

## **Martial Unity 181**

### Chapter 181: Training regimes

He quickly exchanged all of his hard-earned martial credits for the techniques, before sitting down at the Apprentice Library to memorize their training methods.

Out of all the three, The Stinger's training was the most painful and least pleasant by far. The training of the technique involved the repeated damaging of the toe to cause micro-fractures that when healed via healing potions would strengthen the bone structure to stronger than it ever was, while also reshaping the bone and the flesh to become more conducive to piercing.

This was not something Rui was unfamiliar with as a concept. It was a well-documented fact that pressure and the reconstruction of microfractures strengthened the bone. There were several traditional martial arts on Earth that used this kind of conditioning to strengthen bones. The most popular ones being Karate, Kung Fu and Muay Thai. Each applied this principle in different way to varying degrees.

But the Stinger technique's training took it to a whole other level.

It was a long and painful process that was nothing short of pure torture. This was one of the reasons it had an abnormally high difficulty grade. Too many students who had undertaken this training had simply quit. Only ten-percent of the Martial Apprentices who had purchased this technique had the determination to see it to the very end.

The excruciating pain was simply too much for most of them, the power of the technique was simply not worth the agony that the technique's training regime entailed, only a handful of Martial Apprentices possessed the fortitude needed to complete the training.

Rui intended to see it through to the very end as well, the lethality of the technique was extremely attractive, it would benefit him not just in the Martial Contest, but it would help him in all future missions as well. He would be able to end fights much quicker than he ever was able to before.

Had he had this technique in his very first mission, he would have been able to hinder the enemy Martial Apprentice and rejoin with Bella before she was found and killed. He might have been able to prevent the bandits from escaping and the earthen basilisk would have gone down far sooner than it did.

In comparison, the remaining two techniques had training regimes that were far easier.

The Phantom Step technique had a training regime very similar to that of the Binding Lash technique. It involved memorizing the timings of feints by wearing suits that froze motion at the right moment so that Rui would understand the timing for feints of each maneuver. The training involved Rui learning to replicate that timing so as to be able to replicate the feint perfectly.

Rui was certain he would handle this training regime quite well, he had already undergone it once and was quite familiar with how the Academy trained feinting maneuvering techniques. Thus, he would likely master this technique the quickest because he wouldn't need to go through the adjustment phase of the training regime.

This was also one of the reasons he was comfortable choosing it. With how brutal the Stinger's training regime was going to be, he would like it if, at the very least one of the other two training regimes was something he was confident of nailing smoothly, that would put less stress on him during the entire training stage, without a doubt.

The more at ease he was mentally, the easier he would be able to make it past the painful Stinger technique.

The most interesting training regime however, was the Primordial Instinct technique. This technique exploited the fact that the danger and precognitive instinct of the human mind could be exercised and developed, like any other muscle.

In fact, it treated the subconscious instinct of the human as a muscle, and trained it like one.

How were muscle trained? By straining them with weight against their motion. A similar principle was applied to the subconscious instinct of the human mind. It was restricted by restricting senses and then thrust into situations where its danger sensing capabilities would inevitably be strained.

This was also another training regime he wasn't entirely unaccustomed to. He had gone through similar training for the Seismic Mapping technique. There were of course, several key differences.

The first was that the Seismic Mapping technique almost completely sealed off all senses so that Rui's mind would be forced to subconsciously rely more and more on sensing the seismic radiation to be able to perceive the environment and objects in the surroundings as well as the movements of these objects, as long as they were touching the ground, of course.

Primordial Instinct instead restricted all senses, including techniques like Seismic Mapping, to a high degree, but not completely. This was because the Primordial Instinct of the mind operated via the subconscious processing of the senses. Restricting the senses completely was not a good idea because it simply meant that the Primordial Instinct of the subconscious mind would simply not be able to operate at all.

Thus, the training regime involved almost complete sealing of the techniques, but not entirely, and the user would be forced to rely on his instinct more and more. As months passed, the senses would be restricted more and more as the user improved, until they were almost completely restricted and the user was still able to operate via the subconscious instinct alone.

This was because as time passed, the instinctual sense would grow stronger and sharper until it was able to significantly boost the reaction time of the user, especially to blindside attacks as well as the subconscious precognitive capability of the user.

"Alright then." Rui got up, dropping his scrolls into his pouch. "Time to get to training."

He walked out of the Apprentice Library, heading towards the Apprentice offense training facility of the Martial Academy, headed by Squire Instructor Dylan. For the first time in his life, Rui was not excited for a training regime even before he had begun it.

Chapter 182: Conditioning

"Instructor Dylan." Rui bowed.

"Hm?" Squire turned away from supervising some training of other students, recognizing him on the spot. "Oh, Quarrier. Is it four techniques this time?"

"Only three." Rui corrected him modestly.

"..."

"I'm here to learn this." Rui waved the Stinger technique scroll. "Care to help me out?"

Dylon winced when he saw the name. "I hope you're prepared. This is going to be rough, not to mention messy.

"Thanks a lot for that, truly helpful." Rui replied.

"Not at all, I'm just here to help after al- Wait, is that sarcasm? That's sarcasm, isn't it?"

"Can we begin immediately?" Rui asked, ignoring him. "I have a busy schedule."

"Of course, you do." Dylon replied, snorting. "Your life is a busy schedule, you're never gonna lose your virginity, you know. Why not forget about learning this technique and instead learn how to pick up girls, or boys, if you swing that way."

"If the Martial Academy ever did have such a teaching post, you wouldn't be hired for it." Rui assured. "Don't think I forgot how Instructor Kyrie rejected your ass by publicly beating you up in front of all your students." Rui ruthlessly reminded.

"Guh!" Instructor Dylon collapsed to his knees, clutching his chest in pain. "With this kind of offense, you don't need to master any other technique."

Rui sighed, exasperated. "Stop fooling around, let's get to work."

"No fun, are you?" He sighed, disappointed. "You've memorized the training regime, haven't you?"

"Every word." Rui confirmed.

"Of course, you have." He nodded, unsurprised. "Well, then you know you don't really need me very much. The Stinger technique merely requires the right training methodology and resources, and you're set."

He gestured to some unused equipment at one end of the training facility.

It was a kicking dummy, meant to be kicked. Besides from some unusual features, nothing about its appearance was too different from ordinary target dummies.

Yet, Rui winced at the sight. Because it was not an ordinary kicking target dummy. It was a special training equipment created by the Martial Academy specifically for the training of the Stinger technique. This training-dummy shaped the toe in the desired manner for the Stinger technique every time the user kicked at it with his or her toe.

Its exterior was made up of a jelly like substance, a semi-solid substance through which one could insert fingers and toes like ordinary jelly. It was not rigid, and allowed objects to pass through it. Rui was supposed to kick at it with his toe, ensuring his toe passed through it each time.

This jelly was actually an esoteric substance that had a special property. It was engineered such that it would absorb the energy of the impact and use the same energy of Rui's own kick to press against the toe sideways. Every time the toe made contact, it would pass through it, like jelly, and the jelly would pressure it sideways immensely with the power of Rui's own kick!

The esoteric jelly was used an immense amount of energy attempting to reshape, restructure and strengthen Rui's toe. Where did this energy come from? From Rui's own attack that would be absorbed by the esoteric jelly.

It was an extremely efficient substance that would use the user's own energy to continuously pressure and damage the toe, flesh and skin, accomplishing two things by doing this.

Firstly, it ensured that when Rui's toe healed from the micro-injuries, it would be ever so slightly stronger, and its shape would be ever so slightly closer to what was required for the Stinger technique. Of course, this was a very gradual change, it would require many, many months of training to complete the transformation.

"Was it one million kicks?" Dylan scratched his head, trying to recall. "One million kicks against the jelly dummy for the conditioning Stage to be over?"

However, once the training ended, the many tiny minute reshapes caused by the micro-injuries would eventually culminate to ensure that the toe's bone structure resembled a bullet, while the skin and flesh would become extremely rough like sand paper and as rigid as rock. This was to ensure that the skin of the target would tear apart with ease when the Stinger made contact with the flesh of the target.

Rui couldn't even begin to imagine how painful it was, but he didn't need to. He was about to find out himself.

He took a stance, preparing his right leg for a kick, while sticking out his thumb-toe.

BAM

"FUCK!" He felt like a truck had run over his toe, the jelly absorbed the energy of his impact and used it to grind his toe, like it was sharpening a sword or a knife.

He collapsed as he looked at his bruised toe, gasping.

"Get up." Dylan instructed, with a serious tone. "You can't stop right after you start, you know that."

Rui could only consume an extremely-low-grade healing potion meant for the training only after a hundred kicks.

"Steel your will kiddo." He instructed. "As you steel your toe."

BAM

BAM

BAM

BAM

BAM

...

BAM

One hundred kicks later, Rui's toe was swollen, bruised, broken all the medically different ways a toe could possibly be injured. The pain was beyond painful, it agonizing and excruciating and all the synonyms of the pain combined. Rui could barely even hear himself thinking over its intensity.

"Here." Dylan tossed him a healing potion, which Rui inhaled like a fish back in water, he even used Helical Breathing to speed up the process.

Only when his toe finally healed, had he regained his senses.

"What the fuck." He finally said.

"Yeah, it's messed up." Dylan nodded. "Most conditioning techniques are. Pain is the part of the game."

"This better be worth it." Rui groaned.

"Heh." Dylan smirked. "You can be the judge of that."

He casually launched an incredibly swift kick towards the closest striking target dummy.

BOOM

Rui's mouth dropped as he saw Dylan extricating his toe out of a gigantic hole in dummy's head, with cracks emanating from it.

"You should be capable of that once you master it."

Rui's gaping mouth morphed into a smirk.

Chapter 183: Perseverance

"But you're a Martial Squire." Rui frowned.

"I held back to match your physical power." He shrugged. "As long as you master it perfectly, the result shouldn't deviate much from this."

Rui was quite excited at the prospect of obtaining that kind of lethality, that he resumed the torture training immediately. This time, he even stopped screaming. Bearing the pain and putting his toe through utter hell with each kick.

A little over an hour passed, and he had just completed a thousand kicks!

He glanced at his toe, after he healed it for the tenth time. It didn't look any different at all. But, that obviously to be expected, if the process would be completed over the span of a million kicks, then there would be no visible progress over merely just a thousand kicks, which was 0.1% of the total progress.

The bone reconstruction process was a well-understood one. Bone had an incredible ability to adapt to mechanical loads or pressure we place upon it. According to Wolff's Law, a bone's internal framework, known as trabeculae is initially weakened when strained and micro-fractured by mechanical stress, thereby triggering a rebuilding process that eventually made the bone denser. The hard outer shell of the bone also became a little thicker with time. This was how bone could become stronger.

It was a long process that required prolonged period of just the right amount of stress and strain to the bones. It was not a process that could be sped up too much, even with healing potions.



Rui sighed, before proceeding to continue. He usually spent many hours on a single technique, and as painful as the Stinger technique was, he did not want to skip out on it.

If he left after only an hour, he would feel like he was admitting defeat! Thus he continued and persevered until several hours later, he finally managed to complete a total of three thousand kicks!

Every time he consumed a potion, the pain reset. As dozens of these rounds went by, he grew more and more accustomed to the excruciating pain. He wasn't sure how the hell he was going to get to one million, but he knew he had to damn well try.

Still, this was just the first session. He put a halt to it after he hit the satisfying number of three thousand.

When he walked out, his toe was perfectly healed and functional, but it still hurt in his mind.

"Next." He sighed wearily before heading to the maneuvering training facility. The next technique he intended to break the ice with was the Phantom Step technique.

He looked forward to this training session after the dreadful training session of the Stinger technique. He knew the training regime quite well, and was quite comfortable with it as well.

Once he reached, he searched for the head supervisor.

"Squire Instructor Veena." He bowed once more, before explaining that he'd arrived to train for the Phantom Step technique.

What proceeded was a relatively smooth training session with no hiccups. Rui donned the body suit that was required for the prescribed training regime of the Phantom Step technique.

Across the entirety of the training regime, Rui would perform a wide variety of maneuvers that he would normally perform in a fight. Punches, kicks, jabs, dives, dodges, blocks, shuffles and things of that nature. The bodysuit was actually a piece of equipment that could be frozen at a particular spot

remotely by a device in possession of the supervising instructor. As Rui shadow-fought, his instructor would freeze the suit at the correct timing for a feint in any given motion.

This would allow Rui to learn the exact position in all of these common motions he made, at which stopping abruptly would produce the most effective feint. By being stopped exactly the right timing and placement, Rui would be able to memorize the exact position and timing for feints in each of these maneuvers with his body.

This training applied the principle of learning with your body to the absolute highest degree. It exploited the kinesthetic and dynamic learning capability of the brain to learn via the body to the highest degree.

The training would focus on a handful of maneuvers at a time, each maneuver, Rui would need to practice thousands of times before he finally got the grasp of how to feint a particular motion. He needed to repeat this process for each motion. Different kinds of punches and kicks all required extensive practice before he could finally have some degree of confidence in them.

Rui had already suspected it, but he had come to truly confirm that this technique would likely be the most straightforward and easiest training regime for him out of the three training regimes he would be subjecting himself to for the next few months.

He had incredibly high hopes for this technique. It added a universal element of deception across the entirety of his Martial Art. In hindsight, he had come to realize that while Blink also did this, Blink was partially out of his control and also not something that he could time. Meaning he could never become too dependent on it. Blink exploited the blind spot of blinks to surprise his opponents, it was most fit to be a trump card, not a regular attack.

Phantom Step was much more universal than Blink, albeit a little less powerful, but Rui enjoyed the stability and control he would obtain with the Phantom Step technique.

As he daydreamed more and more about what he would accomplish with this technique, he grew more and more excited and engrossed into his training. He trained every second because he couldn't help but ache for the day he would master this technique.

('This is what training should be like!') Rui thought ecstatically. The Phantom Step training was like a soothing balm to the psychological wear and tear that the Stinger technique had inflicted on him. Nothing like an easy cooperative training regime to heal his spirits!

#### Chapter 184: Prospects

He left the maneuvering training facility with a smile on his face. He had decided, every training session of the Stinger technique needed to be followed up with Phantom Step training!

This was the key to making this training phase a success!

Only by coupling the tormenting training of the Stinger technique with the ecstatic and soothing one of the Phantom Step would he be able to endure the former in the long run.

"Alright then." Rui sighed. "Time for the final training session."

Out of all the techniques he was learning this time, he was actually most excited for the Primordial Instinct technique. He knew the technique had the highest amount of compatibility with his Martial Art and could be the first through he adapts the VOID algorithm to the world of Gaea.

"Squire Instructor Maxime." Rui greeted with a respectful bow for the third time. "I've returned to learn the Primordial Instinct technique."

The man stared at him before making the faintest of head movements that Rui could barely identify as a nod, before walking away.

('?') Rui tilted his head. ('Er. Should I follow him?')

He sighed as he trailed the man's back. Rui had forgotten that he didn't speak often. Once they reached a certain training room, he paused, gesturing Rui to enter.

"..." Had Rui not had a thorough understanding of what the training regime entailed, he would have had the worst time with this Squire instructor.

The training was specially designed to restrict as much sensory input as possible, though it would only be a partial restriction of senses. Rui wasn't even sure how it managed to accomplish this; this was something that even the technology of Earth was not capable of. But he had long come to accept that the esoteric and exotic material resources of the Panama Continent were capable of some crazy things.

Once all the preparations were made, Rui could feel his perception of his surroundings dimming. His vision had plummeted, as had his hearing and smell. It was like he had entered a void.

Suddenly he perceived a faint shadow in front of him despite his heavily restricted vision, he instinctively put a guard up.

BAM

He felt an impact, even before he could regain his senses, he felt a slight tingle of the nerves.

BAM

Another impact struck him from behind, this time, he hadn't been able to block it.

Rui grimaced in pain. The impacts were not light, especially when he was having a tough time timing his defensive techniques.

This was on purpose, of course. If the attacks weren't painful, then his sense of danger would not be activated, the attacks needed to be dangerous, only then would Rui's subconscious mind push itself, and only then would his instinct increase.

BAM

BAM

BAM

The impacts came from all directions, and were equally distributed across the entire body, so Rui wasn't able to come up with a useful model of pattern recognition that he could apply here to be able to more

Before every impact, Rui felt a tingle in his nerves.

This sensation was something every human experienced, there was a very simple way of understanding what this felt like.

Take a finger, and point it in between your eyes, with the tip just a millimeter away from your skin and keep it there for several seconds. Ninety-percent of the time, one would feel an uncomfortable tingling sensation. This was because one's subconscious mind and brain were freaking out at the presence of an object that close to a vital spot.

The effect was even stronger if it was someone else pointed their finger doing the point-blank pointing. This was because the brain didn't know that it was safe like it did with one's own finger.

And Martial Apprentices were capable of having much more sensitive and stronger reactions to stimuli naturally, even more so when they trained this instinct like Rui currently was

Rui never knew that his instinct generated this tingling sensation before. The reason for that was because he was too accustomed to relying on all senses to perceive his surroundings, his instincts rarely played a role, especially when Rui's fighting style was logically and rationally driven, he rarely moved on instinct or his senses alone, he usually applied the system of the VOID algorithm and made his decisions inculcating that and other rationality-driven thought processes.

Thus, the entire experience was quite new to him.

But he was starting to understand the value of the Primordial Instinct technique. It was not only supplementary, but also capable of helping Rui in areas where the VOID algorithm had trouble and difficulty operating. This made incorporating the Primordial Instinct technique as a variable into the VOID system much more alluring!

This revelation was quite motivating to Rui, as it was the first true step that Rui had taken to perfecting and evolving the VOID algorithm to the world of Gaea and coming one step closer to fulfilling his dream.

Still, that was a while away, Rui had still not gotten the hang of relying on pure instinct to dodge attacks. As a scientist and a researcher, the very idea of not thinking was unthinkable, he wasn't used to relying on instinct, even after he became a Martial Artist in this world, all his battles were conscious rationality driven.

Only now did he realize the untapped power of the subconscious mind!

This was a power he hadn't yet harnessed, but if he could harness it and combine it with the power of conscious mind, just how strong would he become? Just how much more developed would his Martial Art become? Just how much deeper down his Martial Path would that alone take him?

BAM

He successfully managed to block another impact.

He didn't know what the end outcome would be, but he sure as hell couldn't wait to see what lied in store for him.

"Unlimited possibilities." He murmured to himself with giddy excitement. "This is why Martial Art is beautiful."

Chapter 185: Leave it to Me

WHOOSH

Rui launched a strike at Kane, only for the strike to pass through him like he was an illusion. Kane returned strike, only for it to pass through Rui cleanly as well.

The two continued exchanging strikes that passed through illusions of each other, until;

POW

Rui grimaced, stepping back. "Damn, you got me."

"Your timing with the Phantom Step is still off." Kane informed. "It needs to flow smoothly."

As an evasive maneuverer, Kane had already mastered the Phantom Step technique, it was extremely useful to his Martial Art. Rui had been training with Kane to refine his Phantom Step, it was easier to do this with an equal like Kane, who was in the same Realm as Rui.

They had restricted all other techniques, focusing only on Phantom Step alone and nothing else, this way it became clearer to analyze shortcomings and for Rui to compare his performance with the real deal.

"Part of the technique is the psychological part." Kane said, tapping at the side of his head. "If you wanna sell it, you gotta own it." He said.

Rui could understand that. It wasn't possible to truly fake something unless you believed it on some level, if you could believe it superficially, then you would most likely do a better job at convincing others of it as well. Rui was treating the feint aspect of the Phantom Step to mechanically. He needed to immerse himself in the feint.

Problem was the fact this was a mindset he wasn't used to, at all. It was not easy for someone with an empirical and rational mindset such as himself to be able to engage in high levels of self-deception.

He also felt it was a bit scary and dangerous. Self-deceit could escalate and once it did, it would be very difficult to break out of it since you were deceiving yourself continuously, leading to severe cognitive dissonance and coping.

('Still, as long as I exercise discipline and self-control, I should be fine.') Rui thought to himself.

"Again." He said to Kane, before taking a neutral stance.

"Alright." Kane took a non-committal stance that allowed him to maneuver the easiest.

DASH

Rui feinted a straight punch, but alas Kane saw right through it.

POW

He ignored the imperfect feint and landed a clean jab. Rui grimaced, rubbing his abdomen.

He tried again.

And again.

And yet again.

But Kane was seeing through almost all of them.

POW POW POW

He smoothly punished Rui's imperfect feints.

"Tsk tsk." He tutted. "Remember, you gotta own it to sell it."

"Easier said than done." Rui replied. Before taking a moment to center himself.



He pictured the maneuver he was going to do. A dash punch, where he would launch the strike as he dashed towards Kane. He immersed himself in the image, picturing the details, making it more and more vivid.

He opened his eyes.

DASH

He dashed towards Kane at high speeds, and a punch was thrown.

WHOOSH

Kane blocked only to realize it was a feint.

POW

Rui managed to land a clean low kick on him.

"Yeah nice." Kane complimented. "That was probably your best feint up until now, you're getting the hang of it."

Seems like as long as Rui exercised his imagination enough and immersed himself in it, the quality of the feints increased

They spent a whole hour sparring with each other, as Rui took small baby steps with the technique, getting just a bit better across the entire sparring session.

"Phew." Rui exhaled, once their session ended. "Can't wait to master this technique and unveil it in the Martial Contest and the Martial Festival."

"You sure are hyped for it." Kane muttered. "Is it really that exciting?"

"Of course!" Rui replied. "I get to test my Martial Art against the best of my generation."

Kane snorted. "It's just a platform for the rat race of clout chasing that perpetually occurs within the Martial community in the Kandrian Empire. I don't want any part of it,"

"You're not participating?" Rui asked, surprised.

"No, I'll have to participate." Kane said. "I can't even purposely get eliminated by fucking around, my family will learn of it and that will be even worse."

"I see, that does suck." Rui said.

"That's why I'm counting on you Rui." Kane said, putting an arm on Rui's shoulder.

"What for?" Rui said, raising an eyebrow.

"To beat me in the prelims." Kane said. "Each Academy sends only one representative, for a total of sixteen representatives in the Martial Contest. If you beat me, then it means I'm pretty much guaranteed not to go. So you have to win the preliminary contest that decides the representative of our Academy."

Rui chuckled melancholically. "So, you won't be able to hold back, but you still want me to beat you?"

Kane nodded. "Basically. You should be able to do it, more than anybody else."

Rui shrugged. "Alright. It doesn't change what I have to do to participate."

"It's not gonna be easy." Kane said. "I don't know what other techniques you've been training recently, or even the technique you mastered a few months ago, but you better be prepared. I've grown stronger."

"Oh?" Rui eyed him with interest. "How much stronger?"

"I will have mastered the Void Step technique somewhat soon enough." He said, dropping a bombshell. "I've been doing nothing but training this technique for a bit over half a year now."

Rui's eyes flew wide open at those words. "You what...?"

The Void Step technique was one of the highest graded techniques in the Apprentice Library, it was primarily a stealth technique but also overlapped with evasive maneuvering. It was extremely powerful and extremely difficult to master.

"It's an important technique for me." Kane said. "One day I'm going to escape from the shackles of my status, when that day comes, this technique is going to be a lifeline."

"And you're telling me this because..."

"Because it improves the chances of you beating me." Kane said. "Seriously, you gotta beat me. And I genuinely can't help you this time. If I slack off, my family will find out without a doubt and in the worst-case scenario they might take me out of the Academy."

The graveness in his voice revealed the helplessness of his situation.

Rui nodded seriously. "Don't worry, you can leave it to me."

## Chapter 186: Martial Musings

Five months passed away quickly, quicker than Rui had noticed. With his potion tolerance, once he immersed himself into training, time passed way far too quickly. It got so bad sometimes that he wasn't able to tell the difference between hours and days sometimes!

Rui had spent the five months doing nothing but training the Stinger, Primordial Sense and the Phantom Step techniques. His estimates had been remarkably on point, he had wisely set apart one month after the initial four months of training to ensure he had properly integrated the three techniques he had mastered into his Martial Art and fighting style smoothly.

He had done this with the Apprentice and Squire instructors of the Martial Academy, rather than his peers. He didn't want to reveal his cards too early, since he knew that anything he showed would become common knowledge to the descendants from the Martial Community if he won the preliminary contest and became the representative of the Hajin Martial Academy, giving them an unfair advantage in turn.

Rui had thoroughly familiarized himself with the way the Martial Contest held by the sixteen martial Academies functioned.

Across the span of an entire month, each Academy would put their Martial Apprentices through a battle against every other Martial Apprentice in their entire Academy. The Martial Apprentice with the best score would be chosen as the representative of the entire branch.

The possibility of the top score being achieved by Martial Apprentices existed, however this would be resolved by looking at the outcome of the matchup between the two Martial Apprentices, since all Martial Apprentices would face off against all others, this matchup would undoubtedly occur. The outcome of this fight would decide which one of them would be chosen as the representative of their branch. In the worst case, if the top scorers with equal scores tied against each other in a matchup then the Martial Apprentice with the upper hand would be chosen as the representative.

The Martial Academy had laid out an elaborate set of rules for deciding the representative, to make sure there were no issues at all.

One of the things he had learnt that had initially surprised him was the combat arena in which the battles would occur.

It wasn't the straightforward big square or circular arena that one would expect for these kinds of events. It was actually a multi-environmental arena, meant to cater to all kinds of Martial Artists.

The Martial Academies weren't stupid. Having a wide-open arena would obviously benefit certain types of Martial Art more than others. Stealth-oriented Martial Art, environmental Martial Art and more niche Martial Art would be quite unfairly disadvantaged in such a setting.

Thus, the Martial Academies had constructed a giant multi-environmental colosseum that catered to a large variety of Martial Art, such that not a single Martial Apprentice was unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged.

This system existed in the Martial Academy sparring sessions as well, Martial Apprentices were allowed to fight on platforms that catered equally to both Martial Artists contending with each other. It was just that for Rui and most Martial Apprentices this meant they would fight on ordinary rings, since that was neutral for most Martial Artists.

The Martial Colosseum, as it was known, contained multiple environments and topographies cramped within it, making it look very bizarre and oddly beautiful at the same time. It had many other features as well, like devices that recorded the fight and displayed it such that normal humans would be able to perceive them with, at the very least much better clarity than if they were watching with their naked eyes. They could enjoy the high excitement of some of the strongest Martial Apprentices fighting while still being able to understand what was happening.

The Martial Contest was a national event and one of the highlights of the Kandrian Martial Festival. The winner would gain many benefits. The sheer amount of exposure would mean that winning the Martial Contest or even performing well would result in a huge number of clientele making exclusive offers to either retain the winner as their own personal Martial Artist, or as regular customer. The Martial Union allowed for clientele to direct commissions to specific Martial Artists within the Martial Union for an extra fee, though the acceptance and refusal of those missions was up to the Martial Artist question

This meant that the winner would be flooded with highly profitable missions and remuneration pays from many, many interested clientele! Even if one-percent of the regular clientele of the Martial Union decided to try and have the Martial Champion retain them as a regular clientele, that would result in hundreds of lucrative offers of all kinds!

It would be a permanent boost to their careers for the rest of their lives.

This was because the tiny proportion of the population that comprised of the wealthy and influential clientele had enough capital to start caring more about the quality of the undertakers of their precious

commissions, so much so that they didn't mind splurging an immense amount of cash to get the best of Martial Apprentices to undertake their commissions.

If Rui won the Martial Contest, he would probably be able to clear his student loan debt with the martial Academy with a single mission or two, that's how incredibly lucrative it would likely have ended up being.

Still, he wasn't too concerned about the money. He simply wanted to fight against the best of his generation of Martial Artists. The fact that the Kandrian Martial Festival occurred once every five years meant that the sixteen representatives from the sixteen academies would truly be among those who have reached a certain peak in their Martial Path and among their peers.

Whoever won the Martial Contest would undoubtedly be the best of the best, the undisputed number one.

Reaching that height would validate every ounce of his being. It would validate his ambition of two lifetimes and the dream that he gave everything and more to achieve!

## Chapter 187: Tomorrow

The Kandrian Martial Festival was merely a month away. The entirety of the Kandrian Empire had begun to stir. The infrequency of the festival as well as the sheer novelty of how it was celebrated made it one hell of an experience for the average citizen.

The general sentiment in the Kandrian Martial Empire was positive, mostly because the image of Martial Artists was positive in the eyes of the average citizen of the Kandrian Empire. Most of the visible missions that occurred within the Kandrian Empire consisted of defense-class, hunting-class, royal missions and miscellaneous missions.

None of these missions were the type that would leave a bad image in the minds of the average citizen. Essentially, all they saw was Martial Artists protecting and helping others. They did not see the assault that Martial Artists committed outside the country where a large influx of offense-class missions from the many surrounding smaller sovereign state without their own unified Martial association that could supply the Martial services in demand.

Nor did they see the covert operations that occurred in the shadows and the darkness of society.

When only the positive was ushered into the light and negatives being pushed out of sight, it was only natural the Kandrian Martial Festival generated an immense amount of bustling excitement.

The Martial Contest would be held in the capital of the Kandrian Empire, the town of Vargard. The sixteen representatives would be escorted to the capital once the preliminaries were over by the Martial Academies.

That concluded all the primary information surrounding the Martial Contest that Rui had managed to easily dig up. However, there were still many issues that he had gone out of his way to clarify.

"I've heard that many of the descendants of the Martial community participate in the Martial Contest, descendants of powerful Martial families." Rui once told Headmaster Aronian. "What is the risk of being a victim of their family's retribution if I happen to defeat them publicly?"

"That is a valid concern, just not very sound." Headmaster Aronian. "Unless you kill them, or dehumanizingly humiliate them so much that it cannot be interpreted as anything other than a personal attack on that of their Martial family, you will be fine."

"Really?" Rui questioned, skeptically.

"Really. There are several reasons for this." Headmaster Aronian nodded. "Firstly, you need to understand that as important as their heirs and descendants are to the Martial community, ultimately, the Martial World respects only strength. These Martial Families are led by Martial Artists who have vast experience in the Martial World. Every Martial Artist who has survived the Martial World knows that strength is the only thing that matters. Victory is everything and nothing less. They are very cognizant of this fact, they have to be, they would have died a long time ago if they hadn't. These people are sober to the reality of the world, if their descendants fail, they have only themselves to blame."

Rui wasn't convinced, visibly so.

"The Martial Artists of the Martial Community of the Kandrian Empire have experienced many things, boy." Headmaster Aronian shook his head. "They have gone through things that you cannot even begin

to imagine. Do you think it is possible for them to have reached the higher Realms they have with a delusional mindset about their social status?"

Problem was, Rui wasn't convinced. Part of it was because there was too much risk, this kind of reassurance by word wasn't very reassuring.

Headmaster Aronian sighed. "The more concrete reason why you have nothing to fear are the Martial Academies, myself and His Honour Grandmaster Sage Damian Roschem."

"How so?" Rui raised an eyebrow.

"The Martial Academies do not tolerate the harassment or bullying of their students. We're extremely strict about this." Headmaster Aronian informed. "In the past few decades, there hasn't been even a single incident during the Kandrian Martial Festival. The price of making an enemy of the Martial Academies that is responsible for grooming their students to become Martial Artists simply isn't worth it."

Now this was much more reassuring.

"I can promise you as the Headmaster of the Martial Academy, you have nothing to fear." Headmaster Aronian confidently informed. "Still, you're getting a bit ahead of yourself, you haven't been chosen as the representative yet, are you that confident?"

"No." Rui replied. "But I am determined to give it my best, no matter what. I wanted to clarify this issue so that I can go all out without any problems."

"That's a healthy attitude." Headmaster Aronian nodded, approvingly. "I wish you good luck young man. I am quite looking forward to your performance in the preliminaries." He said, before continuing.

"You've mastered a variety of interesting and powerful techniques in the near two years you've been in the Academy, use them well." Master Aronian said.

"Thank you, Headmaster." Rui replied.



"Well, if there's nothing else, you may leave." Headmaster Aronian said, with a ton of finality.

Rui had bade farewell back then, and had returned to his dormitory room deep in thought. These were the among the many doubts and clarifications he had obtained when he was going through the final refining stage of his Martial Art, before he was finally clear on everything he wanted to be clear on.

"Now there's only the prelims left." Rui said, after he finished going through his notebook where he had noted all the important information regarding the Martial Contest.

The prelims began tomorrow. One month of fighting every single other Martial Apprentice in the entirety of the Academy, this included juniors who had broken through pretty recently as well as seniors who had been part of the Academy for years. They would all be competing against each other fairly, and by the end of the month, the strongest Martial Apprentice of the entire Academy would go onto compete with fifteen other peers.

Rui was so excited he had trouble falling asleep, even though he had purposefully avoided using potions so he could start off at his peak.

('I can't wait!')

## Chapter 188: Commencement

It was time. Rui had gotten a good eight hours of sleep, instead of using a potion. Across the entire month, all of the Martial Apprentice participants would be given enough time to get a good organic sleep every night. So that they could be at their absolute best the next and also so that the students that did decide to use potions regardless didn't have to worry about the days their sleep overlapped with any scheduled fight of their own.

He had already donned his Martial uniform and was about ready to gather at the Apprentice sparring center.

"You ready?" Kane asked. "Let's go."

Rui nodded. As they headed to the Apprentice sparring center, neither of them exchanged a word. Kane merely had his hand behind his head, walking with an aura of lethargy and displeasure. Rui, on the other hand, was barely able to contain his excitement

They had already said everything that needed to be said. A tacit understanding already existed between them.

And soon, they reached, walking over to the group of Fae, Milliana and Dalen.

"You're here." Fae said, with an air of focused composure. "Ready?"

"No." Kane replied.

"Yes." Rui nodded.

Fae sighed, not saying more. Kane's dislike of the Martial Contest was well-known, she didn't want to distract herself with it at this important point in time. Soon, all the Martial Apprentices had gathered.

There was an air of tension among all of them, all of them knew they would have to fight each other, and that only one of them would be chosen as the representatives. What would normally have been a light atmosphere with plenty of banter going around was dead quiet and frozen.

Suddenly, a heavy presence weighed on all of their minds. They saw Headmaster Aronian enter the facility with his Martial Squire bodyguards. These bodyguards merely existed to ensure that the Headmaster never had to waste energy dealing with fools who tried to get too close to him, they couldn't truly protect his life given his Martial Prowess existed two Realms above theirs.

"My students." He addressed. "Martial Artists of the Martial Academy. All of you have gathered here for a reason. A reason that drives you. A reason that drives you down your Martial Path. Perhaps it is glory, or perhaps it is wealth. Perhaps it is prestige, or perhaps it is power. Regardless of what it is, it drives you. And here you are. Standing before me. Standing before each other on this special day. Today is no ordinary day. Today is the day you aim to prove yourself. Today is the day you aim to forge yourselves. Today is the day you aim to soar high into the sky. Today is the day you will reap the fruits of your

perseverance. Today is a day you confront not just your opponents, but yourselves. Some of you will win, and some of you will lose. Some of you will retain the hope of being the chosen one, while some of you will won't. Each of the seventy-nine of you that have gathered before me today, will face the remaining seventy-eight of your peers, and when every last battle to be fought has been fought and the winner has won and the losers have lost. We will choose one of you to carry the burden of all those you defeated."

He stroked his long flowing beard. "The only question is... Which one of you will it be?"

He eyed all of the Martial Apprentices gathered before him, feeling their growing determination with a glint of satisfaction. It seems he was able to draw out their will adequately. Good.

"Only time will tell. And that time will soon come." He said. "I hereby declare the commencement of the twenty-seventh preliminary contest of the Hajin branch of the Martial Academies!"

He roared, shaking the earth with his powerful voice, along with the hearts of those who heard him.

"I will return when the verdict has been made, until then; good luck and farewell."

He bade with a tone of finality, before leaving with his bodyguards.

('He's one hell of an orator.') Rui grinned, clenching his quivering fists in excitement. How on Gaea could Rui possible remain composed after hearing that?

He simply couldn't!

He couldn't wait to start, he had been itching for this for many months now!

"Still." He said with a frown. "Seventy-nine huh? Last I checked we had seventy-eight." He'd fought most of the Martial Apprentices in the Academy and had always known the student count was at seventy-eight even a few months ago.

"You get too immersed into training." Kane said.

Rui smiled wryly. In the past two months, he had trained almost exclusively with the Apprentice-instructors, and hadn't interacted with anybody all that much. He was sure to have missed it if one of the Explorer students had broken through.

Kane gestured to one of the Martial Apprentices in the crowd, directing his attention to him.

"He-!" Rui's eyes flew wide open as he instantly recognized the boy. Messy silver hair. Startling red eyes. A demeanor that oozed arrogance and a battle-lust that surpassed even Rui's.

"Nel...!" Rui was shocked. It had been nearly two years since their batch had entered the Academy, and Nel had finally become a Martial Apprentice!

Rui had once wondered how absurdly strong the boy would become once he discovered his Martial Path.

"Well, I guess we'll find out how much he's improved." Rui murmured.

"He's only been a Martial Apprentice for two months, not enough time have mastered any Apprentice-level techniques." Fae said. "That's a disadvantage that will drag him down."

Rui wasn't sure about that. Nel had defeated a Martial Apprentice nearly two years ago, even if that Martial Apprentice was extremely low-grade at the time.

However, since then Nel had undergone the Foundational Stages and the Exploration Stage, and had also discovered his Martial Path, and had naturally grown stronger as a result of age.

This meant that Nel with without a doubt incomparably stronger to his previous self that was already capable of beating Martial Apprentices with ease.

"He just might be the strongest of us all." Rui realized.

The difficulty of being chosen as the representative of the Academy had risen tremendously!

#### Chapter 189: Incredible Feat

Still, Rui wasn't afraid. He had grown tremendously stronger in the nearly two years he had joined that Academy as well. It was a universal fact that Rui had gained the most amount of power since in the nearly two years since they joined. Not a single student of the Martial Academy could match his growth rate! Especially not Nel, who had taken a whole two years to accomplish what Rui had accomplished in two months.

Did this necessarily mean that Nel was weaker?

No, it did not.

Nel had started out far stronger than anybody else, even if Rui grew stronger much, much faster, he had started out from a much, much weaker place. It would depend on whether or not Rui's astronomical growth was enough to close the astronomical gap.

Rui shook his head.

Speculation didn't matter. Neither did theorizing and conjecture.

Reality would soon demonstrate the truth, and Rui would be able to find out for himself whether he was stronger than Nel, or weaker.

Currently, his three biggest threats were Nel, Kane and Fae. Although there were other strong Martial Artists, like the seniors from the batch before them. Rui had sparred against them, and did not think they were in the top three threats, still he did not dismiss them either.

Soon the matchups were announced. Since there were seventy-nine, one student would be left out every time. But this didn't matter, because every student will have faced every other student by the time the month ended.

Rui skimmed through the matchups, barely able to contain his excitement, looking for his matchup.

He looked.

Looked some more.

And a little more.

But he couldn't find it.

('Wait, don't tell me...') Rui's eyes flew wide open. Could it be that his luck was so horrible, that he would be the seventy-ninth person who didn't have an opponent in the first person.

"Oh for fuck's sake!" He cursed, drawing attention.

Now he would have to contain his energy and sit watching while the others fought!

"Wait." He paused. "Maybe that's not such a bad thing."

He got to observe the strongest Martial Artists, especially the top three that he was wary of. Giving him a chance to grasp their prowess, and understand how strong they had grown, maybe even gain data for the VOID algorithm.

He wasn't sure that it would make a meaningful difference, but it was better than nothing. The others had already dispersed as their matchups and assigned sparring rings had already been decided. He walked over taking a seat at a place where he could observe Kane, Fae and Nel with equal amount of ease.

('Maybe I should sit closer to Nel.') Rui thought, reconsidering his decision. He knew a lot about Fae and Kane, he even knew most of their techniques, having spent two years with them. He also knew which technique Kane had mastered in recent times. As for Fae, her mastery speed wasn't as high as his own,

in the span of four months she at most could have mastered one powerful technique or maybe two low-grade techniques.

Regardless of which of the two it was, it was unlikely to make too much of a difference.

In comparison to those two, he basically knew nothing about Nel. He had seen Nel fight only once since he joined the Academy. That fight was so long ago, any specific piece of information from back then was utterly irrelevant to his current self.

He walked over to Nel's fight, keeping a close eye on their fight.

Nel had a savage aggressive aura. Ever since Rui had mastered Primordial Instinct, he had been able to do more than just subconsciously evaluate danger. Before, strong creatures and Martial Artists left an invisible pressure on him. But now that he had mastered this technique, it was no longer invisible.

He was able to see it, read it, interpret it. Nel very much gave him the impression of a savage wild animal. He didn't know how a normal human could possibly come to develop to have such a temperament, but it was truly unlike anything else he had ever seen.

"Take your stance!" the supervisor of their match announced, drawing Rui's attention.

Nel simply crouched, letting his arms dangle down, swaying loosely, an expression of lazy arrogance covering his face. Rui frowned; this was the same stance he had taken in his fight against Felix nearly two years ago, how was it possible for his stance to remain unchanged?

Rui glanced at his opponent, the girl kept both of her hands low, as they curved to the other side, all of her weight was on her left leg, which was in front of her right leg.

('Kicking specialist.') Rui immediately concluded. Her positioning of the arms were for generating as much torque for kicks. She'd placed all her weight on one leg so that her other leg would always be free to launch kicks immediately.

Rui also immediately concluded she was going to lose. Primordial Instinct combined with a lifetime of experience and research into combat psychology allowed him to evaluate his opponents far more accurately and precisely than anybody else in his generation. Perhaps even in his Realm.

She was too weak to pose a threat to either Rui or Nel.

('Alright, let's see how overwhelmingly he beats her.') Rui narrowed his eyes as he concentrated on their fight, he didn't want to miss anything.

"BEGIN." The supervisor commenced the fight.

The girl dashed towards Nel with a fierce expression. Her body contorted as she tried her best to put as much weight on the very first kick of the fight.

BAM

...

('Interesting...')

Nel had caught the attack with his bare hand. Such a feat required incredible toughness and muscular strength, especially when done without an Apprentice-level technique.

He grinned, lifting her by her leg over his head.

BOOM

He slammed her down into the ground from above with incredible force!

BOOM



BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

...

DROP

She had already fallen unconscious, and was bleeding profusely. Nel's grinned had already faded, as bored lethargy overtook his demeanor. He sighed, leaving the ring. His performance had left most onlookers stunned; he had crushed a Martial Apprentice!

Even if his opponent was mediocre, it was still an incredible feat!

Rui couldn't help but feel a grin cracking on his excited face at that sight.

Chapter 190: Fight Had Begun

It wasn't much, but it was enough.

"Strong..." Rui uttered, grinning with raised eyebrows. His power was just a notch below Fae, his speed was a notch below Kane and his durability was a notch below Dalen.

('He's this strong without even having mastered any Apprentice-level techniques.') Rui was shocked. His physical body possessed such high natural attributes that it was like he was using Apprentice-level techniques permanently.

Rui realized he probably hadn't spent much time in the physical foundation stage at all. His physicals were as solid as anyone could ever hope they would be. He likely spent a lot of time in the Exploration Stage looking for his Martial Path.

Rui wasn't sure he could beat him. He could try to compare his evaluation of himself, but frankly, he didn't believe anyone's evaluation of themselves could be trusted when the answer wasn't obvious.

He glanced back at Nel's retreating form before getting up and walking away. The fight was over, he might as well go observe other fighters.

Just as Rui was about head to Kane's fight, a voice beckoned him;

"Apprentice Quarrier." A staff member called out to him. "Your first fight has been scheduled. Please come this way."

Rui did his best to contain his smirk, as he followed the staff as they guided him to his first fight. Rui glanced at his opponent once they reached the sparring ring.

('Gale Minskow.') He mused with a raised eyebrow.

Gale was the oldest Martial Apprentice of the Academy, and had spent one of the longest periods training in the Academy. He was a senior Martial Apprentice that everybody knew.

He was also one of the strongest Martial Apprentices before Rui's batch had joined the Academy. There was no doubt that he was in the upper echelons of the Martial Apprentices of the Academy.

"Rui Quarrier." He said addressed Rui once he had gotten onto the ring. "Let me give you a piece of advice. Resign now and you won't suffer much pain."

He was also very arrogant. His sense of superiority came from the fact that he had been in the Martial Apprentice Realm for far longer than Rui had. Although Rui's meteoric growth was well-known in the Martial Academy, he believed Rui was far too young and immature to challenge him.

"Your talent has earned my admiration and envy." Gale said solemnly. "But unfortunately, you are still far too young to challenge me. Perhaps if you had another two years. No no, if you had another three years would be able to beat me as I am right now. But currently I am certainly destined to be the representative of our Academy. So therefore I strongly advise you to-"

"Shut up."

Gale froze instinctively.

His eyes widened as he looked into Rui's eyes.

And they looked back into his.

They were pitch-black, sucking the very light out of the world greedily.

He felt naked.

Transparent.

Invisible.

They weren't looking at him.

No.

They were looking far beyond him.

A stone. A stepping stone. That was all he was reduced to.

All his years of dedication, discipline and perseverance. A stepping stone in the Martial Path of Rui Quarrier.

"Take your stances!" The supervisor broke Gale out of his reverie.

"Y-You..." Gale stuttered.

In just a few moments.

With just a few words.

With nothing but his gaze, Rui had crushed his confidence. Gale gritted his teeth as he felt boundless weight pressing down on him from Rui's singular concentration.

"Just how strong are you?"

Gale didn't understand. What separated him from the boy before him? Why wasn't he also... special?

"How strong am I?" Rui echoed softly, as the gentlest of smiles arose from his mouth as he pondered for a moment.

"Well, hopefully a little less weak than I used to be."

There wasn't a shred of arrogance in his voice. Only sincere earnesty. Gale could feel it. He truly believed every single one of those words.

Had one stared at those words written on a piece of paper, one would conclude they were ordinary.

Yet, they struck Gale harder than any attack from Rui ever could.

One moment, Rui had driven his mind into turmoil.

And yet, the very next moment Rui pulled him out of it.

A little less weak than he used to be.

Gale felt a sense of peace he hadn't experienced in a long time. He had long grown insecure about his paltry growth rate compared to his peers, most of whom had surpassed him by leaps and bounds. He had always wondered why he was weak, why he had to struggle for six years to obtain what other had in less than two. The arrogance and ego he projected were merely to hide this vulnerability in his psyche.

Yet here came this boy who shattered it in an instant.

"Yes... I see." He adopted his stance.

A little less weak than he used to be.

"That's right. I hope I'm a little less weak than I used to be too!"

It didn't matter if he was slower than his peers. It didn't matter if they raced ahead while he traversed forward step-by-step. Nothing mattered.

Not as long as he kept pushing forward. Not as long as he continued growing less and less weak than he used to be, to the best of his ability.

If this young man who raced down his Martial Path faster than everybody else could abandon sight of everybody else's Path and experience genuine satisfaction at being less weak than he used to be.

Then so could Gale.

('Yes, I can.')

In that very moment, after what felt like an eternity, he felt he had gotten stronger. Breaking past a shackle he didn't even know was chaining him down!

He exhaled, opening his eyes to meet Rui's, shining with gratitude.

Rui's head tilted slightly, intrigued at the change in his demeanor. "Well then, let's both continue growing less and less weak than we used to be." He said, chuckling.

The two solidified their stances, waiting for the fight to commence.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the fight.

WHOOSH

The two of them dashed towards each other.

The fight had begun.