

## **Martial Unity 221**

Chapter 221: Outcome

WHOOSH

POW POW POW

A hint of frustration flashed on Nel's face. He was struggling to tag Kane, and thus far he hadn't laid a single finger on Kane. He had spent quite some time, swinging every time his nerves and senses tingled, but that strategy had failed.

The problem was simply sheer inadequacy.

Nel was slower than Kane.

He was less mobile than Kane.

He was less efficient than Kane in his movements.

Kane was an evasive specialist, and Kane had the Void Step technique on top of that.

Nel just had too many tables stacked against him. If not for his constitution, Kane would have already begun dominating him.

His only possible path to victory was outlasting Kane. However, Rui did not think this was realistic. There were several reasons for this as well.

While using the Void Step technique, Kane didn't need to go as hard on maneuvering. In fact, he didn't even need to use normal maneuvering technique, he could just take a casual stroll, and dodge every time Nel manages to get a strike somewhat close to him thanks to his sharp senses.

This way, he could conserve an immense amount of energy.

On the other hand, Nel fought like a maniac and burnt energy like there was too much. Every single movement was made with maximum effort regardless of whether it was necessary or optimal or not.

Furthermore, Nel hadn't mastered any Apprentice-level techniques yet, he was compensating by consuming far greater power than Apprentices did.

For example, if Nel and Rui launched a strike with equal amounts of power, Nel was able to consume several times more energy than Rui did for the same strike.

All of these variables meant that even if Nel had a greater energy reserve, his energy consumption was similarly greater. The two largely cancelled out each other.

Even if he did possess an advantage in stamina, it would not be a gigantic one due to these factors.

But, Kane had yet to find a win condition himself.

Just as Rui had thought that, a change occurred.

Kane decided to take a risk and dashed in straight towards Nel.

WHOOSH

Nel threw a strike, but Kane effortlessly dodged as he focused on Nel's eyes.

This was the most vulnerable vital area that was susceptible to Kane's power. Everywhere else was rock solid compared to Kane's measly offensive potential. Furthermore, if Ne's eyes were incapacitated, it would be game over. He would be unable to sense Kane even with his enhanced sense and Kane would have won.

Normally, it wasn't easy to jab someone's eyes since they could see you coming. But thing was,

Nel couldn't. Not properly. As long as Kane maximized speed and precision, he estimated it was worth a try.

This was Kane's plan.

Kane forked his index and middle finger, and jabbed them into Nel's eyes!

CRUNCH

Blood spilled as Nel's head jerked back.

Kane's eyes flew wide as he felt a sharp piercing pain from his index finger.

He had paused for a moment, inadvertently stopping the Void Step technique.

"He... He bit the flesh off Kane's finger tips off!" Rui exclaimed.

Nel's head returned forward with a gleeful grin, with Kane's flesh and blood on his tongue. He immediately jabbed his palm straight at Kane.

FLICK

The jab bruised Kane's cheek as he barely avoided it, going Void Step immediately.

"Hehehe..." Nel spat out the flesh, grinning. "Again!"

When Kane had jabbed at Nel's eyes, the latter had felt an incredibly heightened senses of danger, furthermore his sharp vision had picked faint traces of Kane's attack at close range. The eyes were

extremely delicate, even for Nel, and he ducked back, while biting where his eyes used to be as hard as he could.

He got quite lucky.

Unfortunately for him, he wasn't able to use bleeding to identify Kane, not a single drop hit the ground after.

Kane complete retreated, after his best shot, and eye attack, was not only a complete failure but also caused him harm in turn. He simply gave up on voluntarily offense.

The remaining fight was intense as Nel grew energized by the success of his first successful damage inflicted on Kane, however, it was not enough.

With Kane in almost complete retreat mode, there was nothing Nel could do. They fought fiercely for hours, neither side being able to inflict any further damage on the other.

The fought.

And fought.

And fought some more.

Eventually, after a long time, Rui was one of the few people still watching the fight. Although the Martial Apprentices were interested in the outcome, no one wanted to watch Nel kick air for hours. None of them were able to sense Kane like Rui and Nel could.

And this is how, one of the most anticipated fights in the preliminary contest received the most anti-climactic ending ever.

"Draw due to timeout." The supervisor waved his hand, ending the match.

Both sides were simply unable to make any meaningful progress in time.

"Tsk." Nel tutted. "You sure vanish hard, vanish boy."

"Not as hard as you bite, you Martial Maniac." Kane grumbled.

"Thank you." Nel smiled smugly, raising his head with pride.

"It wasn't a compliment!" Kane complained.

"Well, mine was." Nel replied earnestly. "Kane right? Let's fight again!"

"I'm good." Kane turned around as he walked over to Rui.

"Great fight." Rui handed him a healing and rejuvenation potion.

"Thanks." Kane consumed them immediately, sighing in relief as his finger healed. "That was rough."

"You underestimated his reflexes, they're frankly close to as good as your own." Kane chuckled as he glanced at Nel. "You should bolster your offense."

"Later." Kane waved.

With this, Rui was the only one at rank one. Kane had broken his unbroken win streak. He could feel the burning gazes of his fellow Martial Apprentice contenders.

It was a result he should have been happy about, but he was concerned.

Neither Hever nor Kane could do better than drawing against Nel. The same could be said Kane, perhaps even moreso since he didn't think Hever had a chance against Kane.

These two were frankly undefeated even after facing each other, the two greatest threats.

Confident of victory was one thing Rui was not, at this very moment. Regardless, everything would end tomorrow and the day after.

## Chapter 222: Without Them

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

Both Hever and Kane took their regular stances.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the fight.

Immediately, Hever leaped, reaching the very corner of the ring.

This was the strategy that Fae had used. It had failed miserably when she tried it, however, Rui suspected Hever was different.

For one, Hever was a counter-offensive specialist, he would be able to handle invisible impacts much better than Fae did since he was quicker with his muscle memory.

Of course, this did not mean he could effectively counter Kane completely, but it was likely better than standing in the middle of the ring.

Still, Rui did not think highly of Hever's chances. His compatibility against Kane was horrible. One of the worst, in fact.

Because his prowess came solely from the Meteor Swing technique, anything that threatened to bypass the technique as a whole threatened him immensely.

Which is exactly what the Void Step technique did. However, Hever likely had some muscle memory countermeasure for strikes after they impact, so he had some minor hope of throwing Kane out the ring as long as he managed to grab onto Kane after he landed the strike. As long as he fought cleverly, which he was capable of, he might be able to pull a draw.

However, that still wasn't the biggest reason Rui didn't think highly of his chances.

Up on the ring, Kane was stationary. For the first time, he hadn't immediately activated the Void Step technique. It was a bit risky, and he did not want to give Hever's muscle memory a chance.

Instead, he put his right foot behind, and put his hands on the ground in front. Taking a stance resembling sprinter's starting position.

Rui smiled, excited. He was going to witness something he rarely did.

The Godspeed technique.

Through a build-up of energy in the muscles, the Godspeed technique allowed Martial Apprentices to obtain speeds on par with Martial Squires.

It was a technique that allowed Kane to ascend to a higher Realm for just a moment.

Its biggest weakness was that it required a vulnerable starting position, leaving Kane open to attacks that he could do nothing about while in that stance prior to activating the technique. But once that was accounted for, almost no Martial Apprentice could possibly handle that technique. The weakness was the reason the technique was only at grade ten potency, if Kane could reach Martial Squires of speed any time he wanted with no caveat, then grade ten would be too low!

Against Squire Kyrie, Rui had managed to mitigate the shortcoming. The technique was so powerful that even Squire Kyrie had to stop momentarily stop holding back to use a squire-level counter-offensive technique to defeat both of them.

As for Hever...

Rui shook his head.

Unless a miracle happened, the outcome was almost already decided.

Suddenly, the pressure escalated!

Everybody froze, wide-eyed.

Even Hever was stunned.

Both Rui and Nel simply grinned.

It had been more than a year since the former had seen Kane use the technique. Primordial Instinct was blaring loud emergency sound alarms in his head.

Kane opened his eyes and time slowed, even more than it normally did for Martial Apprentices.

He launched himself.

The sheer velocity with which he did, cracked the barrier of the speed of sound, breaking it.

BOOM!

He disappeared, leaving a shockwave where he stood.

BOOM!

Kane stopped at the corner of the ring.



Hever had been launched flying, he bounced and skidded over to the other end of the facility, knocking over several people.

The fight had ended. It was over in an instant.

Everyone had frozen in shock.

They slowly turned with incredulity towards Rui.

"Hey." He said.

"Great fight." Rui smirked. "Good idea using Godspeed instead of Void Step."

"Thanks." Kane said. "Your fight is scheduled soon, right?"

Rui nodded, glancing at Nel.

He had had only two opponents left; Nel and Kane. His two biggest hurdles.

If he could win these, he would go on to win the preliminary contest and be chosen as representative. Although his track record was a touch better than Kane's and Nel's, it was not enough to upset a loss against either of them.

Thankfully, at the very least he was able to make the best preparations he could. He had gotten his hands against an immense amount of data.

('If this doesn't work, I can rest knowing I gave it my very all.') He mused.

He had no intention of letting it not work, though.

They bantered for a bit before Rui was called.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier, your scheduled fight is soon to commence." The staff member informed.  
"Please wait at the assigned ring."

"Sure thing." Rui nodded. "Alright, bye."

"Good luck." Kane wished him.

Soon, it was time for the match.

Rui had been waiting for this for a long time. Nel got up on the ring, with a wild grin and a savage aura to boot, staring hard at Rui.

"You're strong." He grinned. "I'm strong too. This is gonna be great!"

Rui smirked. He couldn't agree more.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Rui interjected.

"Hm?" He tilted his head.

"In this entire contest, you didn't use a single Apprentice-level technique. Understandable, since it's only been two months since you discovered your Martial Path..." He paused, before continuing. "But even if you don't have any Apprentice-level techniques... Why aren't you using exploration-stage techniques?"

This was something Rui had been curious about for quite some time. Nel clearly broke through to the Apprentice Realm, which meant he undoubtedly passed through the exploration Stage. Why wasn't he using any of the Exploration-stage techniques?

Although these techniques weren't as good as Apprentice-level techniques, they were still better than fighting without techniques.

Rui remembered that until he mastered his first few Apprentice-level techniques, he used exploration-stage techniques as well.

He glanced at Nel with great curiosity.

"Ah..." Nel scratched his head.

He then met Rui's gaze and said with a perfectly sincere voice;

"I discovered my Martial Path without them."

Chapter 223: All Hell

"..."

"..."

Rui stared at him.

Nel stared back at him.

"You... what?"

"Broke through without em."

"No, surely..."

"Nope."

Rui tilted his head with incredulous confusion.

Broke through to Martial Apprentice without learning a single technique? What sort of nonsense was that?

Rui wasn't even sure what to say to that.

He wasn't even sure he believed him.

Was he lying to get Rui to lower his guard so he could later unveil them?

Looking at his sincere clueless expression, Rui shook his head, this guy was serious.

But wasn't that even more absurd?

"You... What is your Martial Path?"

"Take your stances." The supervisor had arrived, and quickly told them to be ready.

"Heh." Nel chuckled as he crouched, letting his arms dangle freely.

"My Martial Path is to beat everyone up using my body alone." He declared, his aura growing more feral by the second.

"..."

Rui's eyes flew wide open at those words.

For the very first time, he had run into someone with a Martial Path even more obtuse than his own!

"Take your stance." The supervisor insisted to Rui.

"I see..." Rui ignored him, staring straight at Nel with a boundless fascination and excitement.

He just couldn't wait!

"...My Martial Path is to beat everyone up with my VOID alone."

Rui adopted a neutral all-rounder stance, dividing his weight perfectly, positioning his arms and legs to be equally conducive to offense, defense and maneuvering.

"Fuuu..." He exhaled.

His mind went blank.

There was nothing.

And slowly...

He focused.

Gathering the vast mental energy his mind had bloomed across two lives.

He focused.

Gathering every ounce of physical energy his body could muster.

Nel grinned in amazement despite the weight.

He felt immense amounts of pressure from Rui's sheer focus. It grew by the second, pouring onto him from a boundless abyss. It was almost suffocating.

Just how strong was he?

Nel wanted to know.

"Let's see whose Martial Path is stronger void boy!" He grinned as the savage weight of an apex predator oozed out of every cell in his body.

The maelstrom of mental pressure the two boys generated burdened every onlooker.

Yet, no one could look away.

Not a single person could draw their eyes away.

"B-Begin!" the supervisor commenced the match.

RUMBLE

The sheer force with which Nel had launched himself sent tremors across the ring!

"RYAH!" He snarled as he launched a wild haymaker.

WHOOSH

The powerful swing crashed into a feint, hitting empty air.

BAM!

Rui threw a powerful kick at his ribs from the side, but Nel simply blocked it, pushing the strike away.

POW POW POW

He threw a series of swift jabs. Rui leapt back, having calmly mitigated the strikes with Inner Divergence, Elastic Shift and Acute Edge.

As strong as Nel was, even he couldn't overcome the combination of two mid-grade defensive techniques as well as one high-grade defensive technique with ordinary jabs alone.

He grinned.

So what if ordinary jabs didn't work?

Nel was capable of much more!

WHOOSH

He burst forth with shocking explosive speed, launching a flying kick.

BAM

Rui grimaced as he bruised his arm visibly despite his defensive techniques.

He had long suspected it, but only now had he confirmed that he could not take too many of Nel's more charged attacks.

He launched another loaded strike.

But Rui wasn't going to try and tank it this time.

WHOOSH

Rui cleanly avoided it with a feint. He used Balanced Direction and Parallel Walk, to circle around him.

BAM BAM BAM

He launched a flurry of attacks!

Each strike was powered with Outer Convergence and Vital Pressure.

Yet, it was not enough.

It collided against Nel's guard. His reflexes were too quick to allow Rui to land a clean strike on a vital, and when defended, his defense was too solid.

"Tsk." Rui retreated.

('As expected, ordinary attacks aren't doing the trick.') He verified.

WHOOSH

He avoided a kick cleanly with the help of Primordial Instinct, stepping back to open up some distance between them



Or so everyone thought.

Yet, when Nel charged at him with a punch, Rui charged right back with an attack.

BOOM!!

Their clash shook the earth!

Everyone gaped at the sheer display of raw power.

Nel had launched his most weighted strike, while Rui had charged up his momentum to the max with Balanced Direction and Parallel Walk, and launched a Flowing Canon attack amplified with Outer Convergence and Vital Pressure.

Yet Nel's fist hadn't backed down!

He matched the power of five Apprentice-level techniques with his sheer physique!

The boys furiously fought.

Fists were exchanged.

Kicks were dodged.

Attacks were endured.

And defenses were sieged!

Rui knew his average offense, defense and speed were lower than Nel's. A symmetric battle was not in his favour.

He switched things up with Phantom Step and Primordial Instinct

These allowed him to avoid more strikes than his speed did, and allowed him to land more attacks than his speed did.

But, even then.

It wasn't enough.

Slowly.

Step-by-step.

Nay, perhaps inch-by-inch.

Nel gained the advantage.

"HAHAHA!" He guffawed with ecstasy. "IS THIS THE BEST YOUR 'VOID' CAN DO?!"

BAM!

Nel gasped, choking as a powerful impact landed on his throat.

He couldn't even breathe for a moment.

BAM!

He barely managed to guard as a sharp sense of danger caused him to leap a great distance away.

But it was too late.

FLICK

The Stinger found its mark.

However, Rui had still underestimated Nel's instincts, he managed to avoid it at the right moment, preventing the Stinger from turning lethal, reducing it to a superficial flesh wound.

"Oh..." Rui sighed disappointedly. "So close."

He quickly took his stance once more.

"No matter..." His unyielding concentration fixated on Nel.

His dark eyes widened.

They were pitch black.

As if they sucked the very light out of this world.

All anyone could see in them was eternal darkness.

They saw the void...

And the VOID

And they trembled.

"...I'll get you this time." Rui whispered.

WHOOSH

He sped away to finish the job.

BAM

A powerful impact landed on him!

Rui grimaced as he leapt back.

"What was that you said?" Nel tilted his head with wide feral eyes. "'Get me next time?'"

A surge of ferocity blasted out from his body. "I'm right here."

For a moment, their eyes collided.

And the very next?

All hell broke loose.

Chapter 224: What Was He Thinking?

BAM!!

The ground rumbled as Rui's Flowing Canon struck Nel's weighted haymaker.

BAM

A combination of Blink and Phantom Step allowed Rui to barely get in a speedy jab.

The two unleashed avalanches of attacks. Rui abused almost all of his techniques to their very limit to keep up with Nel.

The ferocity escalated!

They lashed out at each other.

Nel's senses and senses were so sharp that combos of Blink and Phantom Step that would normally be game-enders against almost anybody were reduced to defense bypassers

But Nel was able to handle even that to a certain extent. Blink was only partially effective because he was capable of fighting via his other senses alone, however not as well, and his mind still relied on vision the most.

Phantom Step allowed Rui to confuse him even further, allowing Rui to land in jabs.

The problem was, landing kicks were much harder because they were easier to identify than jabs, and were slower than jabs. This is why Rui had trouble landing the Stinger. It was quite problematic because the combination of Stinger landed with the help of Blink and Phantom Step was easily Rui's greatest trump card attack. But against Nel, this trump card unable to end the fight.

This technique-combo was not compatible with Nel, Rui had come to belatedly realize.

Still, Rui had one last trick up his sleeve that he hadn't used yet.

BOOM!

A powerful impact landed on Nel's body, launching him away.

He glanced up, looking at Rui with a hint of surprise.

Up until now, Rui had only managed to land strikes with his tricky feints.

But this time, Rui just straightforwardly landed a clean strike!

What had changed?

Something had changed.

He felt a faint hint of danger evolving from Rui.

"...It took me a while." Rui exhaled. "But it's ready."

Rui's stance shifted, flowing from his neutral stance to an offensive and maneuvering stance. He brought his legs closer to his center of gravity and positioned his arms to land strikes more easily.

It was time.

WHOOSH

Rui leapt at Nel, launching a powerful Flowing Canon.

BOOM!

Nel guarded, using all of his body to aid in defense before launching a flurry of weighted haymakers at Rui.

WHOOSH

Rui dodged all of them.

POW

He landed a jab on Nel's abdomen, yet again cleanly landing strikes on him without even using feints.

"RYAAH!" Nel launched an incredibly swift kick at Rui.

WHOOSH

It crashed into a feint, much to his chagrin

POW POW POW

Rui surprising managed to land three clean jabs to the solar plexus.

WHOOSH

POW

A jab to the nose dodging a haymaker from Nel.

WHOOSH

BAM

Landed a low kick after avoiding a charge.

As this continued, the onlookers realized something!

The tides of the battles were turning!

Rui had been on a losing end initially, barely coping with blinked feints, but now he was landing more strikes than he was taking.

"It's kicked in." Kane grinned.

"What has?" Fae asked.

"His adaptive evolution thingy."

"Doesn't he do that from start?"

"He said it's harder against all-rounders." Kane shrugged. "Maybe that's why."

This was true, all-rounders had no pronounced weakness or shortcoming, although they didn't have pronounced strengths either. This made it harder for the VOID algorithm to adapt.

However, there was another variable than was unique to this battle.

One of the VOID algorithm's biggest shortcomings were that it was less equipped to handle the super Martial Art techniques that were ubiquitous. This is why Rui was unable to make use of several aspects of the original VOID algorithm, and several were obsolete on Gaea.



However...

What if his opponent was not using any techniques?

What if one of the main the reasons the VOID algorithm was less effective was gone?

The answer was obvious.

BAM BAM BAM

Rui cleanly landed a powerful combo on Nel's face.

Rui grinned with ecstasy. For the first time in a very, very long time, he was able to use a much significant portion of the VOID algorithm against in a fight!

WHOOSH

BAM BAM BAM!

Despite being a truly deviant monster among Martial Artists, his fundamental fighting structure was closest to what the VOID algorithm was originally built for!

WHOOSH!

BAM!

Nel hadn't even landed a single strike in over a minute. The only reason he was still contending was because asides from Flowing Canon, none of Rui's punches or kicks were hurting Nel all too much. His constitution was truly remarkable. Only when Rui managed strike his throat and other vulnerable places was he able to damage Nel with his normal strikes.

To the audience it seemed like Rui was dominating, but Rui knew that his simply wasn't the case.

Unlike with Kane, Rui couldn't afford to peacefully conserve his stamina walking around. He needed to push his energy reserves to the absolute limit if he wanted just to fight against Nel.

In the long run, he would grow tired before he took Nel down.

The only way he could inflict critical damage was through the Stinger, but he had already attempted this. Nel's natural danger sense and instinct was close to as good as Primordial Instinct and his senses were able to pierce the veil of Kane's Void Step technique, even if very slightly.

Landing the Stinger, especially when Nel knew about it, was not easy.

But there wasn't any other way to win.

POW

Rui's fist slammed into his abdomen, but Nel just barely jerked.

"WEAK!" He shouted swinging another powerful haymaker.

WHOOSH

Rui calmly dodged it.

He needed to make a decision soon, his power and speed would slowly start decreasing from this point forth, Helical Breathing was far from omnipotent.

Rui wasn't sure how to go about it, but his likeliest win condition would be a lethal Stinger. The second-best win condition was a ring-out.

"Hmmm." Rui's eyes narrowed as a third idea popped into his head.

He grinned. "Why not?"

Suddenly, he launched the Stinger at Nel.

WHOOSH

It missed, Nel simply evaded the technique cleanly, incredibly cautious of it.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

To everyone's surprise, Rui simply began spamming Nel with failed Stinger attempts.

Chapter 225: What a World

Everyone was confused.

Why was Rui launching Stingers so unreservedly?

Furthermore, why was he launching them when they all failed to land time and time again?

Nel was incredibly focused on avoiding each of them too.

He stared at Rui's toe every time there was even the slightest hint of the attack. Every ounce of his focus was dedicated to avoiding the Stinger, this was Rui's most lethal attack. As long as this could be avoided, Nel was quite confident he would in the long run.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

Nel easily avoided the swift attacks.

POW POW

He even managed to land in some attacks as he dodged them.

Yet Rui didn't cease.

Every single person could sense he was extremely difficult to land the Stinger.

"He sure is betting everything on that technique." Fae mused.

Kane frowned.

He vaguely sensed something was off. Rui should have known that landing a lethal Stinger when Nel was paying full attention to it was impossible.

Nel was much faster and had incredibly sharp reflexes, senses and instincts. Furthermore, the Stinger was not a particular quick attack like speed jabs were.

As an evasive maneuverer, Kane could sense that the odds of the technique successfully landing were low. Even when Rui caught him very off-guard by exposing his Blink technique to him for the first time, he had only managed to get a surface wound, since then the effectivity of Blink had reduced as a trump card once Nel was aware of it.

Kane didn't understand what Rui was trying to do here.

WHOOSH

BAM

Nel avoided the Stinger while landing his own strike, still mindful of Rui's toe.

WHOOSH

POW

....

WHOOSH

POW POW POW

Everyone frowned as Rui ceded more and more space, reeling from Nel's impacts. He was previously using Phantom Step and Blink to avoid attacks, but for some reason he was simply tanking Nel's attacks, getting pushed back a result.

"HAHAHA." Nel guffawed as he eyed Rui's Stinger sharply, avoiding it. "I'MMA SEND YOU FLYING OUT."

BAM!

He managed to send Rui skidding away.

One meter away from the edge of the ring.

A hint of desperation flashed across Rui's face.

But Nel had arrived, Rui charged at him furiously.

The atmosphere contracted.

The sheer pressure from the concentration of the two boys wrung the very air!

This was the climax!

Rui launched the Stinger with Blink and Phantom Step one last time!

He drew every ounce of speed and power.

Every muscle.

Every cell.

They roared!

They roared, pushing forward.

Pushing forward towards victory.

And yet.

WHOOSH

...

Nel grinned.

He grinned like a madman.

He grinned, his body tilted as he watched the Stinger just fly past him.

Close.

Close!

Yet, far.

Too far.

It was in vain.

The attack had missed.

Nel narrowly dodged it, having focused all his attention into avoiding it.

Not even the mighty prowess of the Blink and Phantom Step could reach Nel

It was over.

Rui was at the edge, standing on one leg as Nel charged at him with immense momentum.

A ring-out was almost inevitable.

Despair, was inevitable.

BAM!

!!!

A powerful Flowing Canon impact landed cleanly on Nel's jaw from the far left, rocking his head wildly.

He staggered back, shocked!

Where had it come from?

Everybody was shocked.

Where did the attack come from?

The answer was simple.

It came from Rui. It was a simple Flowing Canon attack.

Nel simply failed to see it.

The attack soared past his awareness, striking his jaw from the left.

But why?

Why did Nel fail to perceive such a clear attack?

No one knew.



No one moved.

They simple bore witness.

The attack shook his brain. Nel was durable, but not even he could completely withstand the power of five Apprentice-level techniques crashing into his jaw unguarded and unprepared.

And yet.

He stood.

His brain shook.

Yet, he stood.

His vision blurred.

And yet. He. Stood.

He would not go down so easily!

He would win!

And yet...

Just as he charged forward.

PEW!

...

DRIP DRIP

"Huh...?" Nel murmured.

A sharp pain shot up from his neck as blood spurged out.

The Stinger had soared through the air once more, landing into his neck!

In his disarrayed state, the bridge had finally been gapped.

The Stinger reached Nel.

Rui... reached Nel.

"It's over..." Rui whispered.

BANG

The third unguarded strike to the jaw.

Brains weren't meant to be tanks.

Turned out, this applied to Nel as well.

THUD

He collapsed to the ground as his brain shut down due to blunt force trauma.

He was down.

Unmoving.

And he stayed that way.

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

Rui fell to his knees, exhausted.

He glanced at Nel.

His plan had paid out.

But just barely.

('That was close...') He smiled bitterly as he thought back to his plan.

Inattentive Blindness Syndrome and psychological inertia.

The former was a psychological syndrome that was well-documented in field of psychological cognitive studies on Earth. It was the tendency of the brain's attention to be focused on one phenomenon causing the mind to be significantly less attentive of surrounding phenomenon.

The latter was a psychological phenomenon of the mind to continue with already established psychological patterns.

Rui had drawn Nel's attention to his toe because of the Stinger time and time again. Nel's attention had gradually grown more and more fixated on his toe as the Stinger was spammed increasingly.

Furthermore, when Rui got pushed to the edge of the ring, his attention was further consumed by his own ring-out attack.

The Inattentive Blindness Syndrome had caused Nel to be much less aware of his surroundings, far more than was normal.

This tendency continued thanks to psychological inertia.

When Rui launched the Flowing Canon immediately after the Stinger, he launched it from the far right.

Nel barely dodged.

At that very moment, almost the entirety of his awareness and focus was on the Stinger.

It was then.

It was then that Rui launched a modest Flowing Canon from the far left, the exact opposite direction.

A simple follow-up attack.

Yet, the deadliest of them all.

It soared unhindered as the Inattentive Blindness Syndrome opened up a clean path forward.

It crashed into Nel's jaw, rocking his brain, stunning him for a few precious moments.

But this was enough.

It was now or never.

Rui had chosen now.

He had generated so much power he could feel his blood vessels almost bursting. Launching the attack least likely to be detected according to the VOID algorithm.

If this had failed, it would have been over.

But it hadn't.

"To think that research paper I published so long ago would end up saving the day." He laughed weakly.

The very first research paper he published in the field of combat sports was a modest amateurish research paper that aimed to demonstrate the positive correlation between higher knock-out success rates and the presence of the Inattentive Blindness Syndrome.

Almost fifty years later, this modest research paper had gone on to become the foundation of victory in his fight against Nel.

Who else could ever have the privilege to make such a statement?

"What a world..."

What a world indeed.

Chapter 226: Suspense

Rui was exhausted.

Truly exhausted.

He glanced at Nel, who was already being treated by the medical staff on site. His blood loss was immense, Rui had struck the carotid artery in advertently.

He quickly got off the ring after having consumed a rejuvenation and healing potion.

"That was an insane fight." Kane grinned.

"Congratulations Rui." Fae said. "That was incredibly close."

They all congratulated him before getting to the elephant in the room.

"How did you land that last Flowing Canon?" Fae asked curiously, it was one of the many offensive techniques she had mastered and thus she had recognized it immediately.

"I was wondering the same thing too." Kane nodded. He was already familiar with Nel's incredible speed and reflexes. He was quite curious too.

"Just some psychological tricks." Rui smiled. "I distracted him with the Stinger so that his reactions to other attacks would be much lower. And then I just to find the perfect timing and placement of the Flowing Canon with my adaptive evolution."

"Was it really that simple?" Kane scratched his head. "To think that's how you managed to create such a huge turn around."

Rui shrugged. "It was that simple. The human mind is more flawed than you we tend to think of it. As long as you learn how to exploit these flaws, you can do things that would normally be impossible."

This was something he sincerely believed. Research in neuroscience and psychology had shown that the human brain and mind were filled with a myriad of flaws and shortcomings, many of the elements of the VOID algorithm were derived from and centered around these phenomena.

Of course, several of these elements were also in effective on Gaea against Martial Artists and beasts because they were too different from baseline human. Which was, of course, one of the many reasons the VOID algorithm needed updating and upgrading.

They bantered for a bit, before a staff member interrupted them.

"Apprentice Fae Dullahan? Your scheduled match is soon to commence." He said. "Please be sure to wait by the assigned ring."

Fae nodded, turning to her friends. "I'll see you guys after."

She left for her match after being bade good luck.

"She's fighting Hever, right?" Kane scratched his head.

"Yeah."

Rui was interested in the outcome of that fight. He suspected there were too possibilities. If Fae's firepower was within the limit of capability of the Meteor Swing technique, then Fae was guaranteed to lose.

However, if her power exceeded the limits of the technique's capabilities, then she was certainly primed to win.

As for which scenario was the actual case of the matter, Rui was unable to gauge it. She had immense raw power however Meteor Swing was a grade nine as far as potency and difficulty went, furthermore Hever had mastered it to a high degree.

It was quite likely that her regular strikes would not be able to overwhelm him.

However, that was for her regular strikes alone.

He couldn't necessarily say the same for her peak power. Her peak power would probably be using Whirlpool in addition all the power striking power techniques she had mastered, such as Flowing Canon. The power of that strike would be on a whole other level.

As far as her peak power went, it must have be on another level.

Normally, she would likely only be able to exert such power momentarily and in some situations, and in many cases her opponents wouldn't let her build up the power to launch the very best of her best.

However, this condition was not necessarily true with Hever.

Hever had no voluntary capabilities. He had no maneuvering techniques and offensive technique he could pressure Fae with, his fighting style gave all the initiative to his opponent.

Meaning Hever was probably the only person she could take her time to land her most powerful strike against.

This was why Rui was unclear and quite curious about the outcome of the fight.

Eventually, they reached the ring.

Fae and Hever were already facing each other.

"It's about to start." Rui said excitedly, gazing at the two of them in anticipation.

"Out of all the people in the Academy..." Hever said to Fae. "I have looked forward to fighting you more than anybody else."

"My." Fae raised an eyebrow. "You flatter me."



"No, I don't." Hever calmly stated. "You are the only Martial Apprentice in the Academy who could show me the limits of my techniques, even when facing it at its strongest."

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

"Come..." hever took his modest stance. "Let us not waste time. Show me the peak of what you can achieve."

His concentration was as imposing as a mountain.

"Let me see whether your peak exceeds mine."

"...Alright then." Fae replied as she took her stance. "This was my intention from the very start."

Hever didn't reply.

There was nothing more he had left to say.

"Begin!"

For once, Fae didn't lash out at her opponent, swiftly pummeling them with her incredible power.

Instead, she walked to the opposite end of the ring, standing at the edge. Facing Hever, she closed her eyes, exhaling.

She slowly moved in her stance, matching her movements with her inhalation.

She focused as boundless power erupted from deep within her.

Her muscles stiffened, growing more and more taut by the second. They turned from tissue into bundles of steel brimming with power.

She opened her eyes.

Rui shivered as Primordial Instinct screeched at him about the incoming danger Fae was about to unleash.

The outcome of the fight was likely going to be decided by a single strike. If she failed, it meant she wouldn't ever be able to bypass Meteor Swing, if she succeeded, the match would end right there.

And it was then.

BOOM!

RUMBLE

The very force she struck the ground with reverberated across the facility!

She flew at Hever with rocketing momentum.

And the moment had come.

BANG

Just the shockwave generated by sheer force shoved against Rui, shocking him!

Her palm propelled forward.

BOOM!!!

What happened, happened so quickly Rui was unable to even ascertain the outcome!

Chapter 227: Interested

Fae's palm rotated ferociously as it pummeled forward, the sheer torque she generated with the Whirlpool create a mini-tornado around her attack!

The moment her attack entered Hever's interception range, his hands lashed out in muscle memory, claspng her arm.

This was the deciding moment.

CLASP

"Hrng!" Hever gritted his teeth as he felt unbelievable force, pushing against him. The attack threatened to twist him along with it if he wasn't careful. He exerted every ounce of his grip strength to maintain hold of it.

And yet;

BOOM!!

('Shit-')

The attack slammed into his gut, churning his flesh.

The rotational force increased the amount of time he needed to successfully intercept, redirect and swing her.

He wasn't able to adjust the trajectory quick enough.

Fae's power in that moment had reached close to the limit a Martial Apprentice could achieve. Not a single person could remain calm in the face of such a display.

DRIP DRIP

"Huff... huff..." Hever exhaled as he ignored the flesh wound the Whirlpool had inflicted on him.

Fae simply watched him.

The match was as good as decided.

"What are you waiting for?" Hever calmly asked as he took his stance. "The fight isn't over until the supervisor declares it over. Come, I still stand."

The solemnness of his unwillingness to admit defeat, no matter, what earned the admiration of the spectators as well as his opponent.

"You're correct." Fae took her stance. "It appears I was the one lacking."

What ensued was a long series of devastating blows, until eventually Hever collapsed.

"Winner; Apprentice Fae Dullahan." The supervisor declared.

The match earned a loud round of applause as both fighters shook hands.

"What a great fight." Rui told Fae as soon as they met up. "Good job, both of you." He said, turning to Hever.

"Thank you." Hever calmly replied, having joined them.

They all conversed as they talked about the fight, the matchups, the preliminary contest. As among the best of Martial Apprentices of their generation in the Academy, they had much to talk about.

"Only one more day." Fae huffed. "Even if I win my next match, my chances are all but over unfortunately."

"The same is true for me." Hever agreed. "Furthermore, your next match is not going to be easy to win."

"Indeed." Fae said, as she glanced at Nel, who was walking towards them after having been fully healed. Blood loss was a bit more complicated to heal and not something that happened quickly, not with low-grade potions.

"Nel." Rui addressed. "How are you?"

"Good." Nel shrugged, before throwing a competitive grin at Rui. "Next time I won't lose."

Rui smiled wordlessly.

Nel turned, grinning at Hever. "Hehe, you lost to palm girl. Don't worry, I'll avenge you tomorrow."

Hever and Fae simply stared at him as he laughed to himself.

"It's been a long time." Nel said, facing Fae with a mischievous grin. "You refused to fight me back then. because I wasn't an Apprentice back then. Well... I am now."

"And we'll be fighting tomorrow." Fae smiled wryly.

"I am interested in the outcome of that fight." Hever remarked. "However, the main act of the show tomorrow is surely..."

He glanced at Rui and Kane wordlessly.

Rui was ranked number one and Kane was ranked number two. They had the two highest scores and were scheduled to fight tomorrow.

Their fight would decide the outcome of the preliminary contest.

Whoever won would go on to become the representative of the Hajin branch of the Martial Academy.

One would expect to see restrained tension between them.

Yet where it was supposed to be, there was none.

The two interacted along with each other as if there was nothing to be said regarding the matter.

Unbeknownst to him, the two had already long come to an agreement on the issue.

There was nothing more that needed to be said.

Rui shrugged at his remark. "Personally, I'm quite interested in their fight as well." He said gesturing to Nel and Fae.

This wasn't a lie.

Two years ago, they had fought each other in the Martial Entrance Exam, securing first and second in the third round of the Martial Entrance Exam. However, their battle never reached a conclusion in the end. Rui had always wondered who would have won if they got fight till the very end.

Now, he would get to witness both of them going all out. Even if their chances of becoming representative were zero, they would not hold back and go all-out nonetheless.

This was another matchup Rui wasn't entirely sure about.

There wasn't an obvious compatibility advantage either side had. Fae definitely had much more offensive power than Nel did. Than anybody else did. Her speed and defense were quite respectable too.

On the other hand, Nel was much faster, more agile and more durable than she was.

Considering their personalities, temperaments and fighting styles the fight was likely to turn into a slugfest. This was the norm for both of them, and he didn't think either one of them would deviate from this established pattern.

If so, the fight would boil down to who was able inflict more damage to the other quicker.

Nel was an absolute beast that could launch extremely powerful attacks extremely quickly. The sheer rate at which he could inflict damage was extremely. In a head-on slugfest, there were very few that were in the same league as him.

Fae was one of them.

Every time he thought about her explosive palms, he found it difficult to bet against them. Especially when he thought about her Whirlpool attack. She had elevated her pinnacle lethal power to a much higher realm than Nel did.

However, Nel's defensive and evasive measure were far greater than Fae's.

Rui shook his head. He could go round and round about the matter with endless analysis and conjecture.

In the end, he would find out. The fight would unfold and outcome would tell him what he wanted to know.

## Chapter 228: Clash

"Who do you think is gonna win?" Rui asked.

Kane shrugged. "They're both freaks."

"You're one to talk." Rui grumbled.

"Fae will win." Milliana confidently added.

"I found Fae to be much harder to fight." Dalen said.

"As did I." Hever calmly added.

"Hmmm..." Rui turned. He didn't necessarily think that meant Fae was stronger than Nel.

Fae possessed a pretty decent compatibility advantage against both Dalen and Hever. Against Hever, although her regular attacks were incompatible and disadvantaged against him, her trump cards were perfectly suited to taking him down. His passive and counter-offensive fighting style were both perfect for her to leverage her trump card.

Dalen on the other hand was a defensive fighter, he had no choice but to tank Fae's attacks. Her offense inflicted most damage on his defense than his offense did against her. It was a completely symmetric battle where she had a strong advantage compared to someone like Nel, who's offense Dalen could likely endure longer.

Up on the ring, the fight was soon to commence.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

"Hehe..." Nel grinned. "Today's the day we decide who the stronger one is."



"Indeed." Fae took her stance. She tucked her right palm upside-down at her waist, coiled like a viper waiting to lash out. Her left palm faced Nel as she crouched.

Almost every single onlooking Martial Apprentice sweated inwardly at that sight as unpleasant memories welled up. At this stage, almost all of them had fought Fae, with Nel being her final opponent, and all of them had faced her fearsome offense.

Nel's grin grew wider and feral. He crouched, letting his arms dangle freely.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the match.

BOOM!

The two of them leapt at each other with unadulterated ferocity!

They unleashed a maelstrom of explosive blows.

BOOM!!!

RUMBLE

Their clashes shook the very ground as an unprecedented amount of power was unleashed!

"Hm?" Rui's eyes flew wide open in shock as the heavy seismic vibrations rocked him, resembling an earthquake threatening to disrupt his balance!

Every single one of their attacks blasted through the air with explosive momentum. The unyielding blasts of wind shoved against the Martial Apprentice wave after wave. Even breathing was starting to take more effort!

Every single Martial Apprentice gaped with unfiltered shock. Not a single one of them was unperturbed.

The absurd power that the two were outputting was too unnerving. One could scarcely believe that Martial Apprentices were capable of such offensive prowess.

Fae launched few attacks, yet every single attack was immensely charged. While Nel had much less striking power but threw more attacks.

The Martial Apprentices spectating this fight braced their seatbelts in excitement, enjoying an amazing display of power.

Yet, the balance had already begun to shift.

BAM!

Nel propped up a double-armed guard as Fae's palm thrust crashed into it.

BAM BAM BAM!

Fae relentlessly threw a flurry of attacks as Nel was pushed back into a defensive position. Even with his rock solid defense, a number of bruises had begun accumulating on his arms.

Everyone stirred at that sight!

Fae was starting to dominate the slugfest!

Nel's pure offensive and defensive prowess as failed against Fae's unparalleled power on-by-one!

The meaning of this was undoubtedly clear.

Fae was the unparalleled strongest in a head-on striking contest!

BOOM!

A powerful impact pushed Nel away. He leapt back, disengaging.

"Hahaha..." He laughed. "I lost the punching battle. No one's ever beaten me and pushed me back head-on before!"

Fae remained silent as she charged at him, not intending on giving him time.

"I may have lost the battle..." He said as his grin grew more severe. "But I won't lose the war."

Fae's attack charged at him just in time.

WHOOSH

Only to strike empty air.

Nel cleanly dodged as landed clean strike on her abdomen through a hole in her stance.

The two began exchanging strike again. However, there was something different.

Nel began employing his remarkable speed not just offensively but also defensively.

"That's a sharp change from before." Dalen frowned.

"His evasive maneuvering is sharp." Kane noted

"He's given up on trying to outstrike her head-on." Rui mused. "There was no way in which he could best her anyway. In that regard, I wouldn't be surprised if she was the strongest in our entire generation frankly."

"I would." Hever said.

Rui raised his eyebrow at that statement. Hever should have a very thorough understanding as a counter-offensive specialist strong Fae was. Why would he be surprised at that statement?

"Ah..." Kane realized what Hever meant. "Yeah, true I guess."

Rui scrunched his face in confusion. "What do you guys mean?"

They exchanged meaningful glances.

"Not much." Kane said. "Just that it's hard to take the title of best of anything in our generation. Not as long as Fiona Roschem is part of it."

Rui's eyes sharpened at that name. He had heard that name before. Fae herself had mentioned her as well.

Fiona Roschem. The strongest.

The three of the strongest Martial Apprentices he knew had mentioned her name, and her prowess.

Rui turned back, facing Fae.

Every single strike was stronger than his strongest Flowing Canon.

If he had to fight Fae without his evasive tactics and the VOID algorithm, how long would he last?

('Maybe a minute, if I'm lucky.') Rui mused. Even if he did managed not get knocked out in that time or lesser, he would certainly be a mangled mess at the end of the ordeal.

Yet, despite this, she was not the strongest?

Furthermore, Fiona was supposed to be an all-rounder. Just how abysmally strong was she to be able match or surpass Fae in offensive striking despite being an all-rounder?

What kind of a monster was she?

Rui shook his head, putting asides such thoughts. He would find out eventually, if he won. For now, he turned his attention to the ongoing fight.

Nel and Fae were caught in an intense clash, however, Fae was no longer dominating, Nel had become remarkably harder to deal with now that he dodged a large proportion of her attacks.

Chapter 229: No Second Chances

WHOOSH

BAM!

Nel swerved out of a palm attack, as he launched wild haymaker at Fae. She grimaced, proceeding to launch a flurry of attacks.

WHOOSH WHOOSH POW

Out of three, only one found its mark.

Although Nel didn't have the effective feints of the Phantom Step technique, he did have his immense speed and agility. He was much faster than Fae without a doubt.

POW POW POW

Suddenly Fae managed to land three hits square.

"She sacrificed power for speed." Rui nodded, having expected this. This was a common tactic she employed against slippery opponents. She'd used it against himself and Kane as well.

Powerful weighted attacks usually needed greater distance to be accelerated over, they were more obvious and were easier to detect and predict, all of these factors made them easier to avoid. Speedy jabs however usually travelled a much shorter distance, they were much harder to detect and predict.

"Why isn't she using that lethal attack she used against you and Hever?" Dalen frowned.

"Probably because she can't really land it." Rui replied. "That attack isn't easy to land and is easy to detect because how much she needs to twist and curl her arm. It also takes longer to land than her other palm attacks. Although she is able to land these speedy jabs, that doesn't mean she can land her Whirlpool palm."

He paused, turning to face the fight, before continuing. "Though if she does land it...."

She would gain a very decisive advantage. The lethality of that attack far surpassed the lethality of Nel's offense. This was the downside of his Martial Path, he couldn't use any techniques that would increase the lethality of his attacks beyond what his body could normally offer.

The question was how was she going to accomplish this?

The situation was quite similar to Rui's fight with Nel. He needed to land the Stinger as well. Eventually, he managed to land it cleanly with a long and elaborate strategy as well as several techniques, the VOID algorithm and most significantly; some psychological tricks.

Fae would likely be unable to replicate Rui's methods.

She lacked far too many things. She lacked the techniques he needed for the strategy to succeed; The Phantom Step technique and the Blink. She certainly lacked the VOID algorithm.

And sacrificing false modesty, Rui knew she lacked his cognitive capabilities by virtue of not having a double-reincarnated mind.

WHOOSH

POW POW POW

Nel cleanly avoided a palm thrust, smoothly throwing three jabs at her. He had begun to get the hang of using his evasiveness against her. This was not something he was accustomed to, in the entire preliminary contest, Fae was the only one who had forced him to back down and fight evasively pretty much entirely.

Even Rui only managed that by spamming the Stinger, which would have been foolish and reckless if not for his resourceful tactic.

He launched a weighted strike at her.

BAM!

To his surprise, she didn't defend against it.

BAM!!

A powerful weighted blow landed on him, pushing him back.

She abandoned her defense, ignoring the damage he caused in exchange for landing an even stronger attack on him.

"That's a good strategy." Rui nodded in approval. "Frankly, she's not getting anywhere even with her speedy jabs. She decided to gamble and go all-in. She tossed aside her defense and dedicated everything to offense."

"Would that really help all that much?" Kane wondered.

"It certainly would." Dalen nodded. "Defense takes physical and mental capital. It restricts your movements, consumes your attention and energy. If you forget about it, you've removed yourself of a lot of shackles."

Rui nodded. "The downside is that you're going to be punished with damage."

Her conditioned had worsened already, each attack from Nel left a bruise on her fair skin, inflicting pain and damage on her unguarded abdomen.

WHOOSH

POW

Nel avoided a strike, landing haymaker on her.

WHOOSH

He ducked sharply as a palm attack almost crashed into him. Ever since she abandoned her defense and went all-out, dodging attacks had become much harder. He was only able to dodge half of them as the other half landed square on him.

POW POW



He leapt back after Fae smacked him twice, chasing after him immediately.

WHOOSH

He spun about a palm attack from her, infiltrating her stance.

However, Fae was prepared. Her right arm twisted and curled as she launched a Whirlpool attack straight at him.

Rui was impressed. She had waited for a moment when he was super close to her to launch her Whirlpool attack. It was only at this range could she possibly have had chance at landing her Whirlpool at him.

Her palm spun as it shot forward.

But.

Not before Nel's foot crashed into her jaw.

BAM!

Having abandoned defense for the most part, the unadulterated power of Nel rocked her head, disorienting her.

Nel didn't let the go of the opening!

BAM BAM BAM!

He threw a flurry of weighted strikes against her.

POW!

A wild haymaker crashed into her head.

The damage done in her already disoriented state was too much.

THUD

She collapsed.

It was over

"Winner: Apprentice Nel!" The supervisor declared, after verifying she was knocked out.

Rui shook his head melancholically. The fight truly could have gone either way. If Nel had gone for that kick just a moment later, or for another attack Fae would have successfully landed the Whirlpool attack in all likelihood.

Once she landed the attack, the match would have been over, Nel's condition would have deteriorated quickly, like Rui's had back then and within five minutes, his condition would have been too desolate to possibly defeat Fae.

Fae would have continued landing strikes, at an even greater rate than she had before thanks to his plummeting condition and eventually she would have pressed for a win and gone onto knock him out either by a palm strike or had him bleeding until he was unconscious.

But no.

There were no second chances.

## Chapter 230: Commence

"Shame." Rui shook his head. "But at the end of the day, it is what it is."

Nel met up with them once he got off the ring, grinning ecstatically. He was immediately bombarded with biddings of congratulations.

"Great fight." Rui told him.

"It was awesome." He grinned. "Wish we could fight more, but this thing ends today right?"

"Yeah." Rui said. "One way or another. But you can fight us even in the future."

"Hehe... I sure will." He said as he each of them. "All of you."

Soon, Fae joined them, after being healed up, with a dismayed expression.

"Why the long face?" Kane asked teasingly.

"Shut up." She glared at him.

"You came pretty close." Rui consoled her.

"Indeed." Hever agreed. "Just the slightest difference and the match could very well have gone down a different path."

"Yes, but it didn't go down that way." She sighed. "The fact that it went the way it did was mainly my fault. I still have many shortcomings to fill up before I can be satisfied with myself."

"Heh." Nel smirked. "We can fight again when you're satisfied. No, there is no need to wait that long, we can fight today again!"

Everyone ignored the battle maniac.

"On the bright side, dissatisfaction pushes you to grow stronger." Rui smiled. "You're probably more motivated than you would be if you'd won. It's the same with me too."

They all bantered for quite some time, shifting from place to place every time one of them had a match.

Rui's fight with Kane had been rescheduled to be the last match of the day due to 'logistical issues'. An excuse that Rui found to be total nonsense, of course. The Academy was overflowing with logistical support, the idea they would be unable to hold the Rui's match with Kane was just silly.

Headmaster Aronian was unilaterally the cause for this. Rui could almost picture the old man stroking his beard with a mischievous grin as he rescheduled their match to be the last for the sake of suspense, tension and entertainment.

Rui shook his head with resigned amusement. It wasn't particularly a big deal, so it didn't really matter when the match happened today as long as it did happen today.

And soon, it came.

"Apprentices Rui Quarrier and Kane Arrancar. Your final match is soon to commence, please be at the assigned ring." A staff member told them.

They nodded solemnly.

"Good luck to both of you." Fae wished.

"Looking forward to a good fight." Hever calmly told them.

"Fight hard." Nel instructed.

They left after accepting the well-wishes of their friends.

Rui didn't even need to look around.

Everybody was there.

Everybody.

The Squire instructors, the staff, every single Martial Apprentice, even the Explorer students had gathered to witness this momentous fight.

This fight would decide which of the two of them would represent all of them in one of the most prestigious Martial contests in the entire Martial Festival!

How could they not be there?

How could they not want to be there?

Their emotions trickled into the air, saturating the atmosphere.

Excitement. Uncertainty. Anticipation.

The very air tingled with the various emotions floating about. Even breathing it became harder, as everyone held their breaths as the two Martial Apprentices boarded the ring and faced each other.

They didn't say a word.

They didn't exchange well-wishes, or trash-talk.

They simply stared at each other.

Even though Kane's expression was neutral, Rui could see a meaningful look in his eyes.

A meaning that only he understood.

A meaning that only he was supposed to understand.

And understand, he did.

A silent pressure built-up.

The lack of emotion. The lack of aggression. The lack of exchange.

These did not ease the atmosphere.

No.

They hardened it.

The two of them weighed upon everyone else pushing down everything else. Even the Martial Squires weren't drawing attentions to themselves, they too had gathered to bear witness to this battle.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed. His voice cutting through the frozen taut atmosphere.

Kane began lightly hopping between his feet. A dynamic stance that allowed him to shift to max speed in any given direction as quickly as possible. His hands were loosely brought in front of him to abdominal height, allowing for speedy jabs.

A silent, sharp pressure could be felt when one looked at his eyes. Some even shivered.

In the past month, out of all the Martial Apprentices that had partaken in the preliminary contest, none had left a greater impact and impression on everybody than Kane Arrancar.

All of them had faced him.

And all of them had felt helpless against his perverse formidability. All of them distinctly remembered the experience of being relentlessly harassed and bullied by an invisible shadow, putting up futile and meaningless resistance.

How could anyone compete with that?

And yet.

"Fuuu..." Rui closed his eyes.

Black.

There was darkness.

There was a void.

And VOID.

Even when his eyes were closed, he could see his Martial Path. He could endlessly stare deep into its depths, deep into its void unfalteringly

He yearned to walk down its path every second.

Step by step.

Yes, step by step.

This fight was just that.

Another step.

His concentration trickled, gathering bit by bit.

His concentration sharpened.

His mind converged.

He was ready.

He opened his eyes, throwing a simple glance at Kane.

The simplest of gestures.

And yet.

Everyone's eyes widened.

They widened in shock as they felt boundless weight erupt from within him.

Even the Martial Squires raised an eyebrow, surprised.

Just how much depth did this young boy possess?



His pitch-black eyes greedily consumed the very light around them, seeing through everything, seeing through everyone. Those eyes made one feel as transparent as glass.

Kane's mouth cracked into an almost indiscernible smile.

Rui brought his guard up, as he centered his legs, crouching them.

It was a stance that emphasized defense, balance and stability.

He was ready. It was time.

The final battle was about to commence.