniques he purchased were qualitatively superior to the techniques he procured out of the foundational reserve that the Academy offered to Martial Apprentices.

He knew that he wouldn't really be able to go back to learning foundational techniques from this point on. In fact, he planned to replace some of the Foundation techniques with either successors or superior techniques operating on the same principle in the future to strengthen the quality of his Martial Foundation.

Still, that was for a distant future.

His mind delved onto the four techniques he had picked up and the difficulty of their training.

"The hardest technique was definitely Seismic Mapping." He murmured to himself, sighing. It was quite the unpleasant training session, but he really wanted to master the Seismic Mapping technique, its sheer practical utility was too alluring.

He decided to maximize the amount of time he dedicated to training the technique. He didn't want to be held back from completing missions because he took forever to master Seismic Mapping. Other Apprentices might be used to it but Rui did not want to endure that.

Furthermore, he felt it was probably to have longer training sessions in one go. The mind retained experience the longer it experienced a particular phenomenon or process, after all.

Rui even seriously considered dedicating entire days of continuous training to purely Seismic Mapping training. He could simply make every alternate day a Seismic Mapping training day while leaving the other days for the remaining three techniques.

The easiest technique to train for was Blink. Just the very thought of the training put Rui in a good mood. This was the first technique whose training was so enjoyable that Rui almost wished it never ended.

"Maybe I can continue to train Blink to refine proficiency above just ordinary mastery." He thought aloud. He even thought he could make it a hobby! Just to feel better whenever he was down or maybe bored.

He shook his head, trying to focus. With how well his Blink training proceeded, he didn't need to spend too much time to it. Thus, he decided to allot it the least amount of training timing. He suspected that Blink might end up being the first technique he fully mastered despite this allocation.

That left two techniques.

Outer Convergence and Inner Divergence.

"Of the two, Inner Divergence was definitely harder." He noted. "So, it gets more training timing allocated to it."

That concluded the initial planning session in a nutshell. Of course, he would have to think out the details and be more thorough to be as efficient as possible, but the overall trend had been set.

He was quite grateful that he had chosen to pick only four techniques this time. Had he tried to pick five he would have quickly realized that it was probably too much. Premium techniques were not as light of a burden as the foundational techniques were.

He didn't think he would be able to complete five premium techniques as quickly as he would have liked.

"In fact, from here on out, I might have to purchase fewer and fewer techniques as times goes by and the quality and grade of my techniques grow higher." he realized.

He recalled thinking about many of the higher-grade techniques he saw in the Apprentice library, many of them had such high grades and difficulty grades that he didn't think he could learn more than one technique at a time!

He sighed with a sullen look as he realized his rate of technique learning would probably significantly reduce from here on out.

Still, quality was worth the sacrifice in quantity.

He began further thinking about how he could quicken his mastery of these techniques. He couldn't always hang out with the Squire instructors, they were not exclusive to him and there were many Apprentices they had to mentor, from his batch and batches below.

In order to train optimally, he thought about sparring with Fae with both of them using only Outer Convergence after he got past the initial training. She'd mastered it a while ago and she was a good enough mentor too.

Maybe he could gather Apprentices who had already mastered the other three techniques he had learnt.

('But that wouldn't work for Seismic Mapping.') He realized. Just his luck that the hardest technique to learn would also be one he couldn't train together with others.

He sighed.

Chapter 135: Leave You Behind

Kane shuffled through the maneuvering section of the Apprentice library, with a lethargic expression on his face. In the fight against the golden-haired bandit in the mission he had just completed, he had noticed that he wasn't able to maintain his top speed while performing non-linear maneuvers or attacks, which hindered his non-linear evasiveness and offense.

He had already resolved to purchase a high-grade fluidity maneuvering technique that would allow him to maintain his top speed even in really sharp curves or turns for attacks or maneuvering.

"Sigh..." He huffed a large puff of air as he nonchalantly sauntered across the section. All of the techniques that suited his needs had high difficulty grades, his head fell back as he stared at the ceiling, he couldn't be bothered.

"Hah. What happened to 'I can't let him let him surpass me that easily'?" A voice asked him from behind.

His expression contorted with disdain as he turned to meet Fae's eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I said I was going to train too, no?" She shrugged.

"What are you doing in this section, the maneuvering section?" He asked. "Go take your muscle-brain Martial Art to the offense section of the library."

"Hmph, juvenile as always, aren't you? You could learn a thing or two from Rui, you know?" She said. "If you had his work ethic, you might even grow faster than he does."

Kane's sheer raw affinity with Martial Art was unparalleled, it was what had led him to discover his Martial Path at the tender age of eleven, and what allowed him to absorb techniques remarkably quickly.

"Hmph, he and I aren't the same. I don't love Martial Art. It's a pain in the ass that allows jerks who are good at it to do whatever they want, and the only way to avoid becoming a victim is to pursue Martial Art yourself." he spat contemptuously. "It causes immense suffering and many problems whose only solution is itself. Has there ever been a more hateful thing? I pursue Martial Art only so that I can be freed of its shackles."

He put his hand on a technique scroll just as he finished, having decided which technique he wanted to learn.

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It was a technique that allowed the user to maintain top speed during curving maneuvers by shifting the user's balance in the direction of the curve at extreme degrees, the acceleration due to gravity provided by the lopsided balance aided in the curve without the user having to sacrifice speed.

He turned to glance at her. "It's not like you love Martial Art either. You and I are both in this for Martial Art can do for us." He said with a knowing tone.

She had a sympathetic expression on her face.

In many a way, Fae's circumstances were the exact opposite to that of Kane's. Despite being born in a Martial family like Kane, she grew up in very different circumstances.

Her grandmother was Her Honour Martial Sage Leila Dullahan, her family was extremely prestigious, just like the Arrancar Martial family.

Unlike Kane, Fae loved her family, and everything it stood for. Her family was not a large polygamous family like his was' a family that was created by his father's desire to find a worthy heir. It was a rather normal family in comparison. With the love and pride that she had been raised with by her grandparents and parents, her family had come to mean everything to her.

She desired to bring glorious honour to her Martial family, that had contributed to the sovereignty of the Kandrian Empire for nearly a century, with many historical Martial Artists with immense power.

Her desire to obtain power was to do her family justice, and to maintain its prestige.

Because her family was small, she was the only heir to her family. Her mother had turned away from her Martial Path despite being the daughter of a Martial Sage and chose not to become a Martial Artist, and her father was a civilian.

She had voluntarily accepted the burden of being the future pillar of the Dullahan Martial family.

Martial Art was everything to her. But she did not love it, to her it was no more than a tool for fulfilling her goal.

Alas, not everybody born to Martial families was a Martial prodigy. She had to work like a madman to obtain the power she currently had. Sweating blood and crying tears, she persevered to be worth of her heritage.

She was the exact opposite of Kane in many ways. The differences between them had been the true cause of friction between them.

Kane, a genius boy longing for freedom whose talent shackled him to the fate of being the Arrancar heir. And Fae, a free yet driven girl longing for the power to be worthy of being the Dullahan heir.

Everything about them was so polarized, that they could never stand each other when they met. Their parents were part of the Fire Sect within the Martial Union, and were close informally. Kane and Fae had known each other since they were three.

Fae sighed. "Love or hate Martial Art. We are born in the circumstances we're born in, and we can only make the best of them."

"Hmph." He said. "Spoken like someone born in the right circumstances."

She threw an irritated look at him. "Don't act like you're only growing stronger for the sake of breaking away from the Arrancar family. Do you even remember your own words?"

Kane eyes lit up. ('I can't him surpass me too easily.')

"You're just afraid Rui will leave you behind at the rate he's growing." She said as her expression turned melancholic at her own words.

Kane didn't respond.

But that was answer enough.

He had grown more attached to Rui than he had ever expected he would have when they first met. Rui was his first true friend. Someone he truly enjoyed spending time with. The only other children he knew in his age group were his many half-brothers and half-sisters who hated him with venomous intensity, and other children from other Martial families who either kissed his ass treated him like a stepping stone.

Then he met Rui. At first, he was ordinary outside of his weird eyes and hair. Kane didn't think much of him, just hoping he wouldn't be too annoying when he reached out to Rui.

It was the first time someone was unaware of his family.

It was the first time he felt like a normal person.

When Rui looked at him with those dark eyes of his, he did not see the genius heir of the Arrancar family.

He saw Kane, his friend.

"He makes even Martial Art fun." Kane murmured softly. "I didn't think that was even possible."

He did not want to be left behind as Rui pursued his Martial Path.

He turned around and walked away.

"Where are you going?" Fae asked.

"Training."

A hint of determination flashed through his eyes.

Chapter 136: Martial Matters

POW POW POW

Rui threw a flurry of Vital Pressure strikes as they struck Dalen. Yet, the damage they did was minimal. Dalen returned the favour by throwing landing a power kick.

BOOM

Rui skidded back, grimacing in pain.

Normally, he would have chosen to avoid the kicks rather than block it. Kicks were generally slower than jabs, and travelled along a greater distance and left the user in a bit more vulnerable position which made dodging and charging in the most optimal solution. Furthermore, kicks had far more power than jabs in exchange for its shortcomings, making blocking them a sub-optimal solution in most cases.

But Rui had chosen to block the strike anyway. The reason for that was because they weren't having a normal sparring session, but an Inner Divergence training session.

They had restricted attacks to Vital Pressure and defense to Inner Divergence. No other Apprentice-level technique and no maneuvering or evasion.

Rui had approached Dalen a month ago, requesting him for routine training sessions to help Rui improve and refine his rough timing with the Inner Divergence technique.

Dalen had agreed, and ever since then they had been sparring together.

Rui had significantly improved in that time, experience had helped burning the movements and motions into his muscle memory bit by bit.

Still, there was a big gap between him and Dalen. The latter had mastered Inner Divergence to a solid degree and had a body that was developed for defense. Even if he used only Inner Divergence, he also had a conditioned body that was inherently tougher than Rui's body.

BAM

Rui collapsed as Dalen bested him once more, panting as he laid flat on the ground.

"Let's take a break." He suggested, reaching for a bottle of water.

There was a reason neither of them immediately resorted to rejuvenation potions. Although rejuvenation potions would immediately invigorate and energize them, there was value in fighting while exhausted.

In the field, in the Martial World, fatigue and exhaustion were inevitable. Sometimes you were in situations where you could not afford to consume potions, such as limited stock or being in the middle of a fight. In these situations, you wouldn't be able to luxuriously consume multiple potions to reinvigorate yourself.

It was a policy and a recommendation of the Academy to not consume potions unless extremely exhausted. Learning how to cope with general fatigue was important. If the Martial Apprentices grew

too cozy because of their potion abuse, then they would die by the droves once they were thrust into the Martial World.

Rui more than others understood the importance of coping with fatigue and exhaustion, and the sheer impact it could make on combat prowess so he religiously abided by this norm, not relying on potions until he was truly exhausted to his core.

"Here." Dalen offered him some water and a towel.

"Thanks." Rui accepted.

There was a bit of an awkward silence, as Rui realized he didn't really have much to talk to Dalen. He was a mutual acquaintance initially, as Rui got to know him better in the mission albeit barely.

"How long ago did you master Inner Divergence?" he asked casually.

"Just a little before I entered the Academy this year." He replied.

"How long had it taken you to master?"

"Just a little less than half a year, I think." He said.

"How long have you been a Martial Apprentice?" Rui asked, surprised.

"Two years." He said. "I broke through when I was fifteen."

"That's pretty good." Rui offered.

"By Academy standards, maybe. But by the standards of the Martial community, it's not as impressive."

"Really?" Rui asked, surprised.

Dalen nodded. "Fifteen is alright, fourteen even more so, which is when Fae broke through." He revealed. "But breaking through at eleven is considered truly special, like Kane did. He's well-known in the Martial community."

"When you say 'Martial community' you mean the Martial families in Kandria?"

Dalen nodded. "There are many Martial Artists, many of them end up being wealthy due to their Martial prowess and form families under their name and many a times their descendants end up following in their path. A lot of the prominent Martial families that have a lot of Martial Artists or aspiring Martial Artists were formed by prominent Martial Artists of the past; Legendary Martial Sages and Martial Masters, and even Seniors. The Martial community is comprised of such families."

Rui nodded, growing interested. He was aware that Dalen was from a Martial family. "It seems the community has higher standards of Martial Artist aspirants and Martial Artists."

"You bet." He sighed. "It's brutal, families compete with each other for prestige and glory through their heirs and descendants. They train descendants. If you ask me, it's just a dick-measuring contest."

Rui nodded, sympathizing. He loved Martial Art, but he would hate if his family treated him like a racing horse that could win for them rather than a family member they loved.

"That sound rough." He nodded. He often looked at his friends from martial families with envy because of all the resources and training they had access to their entire life. He often wondered how strong he would be if he was the son of a Martial Sage.

It was only now that he realized that he realized that he was romanticizing it too much. He knew Kane hated his family with venomous intensity, and having run into his mom had made it very clear as to why. Still, he thought it was worth the payoff.

Now he wasn't too sure.

('The grass is always greener on the other side.') He thought, as he mulled over Dalen's words.

"You said the families compete with each other." Rui curiously noted. "What do you mean?"

"There's Realm of course." He said. "Having your descendant break through to higher Realms it a big a plus point. There's grade, mission record and accomplishments." He paused before adding; "Also, there is Kandrian Martial Festival."

Rui's ears perked at those words.

Chapter 137: Kandrian Martial Festival

Rui was not unfamiliar with the Kandrian Martial Festival. The Kandrian Martial Festival was a month-long festival dedicated to Martial Art. However, this festival was quite unlike normal festivals. For one, there were no celebrations of the normal kind. The festival was a dedicated event to exhibiting and demonstrating the Martial prowess of the entire nation. The festival was characterized by innumerable Martial tournaments of all scales and sizes, making for a bombastic and exciting one month for the Kandrian Empire.

However, it was a festival that was held once every five years.

This was a decision that the Royal Family and the Martial union for multiple reasons. Firstly, Martial Artist work force was extremely important to the Royal Family and especially to the Martial Union. The completion of missions was an extremely necessary economically and politically. The Martial Artists not just sustained the Martial Union, but contributed to holding the very empire as a whole together.

It was not possible for the Royal Family and the Martial Union to allow the Martial workforce to stop working for a whole month every year, on many levels.

The nation as a system would start breaking apart at the seams, and the Martial Union would experience a noticeable plummet in income.

Thus, they had chosen to limit it to five years. Five years was just long enough for the benefits to outweigh the detriments.

The positivity associated with the Kandrian Martial Festival was one of the means by which the Royal Family and the Martial Union ensured that Martial Artists as a class of society wouldn't grow too disconnected from the Empire and its people. It was a means by which it aimed to tether Martial Artists not through incentives, or benefits or practicality, but through some degree of patriotic sentiment.

Of course, this was almost entirely ineffective against mature experienced Martial Artists of the higher Realms. The same, however, could not be said for younger Martial Artists of lower Realm, especially Martial Apprentices.

Martial Apprentices accounted for close to ninety-percent of the Martial Artist population. Due to how large a proportion of the Martial Artist they comprised they were the most important Realm of martial Artists in many ways. The Martial Festival was a way just one way of ensuring cultural integration between the more malleable youth of the Martial Artist population with the Empire.

It was also a way to reduce any class conflicts between the civilian population and the Martial Artists. After all, Martial Artists were undoubtedly privileged and blessed to possess the sheer power that they did. It was not uncommon or particularly unlikely for anti-Martial sentiment born out of envy, jealousy and resentment to fester.

It was no different from how the poor felt about the rich.

By celebrating their accomplishments and emphasizing the need for Martial Art, they could keep the friction to a minimum. It did also help that the Martial Union did not accept privately commissioned offense class missions within the boundaries of the Kandrian Empire. Meaning that Martial Artists did not run around hurting and killing the citizens of the Kandrian Empire.

The ordinary average citizen mostly saw Martial Artists protecting people in defense-class missions and protecting people via hunting class missions.

Or enforcing the law during Royal commissions.

"The Martial families compete with each other in the Kandrian Martial Festival?" Rui asked. "That makes sense. It's just not something that occurred to me."

"It isn't publicly announced, I wouldn't expect someone outside the Martial community to know about it." Dalen explained. "Martial Families often train their descendants with the goal of performing highly."

"Huh, that sounds like it sucks." Rui commented. "The Kandrian Martial Festival has always been fun the two times I experienced it, but being trained for it from five years in advance would ruin the experience."

"Kane hates the Martial Festival you know." Dalen laughed. "He's one of the favourites for wins among the current descendants in the Martial Community."

"I see." Rui murmured. "Kane hasn't ever told me about all of this."

"He genuinely hates it, and hates talking about it, more so than most of us." Dalen sighed. "The Festival isn't that far away too, he would do anything needed to avoid participating."

Rui, for one, couldn't wait. The Kandrian Martial Festival had occurred only twice in his entire life, once when he was and the other when he was five and the other when he was ten. Both times he had been too young to join the adults and adolescents as they visited Hajin to take part in the local festival.

He had never expected his first time to experience the Martial Festival would be after he became a Martial Artist himself.

Just the thought of potentially competing with Martial Artists across not just the town, or even the region, but perhaps the entire nation bred an extremely romanticized picture in Rui's head.

"The Kandrian Martial Festival is in less than a year, right?" Rui asked, excitedly.

"Yeah." Dalen turned to glance at him. "Do you intend to participate?"

"Of course!" Rui strongly affirmed. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You don't strike me as someone who cares for glory." Dalen noted. "Or are you interested in the monetary rewards that winning would yield?"

Rui snorted. He didn't care if they glorified it to hell and back or not at all or if they made him a millionaire or not. The idea of being able to compete with the best of the best was simply too alluring for Rui to not get excited by.

He needed to get as strong as possible as quickly as possible so that he would be able to fight against stronger Martial Artists, to do that he needed to master these four techniques he had purchased recently as soon as possible.

"Come on, let's continue training." Rui said, brimming with energy.

"Weren't you exhausted just a minute ago?" Dalen asked with confused skepticism.

"Exhaustion is for the weak." Rui declared. "We need to train to get stronger."

"Uh huh." Dalen sighed.

Chapter 138: Excited

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Rui and Fae exchanged powerful blows with each other. Fae pummeled at him with palms while Rui returned the offense with fists.

Rui had spent a lot of time sparring with Martial Apprentices who had mastered the techniques he was training with currently. While he did have trouble initially with Blink because there was no one in his immediate friend circle or acquaintances was a stealth-oriented Martial Artist, he had no trouble with finding someone to train his Outer Convergence technique with.

Fae had grown to be a close friend of his in the past year, and she had even helped him with training offense-class Apprentice-level techniques before, so going to her was a no-brainer decision.

Unlike the sparring training with Dalen, their combat was a lot less restricted. They only limited offense to Outer Convergence, while using only one technique for the other aspects of combat.

This was because Outer Convergence could be dodged in real fights and Rui needed to forge experience in dealing with evasive defense and counters to Outer Convergence in real fights.

Of course, they had decided to limit the number of techniques they used for defense and maneuvering because otherwise Rui had too much of an advantage.

Limiting striking offense to Outer Convergence hurt Fae far more than it hurt Rui since a little over half of Fae's Martial Art was comprised of striking oriented techniques, while Rui had only three, including his rough partially-learnt Outer Convergence.

WHOOSH

He sidestepped a weighted palm from Fae, before launching a right hook to her jaw. Fae unhesitatingly deflected the strike with an elbow, redirecting Rui's hook while simultaneously launching a hand jab technique with her finger tips.

BAM

Rui grimaced as he skidded back.

"That's new." He glanced at her with a curious look. "Elbows? Hand jabs instead of out ward palm attacks"

It wasn't the usage of elbows that was surprising. After all, Earth had martial arts where elbows were dominant features. Martial arts such as Muay Thai, a traditional martial art from Thailand, and Silat, a traditional martial art from Myanmar, used elbows more than they used the hands.

Muay Thai in particular used elbows offensively while Silat used them defensively and counter-offensively.

"Surprised?" Fae smirked. "I'm trying to solidify my striking combat prowess at all ranges in close quarters combat. Palm attacks are powerful but they have narrow flexibility as far as range goes. So, I decided to learn the Hooking Elbow technique. It's a mid-grade counter-offensive elbow centric technique that allows me to keep up with opponents even at dangerously close ranges."

Rui understood. "I see, and palm jabs have a longer range than outwardly open palm attacks, allowing you to handle somewhat longer-range close quarters combat better."

Fae nodded, in response, before taking her usual open-palm stance before charging.

('Tsk, no chill.') Rui tutted inwardly, as he launched several Outer Convergence kicks.

POW POW POW

Kicks were a good tool against someone who exclusively used her arms for offense, since legs had longer range than arms, he could effectively continuously attack her while she was unable to attack him.

Unfortunately, his Outer Convergence was still too flawed as she cleanly neutralized his attacks with her own.

Another problem he was suffering was that kicks made it difficult to maneuver, since one leg was often mid-air, meaning if Fae was able to handle his kicks, she would be able close the distance faster than Rui was able to maneuver to maintain it.

BAM BAM BAM

She did just that, managing to close in, landing a flurry of palm attacks.

Rui tried matching them with his own Outer Convergence, but it was too weak in comparison.

BOOM

She managed to land a clean strike, as Rui fell backwards.

"Huff..." She exhaled. "That was not bad, it's actually quite remarkable considering you've only been training for a little under two months along with other techniques." She complimented.

"Thanks."

"But, it's still too rough." She critiqued. "There are two elements to Outer Convergence; Drawing power from each muscle group individually, and then accumulating and converging that power in your strike by having all your muscles cooperate in perfect sync. You're lacking in both those departments."

"Yeah, I know." Rui replied, sighing. "It's hard for me to get used to the increased mental load of synchronizing and managing each of the muscles."

"It took me four months to fully get a hand of it." She said. "So don't be discouraged, as I said, your progress is pretty good."

Rui nodded. "I hope I can master it as soon as possible; I want to get finish some more missions and purchase a few more techniques as soon as possible."

"What's the hurry?" Fae asked, curiously.

"I want to be as strong as possible when the Kandrian Martial Festival rolls around."

"Ah, yes, the Martial Festival." She murmured with mixed emotions.

"Do you dislike it too?" He guessed.

"It's not particularly pleasant." She shrugged. "But it is an opportunity for me to bring prestige to my family."

"So you do intend to participate after all."

"Yes, in both the Martial Academic Contest and other prestigious contests that are hosted every Festival."

"Wait the Academies also hosts tournaments during the festival?"

"Of course, they do." She threw an odd look at Rui. "There are thirteen branches of the across the thirty-nine states of the Kandrian Empire. The Academies conduct an inter-Academy tournament. Each Academy elects representatives in a manner of their own discretion and the representatives compete against each other in a large tournament. The winners usually get a huge credit prize among other things you see."

Rui's eyes glimmered as he reveled in the idea of participating and competing against the best of the best.

"Do the other Academies have prominent and powerful descendants of the Martial Community?" Rui asked excitedly.

"Yes, our batch and the batch before and after ours in total have a large number of Martial descendents now that I think about it. This tournament is bound to be a contentious one."

Rui imploded with excitement at those words.

He couldn't wait for the Festival to arrive already!

"I heard Kane was a favourite." Rui said. "Does that mean the other favourites among the descendants of the Martial community are also at his level?"

Fae nodded. "Talen-wise Kane is considered a top three among all the descendants of the Martial community. Though he isn't the most talented."

Rui's eyes flew wide open at those words. "You're telling me there's a prodigy even more talented than Kane??"

Rui found that hard to believe. Kane broke through at the age of eleven, and was so talented that he was easily on par with Rui, despite all of Rui's huge advantages. Up until, recently, Kane was comfortably stronger than him too. Rui was certain that if Kane loved Martial Art as much as he did, he might have gone to even greater heights.

Fae nodded. "Her name is Fiona. Fiona Roschem. The granddaughter of His Honour Grandmaster Sage Damian."

The granddaughter of His Honour Sage Damian, who was the Grandmaster of all the Academies in the Kandrian Martial Union, lived up to her pedigree.

"How strong is she?" Rui asked with sparkling eyes.

"I haven't seen her in almost two years, I don't know how strong she currently is." Fae replied. "But she's strong. I haven't beaten her a single time in any of our spars, despite being two years older than her. She's the strongest Martial Apprentice of our generation, probably."

"Damn, you're killing me." Rui complained. The more Fae went on and on about this girl, the more he felt impatient for the Kandrian Martial Festival to arrive.

"Don't be so hasty, get a hold of yourself." Fae threw a disapproving look. "It's still some time away, and as you are right now, you probably won't be able to beat her. Forget fighting her, you can't be sure you'll be elected as a representative."

"What is her Martial Art like?" Rui asked curiously.

"She's a perfect all-rounder." Fae stated.

"Ah, a jack-of-all-trades but a master of none." Rui mused.

"No." Fae shook her head. "She's more of a jack of all trades and a master of all."

Rui had another outburst of excitement, as Fae shook her head at the sight.

('If Fae is speaking so highly of her, she must be something else.') Rui thought.

A master of all fields? If that really was the case, then Rui had quickly surmised he stood no chance as he was now. He knew that he was far from a master of any one particular field, he had barely managed to become above average in all fields, which wasn't unimpressive, because most Martial Apprentices could manage becoming average in one or two particular fields.

But thanks to his potion tolerance cheat code, he had managed to grind and get stronger at an incredible pace, yet he wasn't even near being a master of all trades. He wondered how long it had taken for her to reach her level.

"How long has she been a Martial Apprentice for?" Rui asked curiously.

"Five years." Fae replied.

Rui's eyes flew wide open. "Wait, you said you were two years older than her. Doesn't that mean...?"

"Yeah, she broke through at the age of nine." Fae confirmed with a complicated sigh.

"???"

"There's only a handful of people who have broken that young in the history of the Kandrian Empire." She paused, turning to Rui. "All of them became Martial Masters and some even Martial Sages."

Her implication was clear. Fiona Roschem was pretty much a confirmed future high Realm Martial Artist.

Rui grew engrossed in thought as he attempted to evaluate his chances of winning the contest and fighting her at all.

In order to be elected as a representative of the Mantian Martial Academy, he needed to grow to be the strongest of the Martial Apprentices of the Martial Academy, he did not think he was there just quite yet.

He did think that mastering the four techniques he'd set out to master gave him a decent chance, by then his wealth of techniques would probably be higher than most Martial Apprentices.

Most Martial Apprentices in the Martial Academy had broken through after a few years of training in the Foundation Stage and Exploration Stage, and then needed to a few more years to build the foundation of their Martial Art.

The descendants of Martial families like Milliana, Dalen and especially Fae and Kane were quite different from these Apprentices. The latter four were talented and had broken much earlier than the norm and had spent more time as Martial Apprentices, thus their Martial Art were much more developed and mature than the norm, especially Fae and Kane

Rui had also broken through early and had also possessed a Martial Art much more developed than the norm.

Still, that didn't mean his election was guaranteed, he had lost plenty of times against some of the more Senior Apprentices of older batches.

A little less than one year was usually nowhere near enough to become significantly stronger, but the same couldn't be said for Rui.

('Just you watch.') Rui thought to himself. ('I'll be so strong by the time the tournament roles by that not a single person will recognize me.')

Only then he would have a chance of fighting the best Martial Artists of his generation in the Empire.

Just the thought of it pumped him up to the brim with energy like no rejuvenation potion ever could.

If he could develop his Martial Art as strong as he hoped to by the tournament rolled by, then he might be able to win.

Unfortunately, he lacked too much information about his opponents. He could only speculate. Still, there were a few things that could be established. As always, he had the VOID algorithm, a powerful advantage that allowed him vastly superior predictive and counter-deductive capabilities, altering his fighting style to be most suited to his opponent's fighting style.

Rui winced when he recalled she was an all-rounder. Just his luck, all-rounder were the hardest to predict and counter-deduce.

Rui would need to go above and beyond to be able to win.

Chapter 140: Results

A little over four months passed by quickly. Time was often a blur to those who had immersed themselves in training. Especially to someone like Rui, who truly lost track of day and night thanks to his relentless training and immersion. Furthermore, his tolerance of potions made it even more difficult to keep track since he didn't have daily sleep cycles.

Rui launched a tremendous attack at Kane. The sheer force the attack contained blasted the air in its path apart, causing abrupt gusts of wind. The Outer Convergence technique once mastered had fundamentally upgraded his offensive force to a higher level.

WHOOSH

Kane evaded the attack, swerving to Rui's open side almost instantaneously.

POW

He managed to get in a solid jab before Rui could guard, and leapt back unsatisfied. The jab had done nothing, it hadn't even fazed Rui.

"Tsk." Kane tutted.

Rui took the initiative to charge in, chasing after Kane, trying to cut off as much room for escape as he could. One disadvantage that evasive maneuverer fighters had was that they needed space, they were crippled significantly if they were boxed in a small space.

Still, this was not an easy strategy against someone like Kane, who had enough speed and mobility to bypass Rui's attempts to block him.

WHOOSH

Kane dodged yet another strike as he managed to sneak in yet another strike past Rui's guard, a strike that, once again, didn't do any damage.

('Thank god for the fact that I have mastered three defensive Apprentice-level techniques. Kane's general offense is too weak to bypass my solid defense, he'll need to use higher-efficiency techniques like what he used against Fae.') Rui mused.

Ever since he had mastered Inner Divergence, he had become quite confident and secure in his defense. The three techniques he had purchased were all quite compatible with the VOID algorithm. Rui resumed his tactic of trying to cut off Kane's evasiveness, but his approach to combat had begun to change.

No longer did he try running after Kane to land an attack, ever since Kane had mastered Axis Earthing, his ability to maintain his top speed despite making really sharp turns and curves had risen immensely.

Meaning he could almost instantly switch directions extremely acutely without needing to slow down at all.

Pursuing him trying to hit him was impossible as long as Kane was focused on evading was utterly impossible. Even though Rui was quite swift himself having mastered Outer Convergence and Parallel Walk and Balance Direction himself, it was still far below Kane.

Instead, he altered and adapted his approach to be as well-suited to Kane as he could. He continued to attempt boxing Kane, but instead of going for the attack, he took an extremely defensive posture with very few openings worth attacking.

"Hah. Given up on attacking me?" He smiled playfully. "That just makes you a harmless punching bag you know."

This wasn't false, it was difficult to launch a swift attack from an extremely defensive position. On open offensive stance was launched attacks quicker than super defensive stances.

Against Kane, who was extremely swift and mobile, it just seemed like an incredibly bad idea.

Kane wasn't sure what Rui was thinking, but he shrugged, before dashing in. His confidence in his speed and evasive mobility was extremely high and he did not think Rui would be able to out-speed him, especially from that position.

POW POW POW

He closed in, and landed heavier blows, which hit harder than the speedy light jabs that he thrown earlier throughout the match with the few low-grade of the Apprentice-level offensive techniques he had.

When he saw Rui didn't bother counter-attacking, he threw a weight blow through a small chink in Rui's guard, aimed for his neck, trying to finish Rui off with a single strike, unlike his normal fighting style. The reason he did this was because he knew Rui got stronger as the fight went on, he would alter his placement, timing and application of techniques, as well as general course of actions and tactics

throughout the entire fight to better deal with his opponents. He did not want to prolong the fight too much out of wary caution against Rui's adaptive evolution.

BANG

He cleanly landed the strike onto Rui's neck, slamming him back. It seemed almost entirely clear that Rui had chosen the wrong course of action.

One moment, he felt elated for having won, giving him major bragging points.

The next moment, he saw a grin on Rui's face.

And the moment after that, Rui's arms and legs had already latched onto Kane's arm, using the Binding Lash technique

('What??') Kane was shocked that Rui had managed to use that technique against him successfully. He was long aware of the fact that Rui had mastered the technique but did not fear it because his speed was too high for Rui to time that technique perfectly. It was a technique that involved the entire body, meaning that it was slow. Against extremely fast opponents like Kane, it was practically impossible to use unless one had timed the execution with miraculous accuracy.

('How did he get me?') Kane wondered as he struggled to get out of the lock. But it was of no avail, Rui was a much better grappler than he was. He used Shifting Silhouette, his only defensive grappling technique to crush all of Kane's attempt at trying to attack Rui, while applying an immense amount of pressure on Kane's joints.

"Alright alright you win." Kane tapped the ground. Rui heaved a breath of relief as he let Kane go.

"Hehe. Looks like I managed to squeeze out a win." Rui chuckled. "Good fight."

"How did you even get me?" Kane complained. "I know you're not an expert grappler to be able time that technique that well regularly."

"You're right." Rui nodded. "I timed it because I had predicted what you were gonna do by limiting your striking options."

Kane tilted his head in confusion.

"A closed defensive stance has fewer openings and holes than an open offensive stance." Rui said. "Your options to land a clean strike were much more limited and fewer in number, making it easier to guess which one you would pick. It's like the difference between flipping a coin and rolling a dice."

The probability of predicting a coin flip was fifty-percent, but the probability of predicting a dice roll was only one-sixth.

This was because there were more options with the dice roll than the coin flip, thus making it much harder to predict dice rolls than coin flips.

Rui had applied this exact principle to his stance, by giving Kane fewer openings to land clean strikes in, he was able to make it easier to predict which option Kane would go for.

Kane grumbled while Rui chuckled at his expense.