

Martial Unity 211

Chapter 211: Rui

Rui opened his eyes. A bright blue sky assaulted his vision.

That didn't make sense.

Shouldn't he have been in the hospital?

He got up to his feet, taking in his surroundings.

He was in the middle of the wilderness, in the middle of nowhere.

"Where am I?" He frowned.

He didn't know.

He turned around.

And what he saw shook him.

He saw a path.

A path he was standing on.

It extended far beyond the depths of his vision.

Who knew who far it went?

It was a path that elevated towards the heavens above, growing in height the further it extended.

It was a path no one else was on.

Yet it wasn't the path itself that drew his attention.

It was the that what the path went through!

Ferocious beasts of various shapes and sizes.

Earthquakes.

Volcanoes.

Tsunamis.

Meteorites.

The path winded right about treacherous monsters and calamities!

Who in their right mind would travel down this path?

Yet, as terrifying as it was.

It was equally beautiful.

It inspired fear.

Yet.

It also inspired awe.

The path called out to him. Lulling him. Whispering to him.

It was a path he wanted to walk down.

Yet the moment he took his first step...

The world cracked and shattered!

His eyes opened as he rose up abruptly, gasping for air.

He glanced around him as his eyes ran into a set of familiar faces.

"You guys..." Rui murmured as he gazed at Kane, Dalen and Milliana. His eyes danced around as he recognized the familiar visage of the medical wing.

('...A dream.') He realized, almost in disbelief.

It was so real.

Vivid.

What was that dream?

"You okay?" Kane asked with a concerned tone, as he noticed Rui's disorientation.

"...Feeling fine, actually." Rui replied as his senses grew more comfortable with reality. He shook his head, putting aside the dream. A dream was a dream.

He glanced to his side.

"Fae..." She was still unconscious.

"The doctors said both of you recovered fully and will be in perfect shape for tomorrow." Kane said.

Rui nodded as the fight between them flashed back to him.

He had revealed one of his trump cards. The Stinger. Now all of the elites of the Academy that he was to fight knew of this trump card and would be wary of it.

In the worst case, word of it might leak out to the fifteen candidates of the Martial Academies through certain channels in the Martial community.

('I'm getting too ahead of myself.') Rui shook his head. He hadn't even won the preliminary contest yet.

Thankfully, he had managed to preserve his final trump card; Blink.

He hadn't needed to use it. He simply lured Fae too close. He did this by ducking to and leaning back to avoid her Whirlpool impact, forcing her to enter extremely close quarters. By then, his foot was outside her peripheral vision, and all her attention was directed towards landing the Whirlpool attack on him.

Furthermore, he had shifted all of his weight on his left leg prior, meaning his right leg was free to move without any trouble at any time without any warning.

These three factors had allowed him to land the Stinger technique without her awareness. The technique was so swift she hadn't even realized it had struck her until it did, and she only comprehended what had happened a few moments later.

Then the pain, the fear and the shock had completely thrown her mind off-track and Rui was able to exploit a timely opening in her spatial awareness to land the final blow at the last moment.

Her Whirlpool attack stopped just a centimeter away from his face, it was truly too close. Thankfully the much greater range of the Stinger meant he could land the attack even if he was tilting away from her, which is why the Stinger had landed first. She was moving towards the Stinger, but he was moving away from her attack.

However, he hadn't been sure of his victory until he landed the final blow on her. Even if he managed to land a lethal and critical wound on her, so had she. He had even been bleeding longer, if she had simply kept her calm and composure, she might very well have been able to win the fight. At the very least he would have been forced to use Blink.

But that was not what had happened. Ultimately, she was not a robot. Intense emotions and sensations had clouded her judgement and caused a single poor decision which Rui had ruthlessly exploited.

All of this resulted in his victory.

"I guess I really did win." He murmured to himself as a feeling of elation rose in him. He had finally defeated Fae in a serious fight for the very first time. This was a goal he had had ever since she beat him in the Martial entrance exam.

He had an immense amount of respect for her. Defeating her was definitely a milestone he was proud of.

"Mmmmhh..." She groaned as her eyes opened. She blinked a few times, glancing around as realization dawned upon her.

"You okay...?" Milliana asked, concerned.

"Who won?"

"..."

"I see." She sighed. The fact that she could not remember anything after Rui had struck her was not a good sign, but she'd still hoped she hadn't lost.

She sighed, closing her eyes, trying to processing her loss.

With this, her chances of being chosen as representative were all but very low. Kane, Nel and Hever Mendelieve would need to lose atleast once. Rui would need to lose at the very least two times in his remaining matches for her to get back into the competition. If he lost only once, she would not be chosen, even if she won her remaining match, since if their scores were tied, he would be chosen because he beat her.

She open her eyes, exhaling. Turning to Rui, she smiled despite her disappointment.

"Great fight." She said, extending an arm. "You've truly come a long way."

"Thanks." Rui smiled. "You were incredibly strong, so much so that I could have easily lost that match."

Chapter 212: Banter

The five of them bantered a bit more, touching more into several aspects and parts of the fight, going deep into them and offering their thoughts and opinions.

"Outer Convergence: Whirlpool huh?" Rui murmured. "That's amazing. If its difficulty is above Outer Convergence then my talent and affinity for offensive techniques is probably not good enough. Still, it was very creative of you adding a conditioning element to it to create that unique attack Fae."

"Thanks." She replied appreciatively. "I had mastered the technique for the Martial Festival and the Martial Contest, but it was too optimistic to not lose without using it. In the end I lost despite using it."

"You came too close." Rui said, shaking his head. "Just the tiniest difference could have been game over for me. In the end, I was forced to reveal my trump card."

"What was that technique?" Fae frowned, glancing at his toe.

"It's a technique known as the Stinger." Rui explained. "Through intense conditioning, the toe is transformed into an extremely durable hard piercing instrument. That along with a kick amplified with Apprentice level techniques allows me to kick with piercing power significantly surpassing even musket bullets."

The four of them were impressed.

"That's a lethal trump card." Dalen sighed. Out of all of them, the revelation that both Rui and Kane had power and lethal trump cards that they had hidden had hit him the hardest. He had lost against both Rui and Fae, but he believed that the gap was not gigantic, if he learnt two or three techniques, he would be on par with them.

This fight had shown him how misguided that notion was.

This was particularly disheartening because he was a defensive Martial Artist. He had endured Rui's and Fae's attacks better than almost anybody else. But now he had learnt that both Rui and Fae could have pretty much easily put him into a critical state with just a few attacks with their trump cards.

Most people would be downed with one or at most two Stingers and Whirlpools. Dalen estimated he could take four-to-five Stingers and Whirlpools. Furthermore, if Rui and Fae truly fought him with intent of killing him, he would last lot less.

He sighed. He still had a long way to go.

The only one who was rather unmoved was Kane. The trump cards were less effective against him because they didn't solve the fundamental that he posed to everyone else.

The biggest issue fighting Kane wasn't being unable to take him down with any attack that they landed on him. The biggest issue was landing attacks on him at all. In that regard, the Stinger and the Whirlpool attacks were not any better than normal attacks. If anything, those attacks may be at an even greater

disadvantage than normal attacks against him since he would be extraordinarily careful against them especially compared to normal attacks.

"They're powerful trump cards." he noted. "Are you two going to continue using them now that everybody already knows about them?"

"Yes, it doesn't make sense to hide it after it's already be revealed." Fae replied.

"I'll use them if it is optimal to use them, and won't if it isn't optimal." Rui shrugged. He made his decisions after analyzing his opponent and the circumstances via thinking it through the algorithmic analytic procedures of the VOID algorithm and general circumstantial evaluation.

Kane threw a meaningful look at Rui. He had known from the very start that Rui had hidden trump cards. It wasn't a particularly genius deduction on his part. He knew Rui had learnt three techniques in his last training phase, and four techniques in the training phase before that.

Our of those seven techniques, he was only aware of Phantom Step, Inner Divergence, Outer Convergence and Stinger.

That left three unknown techniques he hadn't seen Rui use.

He still had hopes that whatever those three techniques were, they would be useful against himself.

Little did he know, that his hopes were largely true.

Seismic Mapping and Primordial Instinct were quite useful against him. They were more than just useful. They were Rui's lifeline against Kane. With these two techniques combined. Rui was able to sense which direction Kane was at all times, and also his position vaguely at all times. He could sense Kane's attacks or motions, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He could only thank his good fortune for having chosen techniques that would be useful against Kane.

"Oh right." Rui suddenly remembered. "Nel's fight isn't over yet, is it?"

"Nope." Kane replied. "It's scheduled today."

"Who's he fighting against again?" Dalen scratched his head.

"Hever Mendelieve." Fae replied. "I'm looking forward to that fight."

Hever Mendelieve was now among the only four undefeated Martial Apprentices in the Academy along with Rui, Kane and Nel.

Hever Mendelieve was one of the most unique Martial Artists in the Martial Academy. He was the only elite Martial apprentice who had mastered one and only one technique.

Of course, there were freaks like Nel who hadn't mastered a single technique, but this was rather different. Nel was gifted with godly physical prowess. Hever was a normal man.

Yet, he had made it to the top undefeated having mastered a single technique.

Meteor Swing

This was a technique that was graded nine in regards to both potency and difficulty. It was a counter offensive technique that intercepted attacks with a grasp and used his opponent's attacks energy in addition to their own energy in a swing that was executed with the principles of redirection, center of gravity and balance manipulation.

He was a senior Martial Apprentice from the same generation of Gale, but had long since widened the gap between them.

For the past six years, this Martial Artist had dedicated his everything to the singular mastery of this one technique. And elevated his mastery of application far beyond the general mastery. His timing, placement, body-eye coordination, precision and accuracy with this technique were leagues above any other Martial Apprentices mastery of their techniques.

He was not a rank one Martial Apprentice for no reason.

Chapter 213: Alike

Techniques were like weapons themselves. They allowed Martial Artists to achieve things that they would ordinarily not be able to. They allowed for greater prowess in combat. Lower-grade techniques had a marginal effect whereas higher-grade techniques could change the tide of battle.

Usually, the one with more of these weapons, and better-quality weapons won. They would usually overwhelm with a quantity or a quality advantage.

However, there was a variable that was often left unseen.

Mastery of these weapons. Mastery of these techniques.

Someone who had higher mastery of a technique would defeat someone with a lower mastery. Mastery was an important variable that had significant impact on the outcome of a clash.

Yet, there was a reason people moved on to another technique after mastering one to a satisfactory level. Learning new techniques was easier than increasing an already high mastery.

The higher the mastery, the more energy and time it took to raise that mastery. It became an inefficient exchange and the effort and energy it costed to raise the mastery even a bit simply wasn't worth it. Why spend all that time and energy for marginal gains when one could simply start mastering a new technique and make much greater progress?

This was the rationale that drove ninety-nine percent of Martial Artists to mastering multiple techniques.

Even Rui was part of this group. Perhaps he was even at the forefront of that group with sheer number of techniques he had mastered in a short amount of time.

But not Hever Mendelieve. Born in a prestigious Martial Family, he had reached Martial Apprentice even before he had joined the Academy.

In all his time in the Martial Academy, he was the only Martial Apprentice to have never entered the Apprentice Library.

He had chosen the Meteor Swing technique the day he broken through to Martial Apprentice, and had dedicated everything to this counter-offensive technique.

Within a year of entering the Academy. He had mastered the technique to a general level. He had mastered it to a level that other Martial Apprentices would have stopped training it and begun training new techniques.

But Hever wasn't satisfied with his mastery of the technique.

No matter how much better he got, there was always something missing.

In fact, his sense of inadequacy only grew stronger and stronger.

He grew more and more unsatisfied with his mastery of this technique.

The Squire instructors had encouraged him to attempt learning other techniques, but he had deigned to reject their suggestions. He would move onto other techniques after he was satisfied with his mastery of Meteor Swing, despite their unspoken disapproval.

Only Headmaster Aronian had encouraged his decision wholeheartedly.

"Every technique is a limitless well of potential and possibilities. This is true even for the lowest of techniques, as well as the highest." Headmaster Aronian told him. "Yet most never realize this until much later in their Martial Path, many have heard this, yet very few truly understand it."

He paused before, continuing. "Your sense of inadequacy grows because your subconscious awareness of the infinite potential of your technique grows as well."

"However, just because your awareness of the limitless potential of your technique grows, doesn't necessarily mean you have to realize that potential." Headmaster Aronian told him as he stroked his flowing white beard. "You don't have to do anything. Anything at all."

"What does that mean?" Hever had asked, confused.

Headmaster Aronian chuckled at his confusion. "Your voyage down your Martial Path isn't an obligation. It's a choice, it's a will, it's a desire." He said. "You only need to do what you want to, if you wish to keep travelling down this Path. So what is it that you want to do? Continue mastering this technique despite it yielding lower short-term growth or... abandon your training of this technique and pursue new techniques?"

More than five years later, Hever Mandelieve stood before Nel in one of his final few matches in the twenty-seventh preliminary contest of the Hajin branch of the Martial Academies.

And he had yet to master more than one technique.

No.

If asked, he would say he hasn't mastered a single technique yet.

"That's crazy story, to be honest." Rui muttered excitedly as they waited for the match between Hever and Nel to commence.

They had long since migrated to the sparring facility waiting for the matchup between Nel and Mendelieve. Neither Rui, Kane nor Fa had faced either one of the, so that alone was enough reason to spectate their match. Furthermore, this was a fight between two undefeated top rankers, the outcome mattered a lot and would significantly affect who would eventually become the representative of their Martial Academy.

"It is a remarkable story." Fae agreed.

"We're quite alike." Rui blurted, earning stares of confusion.

"You're nothing alike." Kane grumbled. "He remained faithful and loyal to a single technique whereas you mastered seventeen techniques in eighteen months, you Martial Whore."

Rui threw a sharp glare at Kane.

"Putting his phrasing aside." Fae said throwing a disapproving glance at Kane. "He does have a point, you're the exact opposite of Hever in every way."

Rui shook his head wordlessly. He didn't bother defending himself against Kane's rebuts. They wouldn't understand.

But what Fae had told him about Hever resonated with him. He felt the exact same way with the VOID algorithm. The more he used it in this world, the more he realized that there was an immense amount of potential in his master of the VOID algorithm and the algorithm itself.

Although he mastered other techniques, he only mastered them because they were necessary for his Martial Art and Martial Path; the VOID algorithm and Project Water.

In way, he could relate to the one-track mindedness of Hever, and could even appreciate it.

This made him all the more excited for his fight against Nel. He wasn't sure who would win because he lacked too much information, but he hoped for an amazing fight more than anything.

Chapter 214: Come Then

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

Nel took his usual bizarre stance. Crouching and letting his arms dangle lazily, it was a stance that would have oozed lethargy if anybody else had taken it.

But not Nel.

No one would have called him lethargic.

Not with the savage beastly aura he radiated. The sheer pressure he exerted on everyone with just a flash of focus was immense, it was as though one was staring into the eyes of a tiger face-to-face.

Yet when one turned to glance at Hever, one could only see an unmoving mountain. He had a sturdy aura that gave one the impression that he was unmovable. He simply gazed abck at Nel, ignoring his strange antic as he took his stance.

It was a modest stance.

Distributed feats, and open hands ready for interception.

The stance was modest.

But the danger that Primordial Instinct felt going near it was not.

"This is going to be one hell of a fight." Rui grinned.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the match.

WHOOSH

Nel dashed, reaching Hever in an instant. He swung a wild haymaker at his face with immense speed and force.

BOOM!

A heavy impact resounded through the air and the earth of the sparring facility. The outcome of the clash shook not just the ground, but also the minds of those who were watching.

Nel had been the one to attack first.

Yet, the very next moment, he was flat on the ground.

A milestone had been crossed.

For the first time since the commencement of the preliminary contest... Nel had been downed.

"This..." Rui's eyes flew wide open. What had occurred had unfolded so fast that it was a blur even to Rui's eyes. From the looks of it, even Nel was unable to combat it in time!

However, what had happened was clear. Hever had intercepted Nel's attack and swung him across his shoulder using not just the energy gathered from across his body, but also the energy of Nel's own attack.

The resulting outcome was a throwing maneuver with such absurd power, that even Nel was unable to mitigate the damage!

"Unbelievably fast intercepts, remarkably smooth and fluid transition and an incredible impact fueled by his opponent and himself." Rui muttered.

Rui realized that out of all the former twelve top rankers, Hever Mendelieve was a cut above the lower half. No wonder he had managed to go undefeated even at the top ranker began being pit against each other. He was a powerhouse and a contender for the position of representative of the Martial Academy in the Martial Contest.

Yet Rui knew the match was far from over.

Nel got up to his feet, grinning as he patted his uniform. He wasn't bothered that his attack completely failed and was used against him overwhelmingly slam him into the ground.

No.

He simply grinned like a boy who had been gifted the toys he wanted for christmas.

He turned to Hever, stancelessly.

"Heber Menleave." Nel addressed.

"You-" "-It's Hever Mendelieve." Hever cut him off calmly, correcting him.

"Ah.." Nel scratched his head awkwardly. "I'm not good with names. But I'll remember yours." He promised.

Suddenly, there was a change.

It could be felt.

The air grew heavier.

It grew graver.

The expressions of the onlookers tightened.

A maelstrom of pressure pushed down on all of them as Nel's grin grew wider.

"You're strong." His focus and concentration skyrocketed.

His eyes burrowed into Hever. "Stronger than I could have hoped for."

He took his signature stance.

Yet, it was completely different.

What had changed?

"The strongest I've faced so far."

Nel had changed.

"Please."

Only sincerity could be heard in his tone.

"Try not to lose too quickly."

Hever simply gazed at him.

He sighed.

"Come then."

His words cut through the heavy atmosphere.

There was nothing left to be said.

WHOOSH

('...Fast!') Rui's eyes widened ('Only Kane is faster!')

Yet, what occurred was even faster.

BOOM!

Nel slammed the floor. Yet before Rui could even marvel at Hever's technique, he was already up!

WHOOSH

Nel blurred as he appeared in front of Hever. His fist was merely inches away from the latter's face.

And yet,

BOOM!

He was already on the ground, skidding away.

WHOOSH

BOOM!

WHOOSH

BOOM!

...

WHOOSH

BOOM!

The Martial Apprentices gaped. Hever Mendelieve threw him over and over!

Nel's speed was immense. Only Kane would overwhelm it, almost everyone else would simply lose. The few that didn't would need to be extremely careful.

Yet Hever Mendelieve was intercepting these speedy attacks and throwing Nel to the ground before the latter could even do anything about it?

"He's incredibly fast." Dalen murmured.

"No." Kane shook his head. "The speed of his motion isn't special, he's not bad, but he's not particularly good either."

"Then how is he accomplishing such speed?" Fae asked.

"Not sure." Kane admitted, scratching his head. "It's like there's no delay in his motions or something. It's hard to explain."

"It's a result of an unbelievable amount of muscle memory. It has to be." Rui realized, observing Hever with his keen eyes.

"I thought memory resided in the head not in the muscles." Milliana tapped her temple.

"Muscle memory is the subconscious memory of movements and coordination." Rui explained. "It resides in a special part of the brain that is responsible for motion, coordination, balance and equilibrium."

"What does that have to do with Hever?" Dalen asked curiously.

"Normally, all movements require conscious processing and guidance from the conscious mind." Rui explained. "Even as we move, our conscious minds are perceiving, thinking, making a decision and executing the decision regarding what movement we should make next."

Everyone nodded. This made sense.

"But." Rui added. "This takes time. Not too much time, of course, but enough time to slow down the execution of movements, especially complicated movements, especially complicated movements like Martial Art techniques."

"Hever is skipping all of that through sheer muscle memory." Rui explained. "Rather than consciously perceiving, processing and thinking, and finally making a decision. He simply skips all of that because he subconsciously remembers what movements to make in any given circumstance."

This was the secret to Hever's strength!

Chapter 215: Dangerous

Normally, conscious reaction functioned like so;

Perception -> Processing -> Decision making -> Reaction.

But Hever's mastery of Meteor Swing functioned like so;

Perception -> Muscle memory -> Reaction.

Of course, this was extremely difficult to accomplish. It took a long time to build such immense amount of muscle memory. Merely general mastery of a technique was not enough.

This was the fruit of five continuous unhalted rigorous years of training with the Meteor Swing technique. The Meteor Swing was a counter-offensive technique, it was meant to be used when the user was attacked.

By practicing the Meteor Swing over and over and over against countless kinds of attacks, he had burned those motions into his muscle memory.

If someone threw a punch at his face, he no longer needed to think and react, his muscle memory remembered what to do when someone threw a punch at his face. The speed of subconscious sensory recollection and muscle memory was far superior to the speed of conscious cognition. Thus, he reacted earlier and there was no delay in his maneuvers caused by conscious reactive processing, because it had been replaced by the quicker muscle memory.

This was why, even though his motion and movement speed were limited, he was still able to perform extraordinarily quick maneuvers because his reactions and motions were not hindered by the tedious process of conscious cognition.

This was why he was able to keep up with Nel.

"That's unbelievable." Fae murmured, impressed.

"But why doesn't everybody do this?" Kane asked, frowning. "If muscle memory is this useful, why don't more Martial Artists take his route? Won't it make more sense to go down this route."

Rui shook his head. "In most cases, dedicating yourself to a single technique will lead to lower growth than mastering multiple techniques. The reason it's worked out so well has to do with the fact that the technique he picked covers everything; defense, offense and can handle a lot of styles as far as compatibility goes. Furthermore, it's a grade-nine technique as far as potency and difficulty go. And finally... It has to do with Hever himself. His affinity and talent with that technique and counter-offensive grappling must be extremely high. All of these factors into why it worked out for him."

"I see..." Fae muttered as she turned back to the battle.

BOOM!

Hever threw slammed Nel onto the ground after intercepting yet another charge and swing.

BOOM!

BOOM!

None of the fighters could take their eyes off the battle. This battle was such a bizarre battle that they were sure they would never see anything quite like it ever again.

"Hever is tossing him like a ragdoll over and over." Kane said. "There's no way Nel can possibly win right?"

"I wouldn't necessarily say that." Rui disagreed, glancing back at the fight.

It was true that Hever was intercepting, defending and countering every attack while landing successful throws each time...

"Nel keeps getting up faster and faster. Rui noted. "His constitution is strong. The damage he takes with each strike is not significant."

Nel wasn't getting faster, he was getting more and more used to the timing. This wasn't the same as the VOID algorithm, which would have adapted than he did, but it was a result of the natural optimization capabilities of the human mind.

"At this rate..." Rui hesitated.

At this rate, Hever Mendelieve would likely become more and more disadvantaged. This wasn't his fault, usually someone with this level of durability and speed seldom existed. Nel was exhibiting a level of toughness that only Dalen could match while showing off speed that only Kane would surpass. Both of

those were quite uncondusive to Hever's Martial Art. Usually people did not last long enough to adapt to his Martial Art. Prior to fighting Nel, no one lasted for more than three throws.

But here came Nel, with the durability to endure many strikes and the speed to potentially overwhelm the Meteor Swing technique once he grew completely used to the timing of the technique.

Suddenly, there was just the slightest change in the ring.

Just the slightest.

Yet because of the monotony of the match, not a single onlooker missed it.

"Mmrrg." Hever grimaced as he took a step back!

BOOM!

He still managed to successfully execute the throw.

But no one missed it

BOOM!

He had ceded even more ground.

Nel's grin widened at the sight as he threw more and more attacks in one direction, each forcing him to cede more and more ground in on direction!

Hever slammed him more and more, but his breathing had grown strained.

"His stamina is lacking." Kane shook his head. "He's going to lose this match, it's a matter of time."
Earning approval from the others.

Only Rui and Milliana frowned.

"This doesn't make sense." Milliana commented. "It's too sudden."

Rui nodded, sharpening his eyes. "He went from pristine condition to tired in the span of twenty seconds? That's now how exhaustion works, it's linear with time, especially when consumption rate of energy is constant like in this fight. If he's this exhausted right now, we would have seen signs of it five minutes ago."

Milliana nodded in agreement. "Also, his Meteor Swing is a technique uses the opponent's energy as well."

"Yeah, it's just a bit bizarre that he's already this exhausted despite that in such an abrupt timeframe."
Rui nodded. "Either he was born with strangely poor stamina or..."

"Or?" Kane echoed.

"Or he's doing it on purpose." Rui's eyes sharpened, even he found that hard to believe. What he didn't understand was why he would bother. After, weren't there only demerits?

He was only ceding space, losing control of the center of the ring and reducing his own freedom. He was dragging himself to edge of the court for no reason. It would only increase the chances of a ring-out.

Suddenly Rui's eyes. "No way..."

If what he had come to suspect was true, then Hever Mendelieve was even more dangerous than he had expected!

Chapter 216: Shocking outcome

Hever collapsed to a knee near the corner of the court. To everyone but Rui, Hever's defeat was certain.

"It's over."

"Well, he put a good fight."

"Nel's gonna knock him out."

Nel didn't even hesitate, he blasted forward faster than he ever had. But Rui didn't pay attention to him. He was staring at Hever intensely, wondering if he was right.

It was then.

Just the smallest of smiles crept onto Hever's expression.

CLASP

He intercepted Nel's attack, and fell back as he got up to his feet, using that momentum to throw Nel flying behind him. This was a launching maneuver that could only be performed starting from one knee.

This was his goal. He wanted to get onto to his single knee stance near the corner of the ring. However, he could not simply walk to the edge, and get down on knee. Even the most simple-minded fool would realize that this was a trap.

Therefore, he had begun working ahead of time. Feigning fatigue. Ceding ground as if he was starting to weaken. He redirected and threw Nel exactly where he wanted him. And at the end, he collapsed to his knee like he was at his very limit.

All so that he could executed a maneuver that would launch Nel outside the ring.

('I fucking KNEW it.') Rui mused excitedly when he saw Hever successfully intercept Nel's haymaker. He fell back as he got up, using the upward motion to lift Nel and the backward motion to launch Nel flying behind him outside the ring. This was why he had let himself get pushed to the edge.

It was smooth. Nel was airborne!

The plan had succeeded!

And then, it failed.

CLASP

In the final hour. No, the final moment.

Nel found a way to salvage his fight.

Nel's reflexes were superhuman. This, in addition to the enhancement given by the breakthrough to the Martial Apprentice Realm, was truly immense. In this one particular area, his reflexes were on par with Kane despite not being a speed-oriented Martial Artist.

Despite being launched at incredible speeds, he still managed to catch a hold of Hever's arm before it was too late!

He threw Hever a shit-eating grin.

Hever's eyes flew wide open as Nel dragged him along with him!

He had no holding leverage, furthermore, he was truly caught off. He was simply unable to resist the incredible momentum that he himself had generated!

WHOOSH

Both Martial Artists took to the air as Nel guffawed out loud midair with mischievous ecstasy while Hever was simply shocked into an incredulous silence.

BOOM

They both landed outside the ring at the same time.

For a moment...

No, for several seconds even;

Everybody was shocked. The only noise that broke what would have been absolute silence was Nel uncontrollably laughing.

"Maaaaan, that was awesome!" Nel grinned, turning to Hever. "Hey, let's do that again some time."

...

Hever sighed resigned. "Sure."

A commotion broke amongst the Martial Apprentices and onlookers.

The outcome was truly shocking. Never had they ever expected that the fight would end in this manner. Rui was speechless beyond words. He was extremely impressed with both of them. Nel's physical prowess had yet again shown why he was truly one of the top rankers of the Academy.

Hever, on the other hand, had a level of mastery that made Rui envious, this sheer mastery had allowed him to compete with Nel. He had crushed all of Nel's offense and initiative and landed every single attack smoothly. Nel was truly blessed he had a strong constitution and sharp reflexes, otherwise Hever would have defeated him without a doubt.

His tactical capabilities impressed Rui as well, that tactic was resourceful and well-planned. Rui was relatively certain that he was the only one who had figured it out ahead of time given how everyone had written the match off.

Hever Mendelieve was a powerful Martial Artist with a sharp tactical and resourceful fighting style.

"On account of simultaneous ringout, this match is a tie!" The supervisor declared.

This meant that both Hever and Nel's win-streak had been stopped, by none other than each other.

This also meant they were now below rank one, since they no longer had all wins like Rui and Kane did.

Rui should have been elated about the fact that he was one of the two only top rankers, but frankly, he wasn't. Hever Mendelieve was much stronger than Rui had hoped. He was now another addition to the top three threats Rui had to defeat.

In fact, he might even be more dangerous than Kane or Nel!

Rui grinned. He was excited to take on all of them.

But he was clear about its difficulty. Defeating all of them would be a herculean task. He had already come up with countermeasures against Nel and Kane to a partial extent. It seems he would need to do the same for Hever.

Thankfully, as strong as he was Hever was not as much of a deviant as Nel and Kane were. Although he was certainly quite unique, his strength was less anomalous to Rui than Kane or Nel.

The biggest problem with him was dealing with his immense muscle memory, and Rui also had to be careful of Hever's tactical capabilities. He was the only fighter in entire Martial Academy whose tactical capacity Rui was a little wary of.

As for techniques... There was only one. But the problem was that it was grade nine and was highly efficient as well as versatile and flexible. It gave Rui perspective on the benefits of mastering techniques beyond just general mastery. Of course, the technique itself mattered a lot too. Rui did not think it was worth mastering techniques like Mind Palace technique that would allow him to remember information better.

But perhaps in the future he might find a technique worth dedicating himself to a higher degree.

Rui shook his head. This was a matter for the future. Right now, he should be focusing his all on the preliminary contest. There were only a few days until the preliminary contest was over.

He was determined to win.

Chapter 217: Inevitable.

WHOOSH

POW POW POW

Rui avoided kick as he fired of three strikes at Sarron Malcolm, one of the eleven he was scheduled to fight.

Sarron grimaced as he stepped back, trying to open up some distance between them. But Rui was not merciful enough to allow that to happen. Rui dashed forward with Parallel Walk and Balanced Direction before;

BAM!

Rui successfully burrows Flowing Canon into Sarron's solar plexus. The sheer impact was too powerful. The boy crumbled like a house of cards, but Rui was not done.

POW

A single kick to the jaw knocked him out on the way down. Rui wanted to ensure he wouldn't get up.

The onlookers sighed. Rui was brutal, there was a reason he had gone undefeated.

"Winner; Apprentice Rui Quarrier!" The supervisor declared.

He walked off the stage, unperturbed.

"Good fight." Kane complimented.

"Thanks." Rui replied. "I finished it especially quickly because I didn't want to miss the next one."

He glanced at the preliminary schedule on the notice board.

[Fae Dullahan vs Kane]

This was something Rui did not dare miss. They were both close friends of his, and even without that, they were top contenders of the Martial Academy. Rui would pay Martial credits to watch this fight.

It's not that the two of them had never fought. If one were to include verbal spats, these two fought every single day. About all kinds of things too. If there was something that could be argued about, there was at the very least a fifty-percent chance Fae and Kane would fight over it.

But as far as physical fights went, these two hadn't fought in a while. They had both grown stronger ever since then, having learnt new powerful techniques.

But if he had to choose who was stronger...

('...It would have to be Kane.') Rui sighed.

It wasn't a matter of overall prowess at all. It wasn't that Kane operated on a higher level of combat prowess.

It was a matter of compatibility. Kane had a stylistic compatibility advantage against Fae, this would tilt the battle in his favour.

Unless Kane somehow blundered or Fae pulled a brilliant tactic, there was very little chance Kane would lose.

They'd reached. Fae, Milliana and Dalen were already waiting for them.

The atmosphere was tense, especially because these two irked each other to no end on a regular basis.

Yet this time, they exchanged no words, merely exchanging stares.

"Hey guys..." Rui tried breaking the stiff atmosphere. "Looking forward to a great fight. No hard feelings regardless of who wins."

The two of them didn't respond, merely making their way to the ring.

"Do you think they'll be fine?" Rui muttered.

"They should be." Dalen stated, earning a nod from Milliana.

Up on the ring, the two of them took their positions.

The atmosphere grew taut.

"Take your stance." The supervisor instructed.

Fae reverted to her usual stance, tucking her right palm upside-down at her waist while her left palm pointed straight at Kane. "I'm intend to win."

She spoke calmly.

Kane snorted, as he lightly hopped between his feet. "Be my guest."

That was the signal.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the fight.

WHOOSH

Fae raced forward as she threw a palm attack right onto him.

WHOOSH

And where Kane should have been, there was but naught.

Kane sauntered out of all perception, having activated the Void Step technique.

Fae stayed stationary, waiting.

POW

Her body jerked at a strike from behind her landed on her. She swiftly turned, launching swift palm attack.

WHOOSH

Despite her sacrificing power to obtain speed, she had missed. But this was not outside her expectations.

Rui had observed the fight with Primordial Instinct and Seismic Mapping. Kane was currently circling around her in order to maintain the stealth given to him by the Void Step technique.

POW POW POW

WHOOSH

He landed a combo before evading her attack.

This continued.

And continued some more.

And some more.

This unfolded from start to finish. Kane abused his advantage and continued pummeling Fae up. She slowly but surely built up more and more damage as the fight went on. Fae's defense was quite solid and Kane's offense was unremarkable. Even if he did possess an advantage, he certainly would not be able to end the fight quickly, he was an evasive maneuverer at his core, his offense would never be special.

Not every fight was flashy.

Not every fight was suspenseful.

And most certainly, not every fight was unpredictable.

Sometimes, there were just predictable fight.

Sometimes, there simply were inevitable outcomes.

This fight, Rui had come to realize, was probably going to be one of them.

Fae was just too incompatible with the Void Step technique. Her techniques and her Martial Art were not conducive to it, and it showed.

In the end, she grew more and more desperate, taking a gamble.

She stood at the very corner of the ring, cutting out any access to attacks from behind or even from her side. While waiting for an attack to land on her.

Her idea was to land a strike as soon as she felt Kane's attack.

Rui shook his head. It may have seemed like a good idea, but it simple wasn't. The risk was far, far too high. Kane's offense was not special, but it wasn't weak either, he had two mid-grade striking offensive techniques that amplified the power of his regular strikes and with the Void Step technique, he could easily build up momentum. She would fall off before she could land a single strike.

Even if she had the defensive prowess of Dalen, she would still not be able to land a strike on him probably. His evasiveness was too good, and he could easily land strikes while avoid strikes unperturbed.

And, he was invisible. To Fae, atleast.

That strategy was too risky even for Rui, who could actually sense his position vaguely. He would merely be trading out one disadvantage for another.

The fundamental issue was not solved.

BAM

Fae was firmly ringed out.

And the battle ended.

Chapter 218: Charge

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

Hever shifted as he took his modest stance. He distributed his weight equally between both feet, putting his left foot forward and his right foot back as a support. His hands were open, placed at a height precisely in between his chest and waist. They were in interception position, ready to intercept all attacks that Rui threw at him.

"I'm looking forward to fighting you." Rui said as he hopped lightly between his feet, with both hands in front of him perfectly positioned for speedy jabs.

This stance sacrificed power for speed and mobility. Rui had seen that Hever was comfortably able to handle even the power of Nel without any problems for an extended period of time. There was no point in trying to overpower Hever. The only person who had chance of accomplishing that in the entire Academy was Fae, everybody else could only lower their head to his obtuse counter-offensive mastery.

"As am I." Hever calmly replied. Rui was not the only one paying attention to his rivals and contenders. Hever had long since identified Rui as one of the biggest obstacles in the entire Academy for the preliminary contest.

Especially since Rui was also ranked higher than he was at the moment.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the match.

Rui shuffled as he drew closer to Hever.

Hever simply waited.

Rui threw a jab only for Hever calmly intercept it.

WHOOSH

A feint. The Phantom Step technique.

Rui exploited the opening to throw the quickest jab he could!

Yet, the very next moment;

BAM!

Rui grimaced in pain as he skidded away. Even with the application of Inner Divergence and Elastic Shift. The throw hurt like hell. Even with Primordial Instinct, his reactions were inferior to Hever's!

He quickly got up, launching himself at Hever throwing a jab.

WHOOSH

BAM!

Rui skidded away groaning in pain.

('As expected. I cannot beat him with such an easy tactic.') Rui mused as he got up. If Hever was not aware of the Phantom Step technique, then Rui was certain he would be able to use it at the right moment and at the right place to create an opening he could successfully exploit.

However, Rui had used the Phantom Step technique many times in this preliminary contest, and Hever was clearly prepared for it, anticipating that Rui would use this technique in this manner.

Not that this surprised Rui. If he were in Hever's place, he would have made this realization the second he saw himself using the Phantom Step technique. He had anticipated that this would not work against the careful Hever.

However, just being careful was not enough to foil a high-grade technique like Phantom Step. The biggest reason had to do with the Hever's muscle memory quickness, it was so quick, that even after falling for a feint, he was still quick enough to respond to Rui's real attack in time!

Rui couldn't help but admire his sheer mastery of a single technique, that allowed him to crush so many powerful techniques and attacks.

He stopped attacking. Having already cleanly failed twice, he did not expect anything to change even if he continued, it was a fool's errand. He was not going to fight foolhardily like Nel and continue attacking over and over.

He dropped his guard, circling around Hever at a distance. The best part about fighting Hever was that Rui did not have to worry about being voluntarily attacked. Hever had mastered only one technique, and it purely counter-offensive, he had no pure offensive potential. This meant that Rui had fully grasped the initiative in this fight. He could leisurely do whatever he wanted and Hever would not press him.

Thus, he took his time, thinking and analyzing.

Hever continuously shifted; rotating to ensure Rui was always directly in front of him at all times.

('So the technique works best when he's facing his opponent.') Rui conjectured. ('Or perhaps it works worst or not at all when his back is facing his opponent.')

Rui thought of ways he could exploit this, but eventually shook his head, it was too difficult.

"Do I really have to use that?" Rui murmured.

He had inputted Dalen's capabilities as well as his own into the VOID algorithm, and had long begun analyzing their fight with algorithmic procedures of the VOID algorithm. It wasn't that he hadn't obtained any solutions, it's just that Rui was rather reluctant of using the solutions he had deduced through the algorithm.

('Sigh, no choice.') He shook his head. At the very least, Dalen was easily in the top five, if not top three in the entire Academy.

He took solace that he wouldn't be wasting his final trump card against someone who was unworthy or could be defeated through other ways.

"Fuuu..." Rui focused.

He suspected he had one chance. If this failed, the odds of it succeeding again were lower than the first time. Such was the nature of all trump cards.

Especially for this one.

He could not afford to fail.

But what was new?

Hever narrowed his eyes as the burden on his mind escalated. His muscles grew tauter and his alertness heightened. His instinctual sense of danger heightened with the sheer amount of physical and mental energy Rui was gathering. He knew Rui was an intelligent fighter, he would not simply try to replicate completely failed attempts with more effort and hope they would magically succeed, whatever he was trying was certainly going to be new.

Rui shuffled closer and closer, controlling every single movement carefully. He paused at a distance of one meter away.

The pressure was immense. The air was taut.

Hever could vaguely sense Rui was waiting for something.

But for what?

He didn't know.

Whatever was coming was big.

Yet, what he didn't expect was...

He would never see it coming in the first place.

BLINK

Suddenly, Rui was right in front of his face!

It was a takedown charge!

Chapter 219: Hell of a fight

Hever's muscle memory flashed as he just barely managed to reach Rui's attack in time.

WHOOSH

It was a feint.

Where did he go?

THUD

Rui had crashed into his lower abdomen before Hever could even realize! The force of the takedown had toppled Hever onto the ground flat. Hever wrangled like a serpent, but to no avail.

CLASP

Rui used Shifting Silhouette, his only grappling defense technique to suppress all of Hever's grappling activity, and successfully mounted Hever.

BAM BAM BAM!

Rui mercilessly pounded on Hever like a gorilla, using the full power of Outer Convergence and Vital Pressure.

Hever had begun bleeding immensely. He did not have any defensive techniques like Inner Divergence, even if he did, they would not work very well, if at all in such a scenario. Inner Divergence required the user shifting the area of impact as close to the center of the body as possible, whereas Rui had mounted him, preventing such a defense.

Ultimately, the human body would not withstand the power of a Martial Apprentice. Rui even ended up holding back a bit, avoiding his head. One wrong mistake and Rui might have ended up even killing him.

Soon, Hever's condition had degraded immensely, but he never gave up. Rui couldn't really knock him out via blunt force trauma because his head would not rock because of the ground.

The solution was simply.

He quickly maneuvered across Hever's body, getting him in a chokehold. Hever's weaknesses and shortcoming were starting to show.

The brain would automatically shut down after seven seconds of limited blood or no blood supply.

And seven seconds later, Rui demonstrated this.

"Winner; Apprentice Rui Quarrier!" The supervisor announced.

The fight ended quickly.

The onlookers gaped in shock!

They expected Hever to win after that intimidating performance against Nel, but instead Rui almost crushed him.

Was Rui this abysmally strong?

Everyone couldn't help but wonder.

Rui shook his head. He wished he was, but the truth was a lot more sober. He was extremely compatible against Hever.

Although Hever was extremely strong thanks to his astronomical mastery of Meteor Throw, everyone knew that he had many, many gaping holes and vulnerabilities on paper. However, his absurd counter-offensive prowess shined too bright, dominating his weaknesses and even overcompensating for them. No one had figured out how to successfully exploit his weaknesses.

Except for Rui, and the VOID algorithm.

The VOID algorithm loved weaknesses. When Rui gave had inputted the parameters of Hever, it had squealed in ecstasy and gulped it up before excreting the desire results.

Metaphorically, of course.

Rui had deduced many solutions that devastated Hever, but they all required the Blink technique one way or another.

Only with the combination of Blink and Phantom Step, two high-grade techniques, could Rui be able to finally crack a hole in Hever's invincibility.

With those two technique Rui had generated many solutions to take Hever down. The solution he chose was Blink plus Mirage Dive, a grappling feint technique very similar to Phantom Step. This combination allowed Rui to permanently turn the battle into ground grappling, where Meteor Swing could not be used.

This was the power of compatibility. It was one of the most important variables in battle. Hever was decently compatible against Nel, allowing him to crush every single initiative Nel took and even coming close to winning.

But Rui was extremely compatible against Hever. The VOID algorithm along with Phantom Step and Blink were the perfect tools to defeat Hever in a short amount of time!

Rui's biggest regret was that he was unable to win without Blink. But he couldn't have his cake and eat it, too. But now all of his trump cards had been exposed.

If there was one consolation, it's that he had only three more people to defeat.

Nel.

Lala Sec.

And finally, Kane.

At the very least, he managed to preserve his trump card until he had only three contenders left. But on the flip side, he would need to win despite the exposure of his trump card.

However, Blink was not a very identifiable technique. It was not flashy and attention drawing like the Stinger. Hopefully, people would not have identified it."

"Great fight." Kane said with a thumbs-up.

"Thanks."

"That surprise takedown." Kane brought up. "That wasn't just feinting right?"

Kane being a master of the Phantom Step movement himself knew what feints were capable of, he had also grown familiar with Hever's speed and had realized that feinting alone didn't explain how Rui managed to cleanly bypass Hever's muscle memory counters.

He quickly tied the oddity with the many unknown techniques Rui had mastered.

"Hehe." Rui chuckled, realizing Kane hadn't figured out the mechanics of Blink from just that one instance. "Do you want me tell you about it?"

"No." Kane replied. The more he knew, the likelier he was to defeat Rui, this was against his desires, thus he avoided the knowledge. He couldn't purposely hold back either, his family had channels in the Academy, and if there were any signs of self-sabotage, then the Martial Squires observing the fight would no doubt relay this and eventually the information would fall into the hands of his family.

"Sure." Rui replied, aware of this consideration. "You ready for your next fight?"

"As ready as ever." Kane shrugged.

Rui glanced at the fight schedule on the notice board.

[Kane vs Nel]

Rui couldn't begin to describe how incredibly hyped he was for this fight. Kane and Nel were the two greatest hurdles he had left. They were both perversely strong, to a shocking degree.

Frankly, Rui wasn't sure how the battle would go down.

He lacked too much information. At the higher levels, it had become rare for him to be unable to predict the fight to some degree. Yet here was a fight between two of the strongest Martial Apprentices, and he couldn't help but be even more excited than he was for his own fights!

"This is going to be one hell of a fight..."

Chapter 220: Unsure

The two boys stared at each other. One had a wild, excited grin. While the other had a detached lethargic expression. The difference in their demeanors was great.

But not the difference in their Martial prowess.

At the very least, no difference could be spotted in the mental pressure they exerted on all sentient life around them.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

"Hehe..." Nel took crouched, letting his arms dangle down. "You're not escaping me, vanish boy."

"Hmph." Kane snorted. "Catch me if you can."

The two concentrated, tying up the atmosphere in knots.

Many had gathered to spectate this fight. As two titans of the Academy, both Nel and Kane had drawn an immense amount of attention.

Every single person in the facility was curious.

Not a single person even blinked.

Nobody wanted to miss this fight.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the fight.

WHOOSH

Nel soared forward at an incredibly high speed!

"HYAAH!" He swung a haymaker at Kane.

WHOOSH

The attack collided with empty air where Kane was once standing.

As for Kane?

He had already disappeared

Yet, by now, people had grown accustomed to this. There was only one thought in everyone's mind.

What was Nel going to do?

Rui observed the battle not just with his eyes, but with Primordial instinct and Seismic Mapping as well. He was more curious than anybody else.

He was standing at the center of the ring, while Kane circled around him.

Suddenly, Kane rushed in. Launching an attack at his back.

And that was when it happened.

"HAH!" Nel snarled as Kane approached throwing back swing at Kane.

WHOOSH

Kane stepped back, shocked!

This was the first time!

For the first time in the preliminary contest, Kane had been seen through!

Kane genuinely did not expect this to happen.

What was worse was that he inevitably needed to pause before moving back to avoid the attack, causing the Void Step technique to be inactive for a second, confirming Kane's position to Nel for just a second.

Nel's grin grew wider as he launched himself where he just sensed Kane.

Down outside, Rui equally shocked. Nel hadn't even mastered a single Apprentice-level technique, how the hell was he sensing Kane?

('Wait.') He realized. ('Could it be he's born with more than just superhuman physical prowess?')

If Nel was born with extraordinary senses, then that would explain why he's able to vaguely sense Kane.

Rui was able to judge the direction Kane was in at all times, and was just able to sense an impression of the distance Kane was at.

This was due to him mastering Primordial Instinct and Seismic Mapping, as well as a boost from Rui's reincarnated mind.

If Nel's senses were as superhuman as his physical prowess, then he might be able to sense Kane vaguely.

Up in the ring, Nel glanced around. His sharp instinct told him Kane was somewhere in front of him, every time his nerves tingled, he simply launched the widest swing he could to cover as much area as he could.

But it wasn't enough.

POW POW POW

Nel's body jerked from invisible impacts.

Kane was an evasive maneuverer. Dodging attacks while simultaneously launching his own was child's play at his current level

He was merely caught off-guard earlier.

('But there's caveats to that.') Rui realized. Kane's offense was mediocre. By Nel's standards, it was downright garbage. Even if he pummeled Nel's body for hours, it was doubtful whether he could take him down.

Furthermore, his body was built for speed, agility and mobility. He was not built for defense. If even a single attack from Nel landed on Kane, it would do considerable damage, it would also lower his performance parameters, significantly increasing the probability of getting hit again.

Meaning, he could not afford to get hit even once.

The conditions of this battle reminded Rui of Kane's fight with Fae. But there were a few important differences.

Nel could sense Kane. His compatibility against Kane was far higher than Fae's compatibility against Kane.

WHOOSH

Nel swung at empty air.

('Close.') Rui noted.

BAM

His upper body jerked, he stepped back, rubbing his throat.

('Kane is focusing purely on the most vulnerable parts of the body.') Rui realized, nodding in approval. This was a good way to maximize damage. This was normally not a good idea, since focusing on only three or four specific spots greatly reduced their options and made them much more predictable.

However, this caveat no longer existed for Kane. Nel was just barely vaguely sensing him, he was far removed from normal conditions.

Rui gazed at the fight with intense concentration.

To others, this fight may not have been as engaging since no one knew what the hell was happening. But to Rui, this was incredibly suspenseful.

WHOOSH

He swung, and wasn't too far off.

POW

A slight impact on Nel's jaw wobbled his head.

"RAAH!" Nel swung again in the direction the attack came from.

WHOOSH

Kane appeared as he paused for the briefest of moments.

BAM

Nel launched himself towards him with him in an instant.

WHOOSH

And, as expected, he hit air.

So far, every single attack he had launched had missed. But Rui didn't think Kane was dominating. All it took was one blow. As far as he knew, Kane had only mastered Elastic Shift. This technique was basically paper in front of Nel's physical prowess. In the worst-case scenario, a single attack from Nel could put Kane in a critical state!

Rui sensed Kane knew this. Not through Primordial Instinct or Seismic Mapping, but by the fact that Kane's movements were far more cautious than usual. This was probably the first time in the preliminary contest he was feeling a sense of danger.

The strange stalemate between the two of them continued. Nel struggled to get a hold of Kane while Kane struggled to damage Nel to a significant degree. Currently, it was shaping out to be more of a race than a fight.

Rui wasn't sure how this battle would unfold.