

Martial Unity 251

Chapter 251: No Matter What

"WOOOOAAH" An adolescent cooed in excitement.

"Look at them fight!" Another kid beside exclaimed.

"They're so cool!"

"I wanna be a Martial Artist too!"

"Alright alright." Julian chided. "Settle down for now."

He got them to calm down, before glancing back at the ongoing matchup in amazement. It wasn't that he had never seen a Martial Apprentice, he had Rui, and he had also worked with several Martial Apprentices in studies, surveys and experiments conducted by the Kandrian Institute of Sciences.

But he had never seen them in action going all out. Their performances were usually controlled and regulated for the sake of research.

This was truly the first time he had seen Martial Apprentices going all out. And the sight had left him speechless.

Furthermore, these Martial Artists were not ordinary run-of-the-mill Martial Apprentices he had interacted with in his time as an assistant scholar, they were the very best of their entire generation. They would likely go on to become the best of their Realm one day.

The sheer prowess the first six Martial Apprentice representatives had shown him had truly opened his eyes into the power of Martial Art.

"Big brother Julian." One of the adolescents called out. "When will Rui fight?"

"The fourth match is about to commence, which means he'll be fighting very soon." He replied. He inwardly grew tense. He had no idea how strong Rui was, he just hoped he would be fine holding his own in this group of monsters.

Somewhere else in the Martial Colosseum in the 1 st class seats of the Martial Colosseum.

"Man, this is more intense than I expected." Kane sighed. "I'm so glad I don't have to deal with this.

"They've all grown incomparably stronger than when I knew them." Fae remarked. "Especially Ian. Truth be told, I didn't think he was this strong. His talent as well as his age and the many years he's spent as a Martial Apprentice have led him to grow much stronger than I expected. Rui will have a an extraordinarily difficult time defeating him in the semi-finals, if he makes it that far."

"Indeed." Hever said. "Frankly, I would probably lose a majority of my fights against Ian Nepomaniachtchi. I wonder how Rui will fare against him."

"There's a chance he'll lose." Fae sighed.

Kane snorted. "Are you doubting him?"

"My, just being level-headed." Fae replied perfunctorily. "Besides, forget about the third round, he still has his first round to clear. His first opponent is not weak." Fae's eyes narrowed.

Kane nodded. "He would have been called a prodigy if he was just a little more talented than he is."

"I am rather interested in seeing how far Surman Marliak has come in the development of his niche Martial Art." Hever replied. "He will be formidable without a doubt."

The three of them had purchased 1 st class seats to be able to inspect the Martial Contest up close. With the wealth of their families, the cost of this luxury was nothing.

The fourth match was to begin soon.

"Aaaaand onto the next match we go!" The host announced. "In the fourth match, we have representative Surman Marliak and his Enchanting Willow Style representing the Verlain branch. A fearsome Martial Artist known as the Mindbender! Keep your eyes open for this fight folks!"

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause as Surman entered the arena of the Colosseum.

Surman was a nimble man in stature, there was nothing physically aesthetically threatening about him. Yet anybody who spent too long looking at him felt like they were going dizzy. His aura exuded a strange effect on people's minds.

"His opponent is representative Rui Quarrier of the Hajin branch." The commentator declared. "A dark-horse entry into the ranks of the representatives, how far will he go? How far will his Flowing Void Style go? Stick around to find out!"

Up in the first-class seats, Fae frowned. "Flowing Void Style? I didn't know he named it that. It's such an abstract name."

"It's perfect." Kane grinned. "I bet the name symbolized the fact that his Martial Art and fighting style lack a form, they're constantly and smoothly evolving and adapting to his opponent. It lacks an inherent fixed style or affinity for a style. Hence the Void."

Kane was incredibly confident his interpretation was quite accurate. His logic was quite sound indeed, after all.

Yet he was completely wrong.

In reality, Rui realized that there was no way he could incorporate the full-form of the VOID algorithm; the Variable Objective Inverse Deductive algorithm into the name so he used the phonetic word of the short form; Void and then used the Kandrian dialect version of the word Void instead.

Thus, came about the Flowing Void style.

Even before the commentator could finish, people had noticed Rui.

Not because he stepped out earlier, no.

Not at all.

The sheer mental pressure that radiated from the weight of his concentration alone drew eyes to him even before he made he was visible.

"Fuuu..." Rui exhaled as he appeared. His eyes were narrow and lock onto his opponent.

He saw nothing else.

The extended period of time he had invested into honing his focus had paid off. He was able to enter into a focused state of mind he had been cultivating rather easily and quickly.

And it reflected.

Surman Marliak eyebrow raised at the sight.

He had initially wondered if Rui was truly qualified to be among them.

Now any question about that matter had been put to rest. Rui's unadulterated focus on him was heavy. Surman had seldom experienced such pressure from a Martial Apprentice.

Just gazing into those black eyes that sucked in the light of the world greedily made him feel almost transparent.

Almost.

He was not a light man.

His mentality was backed by the confidence that came with true power, true success and having overcome true failure. He had come along way, he did not intend to stop now.

No matter what.

Chapter 252: Let Me Thank You

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Surman Marliak took a strange stance. He lifted his left leg, positioning his left foot at right knee. One arm was raised over his head while the other was raised towards Rui.

Rui wasn't sure what to make of this stance. It looked strange and silly, but the fact that Rui didn't understand the significance and reason for it simply meant his understanding of mental techniques was limited. He had tried to do some research, but he was limited.

In the face of the unknown, he simply chose a simple neutral stance while activating pushing his sensory techniques to their limit.

"Begin!" The supervisor declared!

WHOOSH

Surman Marliak disappeared in everyone's eye, drawing a gasp from the crowd.

POW

He appeared next to Rui throwing a powerful strike, but to his surprise Rui had managed to block him easily.

POW!

Surman retreated in surprise. He didn't expect his misdirection to fail so spectacularly. What he didn't know was that Rui was able to see through misdirection far greater than what he had used. After all, Rui had been able to detect Kane's position despite the Void Step technique; A technique with grade ten potency and difficulty.

Rui chased after him, refusing to let him go too easily. Surman paused at the sight, taking his strange stance yet again, he moved his arms legs in slow wavy patterns even as Rui approached him. It was then, Rui's eyes flew wide open as he suddenly Surman Marliak's figure cloned into two!

Suddenly he saw two Surman Marliaks!

What was this sorcery?

POW!

Both Surman Marliaks threw a strike, pushing him back.

Rui frowned, calming down. There was no way the clone was real, Martial Art was not that absurd, not yet. Furthermore, Surman's specialty was mental techniques, so this was some kind of trick that Rui wasn't quite understanding.

The two images of Surman he saw were identical, their positioning, and their movements were all identical.

Rui's eyes widened as he realized what was happening.

The brain received visual inputs from both eyes, however, both eyes were positioned separately, meaning the visual input they supplied to the brain were different. The reason people had a singular vision despite two eyes was because the brain merged those two images. Diplopia was the condition of having double images due to the brain not fusing the two separate feeds from the eyes properly.

Rui strongly suspected that that was why he was seeing two Surman Marliaks. The strange movements that Surman had performed shortly before his vision had doubled was likely some kind of hypnotic or mental technique.

He knew that vision and other sensory input could affect the brain and mind in various ways. He also suspected that this was the principle on which mental manipulation techniques worked.

WHOOSH

Surman dashed at him, hoping to take advantage of Rui's disorientation, yet once again.

WHAM!

Rui not only didn't get hit but also batted Surman away with a swift kick. Surman frowned as he landed back, realizing Rui was mentally remarkably resilient for him to be this unaffected.

A combination of Rui's supernaturally powerful mind and the Primordial Instinct allowed Rui to fight almost unperturbed despite his disorientation. Rui's mental fortitude was quite remarkable, to the point that Surman suspected he was employing anti-mental manipulation techniques.

He began employing even more strange stances. His body moved and contorted in bizarre ways bewitching the eyes of onlookers.

Rui rushed forward attempting to stop what he was doing. He went for a swing when he suddenly froze. A sharp sense of pain rushed across his entire body!

But nothing had physically changed!

Why did he suddenly feel pain?

POW POW POW

Surman took advantage of Rui's openings launching a flurry of strikes. He began some more strange movements.

Rui struggled to defend as he turtled up.

('He can induce pain?') Rui wondered, shocked!

He did not think such a thing was possible!

Suddenly, he felt his mind blurring as Surman struck his temple before performing some more strange maneuvers.

The result was that the very world around Rui had begun bending and morphing, more and more so by the second.

('He's affecting my spatial awareness too?!')

BAM!

Surman's fist crashed into Rui, driving him back. He ruthlessly exploited Rui's openings to the very limit, trying to end the fight as soon as he could.

Rui on the other hand was still shocked.

And excited!

Every time he thought he understood Martial Art, some new technique came along and broke his world view!

Surman Marliak had been the latest of them. A Martial Art who could affect the sense of pain, spatial awareness and attention remotely and continuously with almost no pre-conditions or significant caveats.

It was extremely overpowered.

Rui had fully come to see exactly why Surman was chosen as the representative of his Martial Academy branch.

He was at a disadvantage. He was in pain. He was disoriented.

Yet he felt only one emotion.

Unbridled ecstasy.

"Huhuhu..."

Surman Marliak's eyes widened as he heard a restrained chuckle from Rui. He saw a grin crack at the edges of his mouth.

Rui began laughing uncontrollably. He couldn't help himself. How could he not? He was just shown that there was yet another direction of Martial Art beyond his imagination that he never even knew had existed before!

Everyone onlooking grew confused.

Why was he laughing like a mad man?

Was this also a mental manipulation Martial Art technique? Did Surman Marliak force his opponents to laugh as he beat them down? If so, how brutally sadistic.

Surman himself had knitted eyebrows in confusion. When had he learnt such a technique? Did he not read the data of his technique scrolls properly?

BAM BAM BAM!

He didn't stop pummeling. No, he was forcefully stopped.

CLASP

Rui suddenly caught one of his incoming fists smoothly. He turned to Surman Marliak wordlessly. He didn't speak but his expression conveyed gratitude.

('Thank you for showing me what is possible.') He thought as he launched a powerful weighted strike at Surman. ('Let me thank you by defeating you.')

BAM!

Chapter 253: Depth

"Do you think that's part of a technique?" Fae had asked with concern when she saw Rui laughing like a mad man.

Kane had gazed at him even as he was being pummeled before replying with a smile. "No, he's just having fun."

Fae was about to reply when suddenly, Rui had caught Surman's Marliak fist cleanly, surprising both of them.

BAM!

He immediately launched a powerful blow, releasing his grip on Surman, sending him flying back.

Not a single person was unsurprised.

How did Rui go from being utterly dominated one second, to suddenly turning the tables around forcefully the very next?

Such things did not happen!

Up in the VIP viewing balcony, the headmaster of the Verlain branch raise an eyebrow, turning to headmaster Aronian.

"I do not understand Aronian." She said. "He clearly is not employing countermeasures against mental techniques, they affect him yet he breaks them too quickly."

"Hohoho..." Headmaster Aronian chuckled at her confusion. "Impressive little pup, isn't he?"

"Does this have something to do with his mental tolerance of extended usage of mental rejuvenation potions that have been recorded in the database?" She wondered.

"Partially." Headmaster Aronian replied a bit more solemnly. "Frankly his case isn't entirely clear. However, with all the circumstantial evidence at hand. I have come to the conclusion that he's an unfathomable genius of the mind hitherto unheard of in the history of the Academy. This much is quite clear when you consider the nearly unparalleled IQ scores and from his entrance exam, the fact that he is also the only student in history to pass the final stage of the mental evaluation exam and the numerous other feats such as that."

He paused, before continuing. "Also, the depth of his Martial Path has reached the Squire Realm, perhaps even deeper. I cannot say for sure, it's incredible."

All of the headmasters reacted with visible surprise.

"That's impossible." She said. "He hasn't even been a Martial Apprentice for two years!"

"It's unbelievable, but it is the truth." Headmaster Aronian confirmed. "Somehow, he has already long fulfilled the first condition to becoming a Squire candidate. That is also why he's doing well against your Surman Marliak, see?"

She nodded with a confused yet enlightened expression. If his Martial Path was truly that deep, if Rui Quarrier had truly walked such a great length down his Martial Path, then she could understand what was happening, it indeed was the perfect explanation.

"The depth of his Martial Path, along with his monstrous mind has made for an incredible sturdy mind." Headmaster Aronian said. "In fact, I'm actually quite impressed that your Surman Marliak was able to affect and incapacitate him to the degree that he did for as long as he did. Ordinary mental techniques would have just bounced off of Rui. Even the extraordinary Void Step technique was only partially effective against his sensory techniques and his mind. The fact that Surman did as well as he did proves he is extremely talented. He just had the poor fortune of running into Rui."

POW POW POW!

Each strike devastated Surman. Most of his techniques were mental techniques, his defense was not all that impressive. He had had a dominant undefeated win streak in the preliminary contest of the Verlain branch simply by incapacitating his opponents with his mental manipulation techniques immediately and winning straightforwardly.

It had been a very long time since he had been punished this much!

POW!

A powerful swing to the jaw rattled his brain.

THUD

He collapsed to the ground.

"Aaand we have a winner ladies and gentlemen! Rui Quarrier successfully advances to the second round after a last-minute comeback against Surman Marliak! What an unexpected victory as the gambling bets revealed! It seems that those who bet on the formidable Flowing Void style have received their money's worth!"

The crowd cheered excitedly!

"Hey." Rui approached Surman who had just finished consuming a healing potion. "Great fight. You're incredibly strong."

Surman gazed at him for a moment, before cracking a resigned smile. "Thank you, you're stronger than I expected and hoped. I've never felt that helpless before."

"Thank you for that wonderful fight, you've shown me an additional dimension of what Martial Art can do. I will be looking into them when we get back after the Martial Contest." He said, smiling.

"I'm always up for a spar, if we can meet that is." Surman chuckled. "Good luck with the Martial Contest, I'm rooting for you."

"Thanks, appreciate that."

They shook hands before heading back to their exits.

The crowd cheered in approval of the sportsmanship that both representatives had shown.

"Congratulations on passing the first round, Rui." Squire Kyrie told him when he returned to them. "You did quite well

"Great job." Squire Dylan threw a thumbs up. "You beat him well. You should have seen the looks on their faces hehe." he subtly gestured to his competitors in the contest viewing balcony. He notices several of them looked at him differently after his fight.

He shrugged, turning back to the arena. He may have won, but he wasn't going to call it a day and head back to his luxurious quarters. He still needed to observe his opponents fighting in order to be able to fight as optimally as he could against them.

He had already watched his next opponent, Servil Bisha, fight in the third match and had begun thinking about that matchup.

"That was an amazing fight without a doubt! However, the next fight is not any less exciting at all! On one hand we have representative Ferlicia Ernard of the Fritzer branch and her Blazing Fury Style. On the other hand, we have Askin Nodt and his Drunken Fever Style of the Fervor Branch!"

Two contestants walked in.

Ferlicia looked like a dignified heir of a Martial Family, as she was. But Askin looked like a drunk man, because he was one. He sauntered nochalantly, with a dreamy lost expression on his face, hiccuping every now and then.

Rui smiled at that sight. He was interested in this fight.

Chapter 254: Amazed

Rui recalled what Fae and Kane had told him about these two.

Heat and alcohol.

These two Martial Artists employed these two phenomena in their Martial Art.

This was something Rui truly looked forward to. How could a Martial Artist fight with heat and alcohol? He didn't even know that this was possible! There were some techniques, but to make it your entire Martial Art?

The Martial Contest opened his eyes to so much that he hadn't seen before, it was truly shocking. Yet it incredibly exciting nonetheless.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Ferlicia crouched, placing her open-handed arms in front of her.

('Grappling stance eh?') He mused.

Askin on the other hand, just shifted around in one place, imbalanced.

"Begin!" The referee commenced.

Ferlicia's skin grew incredibly red, as if she was blushing madly across every inch of her body, before dashing at Askin.

It was a sight that amazed Rui. She was increasing the temperature of her own body to an incredibly high degree!

The human body was actually capable of increasing body temperature to a high degree. It was capable of this and even did increase temperature in times of fevers. Through endogenous and exogenous pyrogens, it could cause a high elevation in the body's thermoregulatory set-point. However, the reason that it did not increase temperature beyond a small degree was because the brain simply couldn't handle extremely high temperatures.

Normal human brains, that is.

Martial Apprentices possessed enhanced brains on a neurochemical level.

Rui would not be surprised if this dramatically increased the ceiling of the temperature that she could withstand, that along with some conditioning meant that this was legitimately a powerful weaponizable phenomenon!

Rui suspected that he had stumbled upon the core of her Martial Art technique.

In this case, it made sense that she was a grappler! If her body temperature was extremely high, then grappling was a field of combat that was extremely compatible with her. It would exploit her strengths and give her far greater gains than striking would, in all actuality.

He wondered how Askin would deal with it.

Ferlicia shot towards Askin, charging to get into contact with him.

WHOOSH

He ducked so incredibly low that he would be fine even if a car ran over him!

Rui's eyes narrowed. It was a simple maneuver, but the reflexes he displayed were extremely quick. He dodged the strike at basically the very last second!

Ferlicia tutted, turning around as she lashed out at Askin who stumbled out of her strike, rolling out of the way.

She continued chasing him around, but she literally couldn't even get close.

"Hue hue." he laughed. "Can't catch me baby."

He wiggled.

Rui smiled amused. "He's drunk, isn't he?"

"Indeed he is." Squire Dylan nodded. "You can trust me, I know drunk when I see it."

"Uh huh." Rui threw a resigned look at him. "How is being drunk a Martial Art technique."

"Well Rui, I can tell you that being drunk allows you to do things that you would otherwise never be able to do. Like choosing to walk in on Kyrie while she was bathi-!"

"Shut up." Squire Kyrie's unadulterated aura seeped out as she coldly cut him off, causing Rui to feel violent dreadful chills climb up his spine. The sheer force of her mind far exceeded anything he had ever sensed from an Apprentice.

"Alright alright." Squire Dylan chuckled mischievously raising his hands, completely unbothered by her fearsome aura.

They hadn't even noticed it.

Rui wiped away some sweat, shaking his head inwardly. ('I have far to go.')

He turned back to the battle, pondering about Askin, who had still gone on untouched by Ferlicia.

Alcohol impaired conscious cognition, but at the same it also consquentially ceded control of the body to the subconscious reflexive mind. Reflexes far surpassed conscious reaction speed.

Furthermore, the enhanced Apprentice brain would likely be able to mitigate the downsides of being drunk that would normally severely impair normal drunk humans.

Rui's eyes widened with interest. This meant that alcohol was potentiall more beneficial to Martial Apprentices with some rigorous training!

But did this mean the Martial Artists with alcohol had to get drunk before every fight started?

Wasn't this incredibly impractical?

"I wonder if he underwent conditioning."

"It's quite likely he did." Squire Dylan said. "There are a few niche alcohol-oriented conditioning techniques that allow the users to permanently retain a large amount of alcohol in their bodies and blood."

"What?" Rui turned to Squire Dylan, surprised.

"They condition their body to not filter out alcohol quickly." He elaborated. "Therefore they can maintain being drunk for rather incredibly longer periods of times. Just by possessing alcohol in their system, they can gain extremely high reflexes."

Rui nodded, turning back. Not even Nel had such incredible reflexes as what Askin was demonstrating, it was almost like there was no gap between stimulus and reaction. Only Kane could replicate that feat.

Eventually, Ferlicia grew frustrated. The very air was sizzling at times due to her heat, and frankly Rui felt that temperature of the Colosseum might have even increased a bit by now all due to Ferlicia alone, but she was struggling to tag Askin.

She brought her palm together. She folded all finger except for her index and middle finger, leaving a small gap between them and bringing them to her lips.

When she got as close to Askin as she could, she inhaled deeply before exhaling as hard as she could.

What Rui saw next shocked him!

She did not exhale air like any normal human did!

She breathed fire!

The flames erupted from the tiny hole of her fingers, spreading out and covering wider area than any single human normally could with their body.

This time even Askin's great reflexes could not entirely save him. He emerged from flames, with first and second-degree burns.

Rui gaped at the sight. He had thought Surman was incredible, but Ferlicia just very well might have taken that spot!

Chapter 255: Outcome

Rui felt this time and time again for each of the representatives, but they were truly worthy of the position of representative.

Even with her body-heating technique alone, she would easily be in the top five in the Hajin branch of the Martial Academies. Her compatibility against basically everyone was great since merely touching her caused damage.

In fact, Rui would even go so far as to say that she would even beat Hever and at the very least stalemate Kane. Hever needed to firm interception and physical contact, Ferlicia would dominate him because he would not be able to maintain contact with her.

Kane may not lose against her, but he really would not be able to win against her either. Kane's offense and defense was already limited. If he could not even realistically touch her, then there was basically nothing he could even do.

And then there was her spectacular fire attack. Rui did not think she was actually expelling fire from within her lungs. If he had to guess, she was using the extreme temperature of her body to ignite the air. She blowed air as hard as she could through a thing gap in her red-fingers, the combination of the high temperature and the high pressure likely reached a level that was enough to ignite the air that she was exhaling.

It was an incredible technique that had a remarkably wide area than one would expect, it was not a technique that could be mastered without dedicating one's everything to heat.

However, Askin wasn't weak either.

POW!

He managed to land a strike on her minimizing damage by striking with footwear in obscure strange angles that were hard to defend from.

POW POW POW!

He launched a barrage of backward kicks on Ferlicia while upside down hand-standing with his back faced against her. It was an incredibly comical scene, yet it allowed him to attack her without suffering any damage.

WHOOSH

He avoided her with a strange spinning flip onto his feet. Rui found his moves quite difficult to predict, it was not easy and he had an a rather unpredictable, unlimited and unconstrained fighting style. He deviated from orthodoxy.

In the Martial Academy, there were several principles taught to students in the Foundational stage regarding combat, these principles were also taught on Earth. They were basic guidelines to fight optimally. Martial Artists had long grown accustomed to taking them for granted and fighting as if those guidelines would mostly be followed.

And they were, because those guidelines and norms were generally good time-tested advice that actually worked.

Yet it seemed that because of the peculiarities of his Martial Art, a lot of the foundational norms of orthodox combat simply didn't apply to him!

He broke every rule, but somehow he kept getting away with it.

Frankly, he was so divergent, even the VOID algorithm would need to take its time in order to adapt and evolve to him.

Many of the Martial Artists spectating the match felt a headache just trying to process his bizarre motions!

Ferlicia was also among them. She had grown more and more irritated at her inability to even properly touch him. He was bizarrely slippery and somehow always escaped her clutches.

Furthermore, he launched bizarre unorthodox attacks that she found it hard to defend against.

POW POW POW!

He managed to launch a swift combination of odd attacks that slipped right past her guard.

Irritation flashed across her face. So far, the only attack that had successfully hurt him or even hit him was her fire breath attack. However, she did not think she would be able to land it any time soon again.

Shockingly, it didn't seem like he was so lose. Then, something changed.

POW

FSSHHH!

"Argh!" Askin grimaced as he retreated. He had burnt his leg badly. He had trouble understanding what had happened. He launched a kick but ended up getting burnt quite significantly.

"She was unable to avoid getting hit, so she shifted so that an exposed part of his leg would hit her instead of more less vulnerable areas." Rui nodded. It wasn't the best strategy she could have employed that Rui could see, but it showed that Ferlicia was a clever fighter.

The damage was done. Askin was too reliant on his unorthodox maneuvering, thus the severe burns on his leg weren't good.

Furthermore, Rui realized he probably had it worse if his body maintained a high level of alcohol at all times. Alcohol was very flammable and Ferlicia was extremely hot. It was quite likely that every attack did more damage than it would normally do so.

Furthermore, his maneuverability had decreased quite a bit due to the injury.

FLICK

FSSH

Ferlicia managed to nick him with yet another attack. Her offense was finally starting finally land on him. However, she was unable to grapple him, grappling charges were still much slower than jabs, after all.

FLICK FLICK POW!

She managed to land her first clean strike. Askin had already been burnt quite a bit by then. In comparison, she hadn't any meaningful damage. Askin hadn't landed too many heavy blows on her.

His condition deteriorated more and more until eventually she managed to charge and grapple him.

FSSHH!

Asking grimaced. Just as Ferlicia was about to grapple and burn him even more.

"I resign."

She froze. Letting go of him immediately.

"Did I hear that right?" She asked him, evidently in disbelief.

"Match over!" The referee declared. "Winner; Representative Ferlicia Ernand!"

Askin shrugged clumsily. "I'm not unreasonably stubborn. I know when to take a step back *hic*"

She simply gazed at him wordlessly as he was supplied potions, before turning around and walking away.

"Hmmm.." Rui pondered. "Well, atleast he saved himself some pain."

"Indeed." Squire Dylan agreed. "I would have done the same if I was in his position. Nobody has time for prolonging torture futilely."

Rui wasn't sure he agreed with that entirely. "Regardless, she's going to be incredibly strong."

Chapter 256: Amazement

"Aaand we have a winner! Representative Ferlicia Ernand makes it to the second round after a spectacular victory against representative Askin Nodt! Onto our next fight. We have Representative Mia Marnt and her Echo Blast tyle representing ther Fellen branch. On the other hand, we have Representative Ana Mariane of the Hyulflum branch and her Belial Claw Style!"

The crowd cheered loudly as the two women walked into the arena, facing each other.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Mia took a balanced stance, however her hands were positioned oddly close to her face. Rui wasn't entirely sure what to make of that.

He did, of course, recall some the bare basic information Fae had told him about her.

She wielded sound.

Rui wasn't sure what to make of that. But he had grown used to that feeling now. He had already long accepted that basically anything and everything could become a Martial Art in this world, that's just how things were.

Her opponent on the other hand was equally interesting. Fae and Kane didn't know much about her, but they said her Martial Art had something to do with wind.

That's right, wind. Rui had already given up on trying to understand.

Ana took a bizarre stance. She placed one foot ahead of the other and then placed her arms to her side with her palms facing the ground.

Rui shook his head. He genuinely had no idea what the fuck she was doing, but he assumed she did. He looked forward to seeing how both sides fought.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the fight.

Mia inhaled deeply, bring her hands to her mouth.

What came out of her mouth was not a shout.

But a roar.

Rui couldn't see the attack, sound was invisible. But Primordial Instinct detected a small yet strong mass of kinetic energy.

His eyes flew wide open in shock!

She was shouting sound attacks!

Ana Mariane avoided the attack not by moving to the side or ducking.

No.

She leapt to the air, reaching a good height to avoid the attack.

Rui frowned. Being midair made escaping impossible, Mia would simply target her midair. She had blundered in his view.

And exactly that happened. Mia didn't let go of the opportunity and sent more sound projectiles at her.

WHOOSH

Rui felt a flash of shock for the second time in ten seconds as Ana Mariane avoid the attack midair!

"Is she... stepping on air?!" Rui was flabbergasted as he saw her gaining altitude continuously as she continued her stepping motion.

Even Squire Kyrie frowned. "This shouldn't be possible at the Apprentice Realm."

"At the Apprentice Realm?" Rui turned, facing her in surprise. "What does that mean."

"The technique she's using is known as Sky Walking. It works by kicking air down hard enough to stay hovering. Essentially an air version of swimming, in a way. Martial Apprentices are too weak to do this however, only Martial Squires and above can use it. Which is why it's impressive she's able to." Squire Dylan pitched in.

Rui's eyes flew wide open. He glanced back at the incredible scene.

He was starting to get tired of being surprised over and over again in such a short timeframe. But the scene unfolding before his eyes was truly incredible.

Mia launched invisible sound bullets and Ana moved out of her aim ever so slightly before the attacks were launched.

It did not look like a battle between Martial Artists!

He focused on Mia first. From what he could tell, she was building an enormous amount of air and pressure and using that generate extremely intense sound waves focused in an incredibly small area. He figured she likely conditioned to a large degree to be able to convert the energy of her body to sound in that manner.

However, he recognized the potency of her offense. She was able to spam reasonably powerful attacks from quite range, giving her a huge range advantage over most Martial Apprentices.

Secondly, her attacks were invisible, it made countering them much harder than if they could be seen. This contributed to the formidability of her offense immensely.

Thirdly, her attacks were incredibly fast, they moved at the speed of sound!

After all, she was literally attacking with sound. This meant her offensive speed surpassed all martial Apprentices. Martial Apprentices could not break the sound barrier unless in specific exceptional circumstances.

Rui shook his head, with an impressed expression. Yet again, he was convinced that the representatives were truly worthy of their positions.

The same could be said for Ana Mariane. She danced around the air, avoiding the sound bullets incredibly well.

His curiosity was in full throttle and his sharp senses had already begun uncovering the secret of her ability.

"She's using a breathing technique." Rui murmured, as he glanced at her breathing motions.

The two Squires glanced at him.

"She's using a breathing technique to momentarily create high-pressure and high-density air pockets and then steps on them." He explained.

Breathing rapidly pushed air from one location to another and back and forth, this momentarily created high density/pressure zones of air. At extremely high density of air, it behaved more like liquid or a solid.

Rui strongly suspected that she was using her breathing and her dance-like motions to momentarily create high density air regions and then stepped on those high-density air regions like they were solid.

In this way, she was literally creating momentary steps of semi-solid air to move around in the sky.

And that wasn't all!

WHOOSH

She kicked the air and a heavy blast of air flew down towards Mia

BANG!

It collided with the ground as Mia avoided it, launching her own attacks. Rui narrowed his eyes at that sight. She was using the same principle that she was Sky Walking with to launch attacks! She created high-pressure and high-density projectiles and batted them against her opponent.

What an incredibly novel way of fighting!

In the sky, she was extremely secure, after all, how would people even hurt her if they could not touch her?

Chapter 257: Result

ROAR!

Mia launched a barrage of sound bullets in one go.

WHOOSH!

Ana barely managed to prance between them midair as she swirled, kicking the air and launching a powerful wind blast.

BANG!

ROAR!

It slammed into the ground as Mia summersaulted out of the way, launching even more sound bullets at Ana even mid-flip upside down.

The two danced in a strange harmony, enrapturing every onlooker into their elegant and profound duet.

Not a single person could avert their eyes.

How could they?

Rui was extremely absorbed into their strange fight. Watching their every movement with wide eyes, it had been truly a long time since he had been this shook by a fight.

His powerful mind furiously processed the data his senses and techniques were supplying as he created mental profiles of each of the two women.

Mia Marnt was a threat. There were three elements that contributed most to her formidable combat prowess; her incredibly long range, invisible attacks and the fact that they moved at the speed of sound. This meant she could badger her opponents with attacks that could not be avoided after they were launched from a range.

Furthermore, this wasn't the only problem with her offense. Her sound didn't just do physical damage, it also affected the brain. Since it struck the eardrums incredibly hard, causing pain and disorientation. Furthermore, at close ranges Rui had no doubt whatsoever that she could burst her opponents' ear drums.

Her only limitations and drawbacks were the fact that it was easier to predict the timing and direction of her attacks than conventional offenses, her options were limited and the linear trajectory of the attacks and the preparatory motions needed to launch her sound bullets made it easier to predict their timing.

Of course, very few people would be able to actually practically apply this to mitigate the enormous advantages she held against an overwhelming majority of Martial Artists.

Thankfully, Rui was one of them. The VOID algorithm was perfect for using these drawbacks and limitations to predict and fight in a manner most apt.

Ana Mariane was also remarkably formidable, but not without her limitations either.

Her greatest strengths and advantages were her range, as well as the fact that she could stay out of range of an overwhelming majority of offensive techniques thanks to her flight. Her maneuvering was not limited to the terrain or two dimensions, giving her a boost in her evasiveness, it was why she was doing a remarkable job at avoiding Mia's attacks.

However, her attack suffered. Air was not an efficient medium to try and accelerate. Mia overcame this by focusing and narrowing the direction of sound with her mouth so that the energy remained clamped and was conserved to a much higher degree. However, Ana was not using sound, she was using wind. She created a powerful wind blast via launching high-density air created by her breathing technique and physical movements.

However, by the time the attack reached Mia, a large amount of the momentum of the travelling wind had already been bled off by the atmosphere. Thus, her offensive power was unremarkable.

They were both extremely strong and would easily be top-five in the Hajin Academy, but they were thankfully not without flaws.

Just as he mused about them, there was a change in the battle.

POW!

Ana stumbled mid-air, plummeting a bit as a sound bullet hit her, causing pain and disorientation to her and disrupting her Sky Walking partially.

Mia's eyes narrowed as she pushed her offense to full throttle to unleash a barrage of sound bullets at Ana. She was not going to let this opportunity go!

Ana was already pushing herself to the limit dodging each sound bullet impeccably, but in her state, it was impossible. One thing had led to another as several more sound bullets struck her.

This caused even more pain and disorientation and led to a chain reaction that swiftly tilted the battle in Mia's favour.

POW POW POW!

THUD

Ana grimaced as she plummeted to the ground. Her face morphed into fear as Mia rushed in, closing the distance between them.

BANG!

A singular potent sound bullet struck Ana's jaw.

The blunt force trauma to her brain atop the disorientation she had already been inflicted with was too much.

THUD

She collapsed flat on the ground, unmoving.

"Winner; Representative Mia Marnt!" The referee declared.

The crowd erupted in excited cheers as the spectacular fight ended.

"Aaaand we have a winner folks! Representative Mia will be moving onto round two after her solid victory against representative Ana!"

Rui exhaled, a little tired from his own excitement. He shook his head.

In reality, Ana could have won against Mia, perhaps even dominantly, had she fought more aptly.

Her breathing technique could create high-density air regions. She could have used this to create currents that would alter the direction of the sound bullets by shifting the medium by which the sound was travelling by for a rather low effort.

But it was unreasonable to expect her to apply a principle he studied in fluid mechanics in his bachelor's degree. However, this realization alone showed him the value of his scientific background in this world. It showed him that there was likely massive untapped potential in Martial Art that nobody had yet uncovered. Nobody was qualified to uncover.

This world did not have the scientific foundation needed to uncover and tap into this potential.

In all of heaven and Gaia, he alone was qualified!

How strong would he be if he realized this potential and employed its power in his Martial Art? Just how powerful would he be with the power of science and fantasy on his side?

Just the very thought of it made him extraordinarily excited. Once the Martial Contest ended one way or another, he had a lot of considerations to explore and think about.

There was simply too much he had to accomplish, too much he wanted to accomplish.

Yet this did not discourage him.

No.

It did the exact opposite.

Chapter 258: Outcome

"Moving onto our next battle! On one hand we have Representative Byron Harth and his Gentle Sting Style representing the Brillix branch. And on the other hand, we have Kaerts Omegde and his Soul Reader Style! Let's welcome them with a round of applause."

The two men entered the arena, earning an eruption of cheers from the audience.

Rui raised an eyebrow at their heavy presence.

They were strong.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Byron Harth extended his left leg forward as he crouched his right leg. His arms positioned themselves in front of him, with all fingers except the index and middle fingers bent.

Rui recalled that Fae and Kane had told him that Byron's Martial Path and Martial Art were centered around nerve targeting.

The nervous system of the human body was responsible for the functioning of the human body in many ways, Rui wasn't even sure what Byron was capable of. He intended to pay close attention to his combat style and make a profile centered around him as well.

As for Kaerts, he wasn't sure what to make of that strange name. Neither of his friends knew much about him either. They only knew that he was the son of a Martial Master.

He simply took a simple neutral stance, making him all the more mysterious in Rui's eyes.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the match.

Byron immediately dashed towards Kaerts, launching several finger poking attacks.

WHOOSH

Kaerts evaded the attack incredibly cleanly, he moved almost the very bare minimum needed to avoid the attack. What struck Rui as interesting was that he didn't strike Rui as an evasive type, yet he possessed high evasive capabilities.

Perhaps this had something to do with his Martial Art.

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

As time passed, he continued avoiding each of Byron's finger jabs with unbelievable timing. Rui's eyes knitted with confusion and amazement as a certain realization dawned on Rui.

('This man... He's not dodging the jabs as or even after they come.') Rui noted. ('His evasive motion begins as or just before Byron begins his movements.')

There were very few people who were able to regularly do that at the Apprentice Realm. Kane was one of them, with his excellent reflexes and agility, he was able to often evade as early as possible. Rui was also one of them, with the VOID algorithm supported with Primordial Instinct, he possessed an incredibly high amount of foresight, and his prediction allowed him to move at among the earliest of intervals in the fight.

However, Kaerts was certainly not an evasive-type like Kane was, and he absolutely certainly did not possess the VOID algorithm.

"Hmmm..." Rui frowned. "There's something strange here."

"You noticed quite quickly." Squire Kyrie raised an eyebrow. "I was going to tell you after the match ended."

"The fact that he's evading this early... As well as the name of the Martial Art..." Rui's eyes narrowed. "Is it a sensory technique?"

"Quite likely." Kyrie nodded.

If that was the case, then it could perhaps explain his remarkable Martial Art.

('But what is he sensing if that is the case?') Rui wondered. ('And how is he sensing it in the first place?')

Rui paid a lot of attention to his movements, trying to understand what exactly was happening.

Suddenly, a strange event occurred. Byron actually skidded just a bit under a particularly slippery part of the arena when setting up a kick, disbalancing him as he launched the kick. Normally, this was a blunder and would be exploited by an experienced Martial Artist.

Yet, not only did it not fail, the kick mysteriously landed straight on Kaerts' face.

POW

Rui raised an eyebrow at that sight in surprise, he would have been able to dodge that thanks to the center of gravity evaluation system of the VOID algorithm, yet for some reason, it completely bypassed Kaerts' sensory.

It very well could have been a fluke, of course.

('Or perhaps...') Rui narrowed his eyes as an idea formed in his head.

Byron managed to land in a strike by fluke, but it worked in his favour. All he had needed was one element to give him an opening. The fluke strike had landed square on Kaerts' nose causing pain and disorientation.

POW POW POW

He landed three speedy close-range finger jabs that had very little power in them. He had sacrificed weight and momentum for speed, allowing him to cleanly land them.

Yet despite being weak jabs, they strangely affected Kaerts negatively.

THUD

He collapsed to one knee all of a sudden, seemingly unvoluntarily.

BAM!

Byron managed to land a powerful kick to the face this time.

Kaerts managed to get back up, retreating.

Rui had watched the scene carefully with eagle eyes.

('Temporary partial Paralysis.') Rui thought with incredulity. With just a single tap, he could temporarily hinder or incapacitate a body part. It was an almost magical ability. The average Martial Apprentice stood no chance of defeating that ability. Byron would go very far in the preliminary contest of the Hajin branch.

In a way Kaerts was extremely compatible against him. However, that did not mean that Byron was necessarily weak.

Against the right opponents, he would dominate incredibly hard. For example, Rui suspected that Nel would likely be helpless against Byron. The reason for that being that Nel relied on his durability toughness too much. Byron would paralyze him quickly and just eternally punish him.

However, his opponent was not Nel, it was Kaerts. He had managed to gain a temporary advantage, but the compatibility was not good.

BANG!

Kaerts landed a powerful blow as he sneaked past Byron's finger pokes smoothly.

He had managed to regain his bearing and began avoiding Byron properly yet again.

Once he began going all out, there was too much of a gap.

POW!

A powerful blow to the jaw rattled Byron's brain, knocking him out.

THUD

He collapsed to the ground.

"Aaaaand we have a winner folks! Representative Kaerts Omegde has earned his spot in the second round after a solid victory against Representative Byron Harth!"

Chapter 259: Fiona

"Good fight." Rui nodded. They were both strong, however, Kaerts was a cut better. That along with compatibility advantage gave him very low chances of losing against someone like Byron.

Although they were all chosen as representatives of their respective branches of the Academies, that did not mean they were all on the same level.

The next match may even serve as proof of that.

"What an incredible first round we've had folks. Now we have only one more fight left! On one hand we have Representative Derk Sermont!"

Derk walked in, expressionless. Yet Rui could almost feel the fear from him.

"And on the other hand, we have Representative Fiona Roschem representing the Vargard branch! Renowned as the Chosen Incarnate in the Martial Community. She is the representative with the highest gambling odds!"

The crowd erupted in cheers louder than any other Representative had received. This was to be expected, since they were in the town of Vargard, the branch that she was representing.

However, Rui noticed something odd.

('He didn't mention the name of her Martial Art...') Rui's eyes widened. Could it be that she hadn't even named her Martial Art yet? As strong as she was, her Martial Art did not possess enough individuality and originality?

This came as a shock to Rui. He had completely suspected her to be a Squire candidate. But it turned out he was wrong.

(How strange!) He froze as Fiona entered.

She didn't make any gestures out of the ordinary. She didn't put on any airs. She was expressionless.

Yet the sense of danger that her focus invoked in all those within her Realm was profound.

In that moment, Rui instinctively felt certain of one thing.

She was the strongest Martial Apprentice he had ever met.

She was stronger than his old Apprentice instructors. Stronger than his friends. Stronger than the golden-haired bandit. Even stronger than the masked bandit who saved the former from eight Martial Apprentices.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

A strange tension took over the arena.

Things were tense before, but Rui felt a faint whiff of fear had tainted the atmosphere.

Derk Sermont adopted a grappling stance as a bead of sweat trickled down his face. Yet he held a resolute expression nonetheless.

Fiona didn't move.

The referee raised an eyebrow, before commencing the match.

"Begin!"

Rui watched with hawk eyes.

Yet, he couldn't believe what had unfolded.

BANG!

RUMBLE

She pushed the ground under her backwards with such ferocity that faint tremors travelled across the entire arena.

In an instant, she had arrived in front of Derk.

BOOM!

A powerful impact crumpled into his gut, as he spat out blood. The impact launched flying across the entire arena.

BANG!

He finally stopped as he collided against the wall.

THUD

He collapsed to the ground.

...

"W-Winner; Representative Fiona Roschem!" The referee declared.

For a moment, no one moved.

"Aaaaand we have a winner folks! Representative Fiona Roschem soundly moves onto the second round with a dominant victory against Representative Derk Sermont!"

Rui jerked as he finally unfroze.

"Haha..." he laughed, before sighing.

"Well..." Squire Dylan scratched his head. "You might as well resign."

Both Rui and Squire Kyrie turned to him, glaring at him.

"You're supposed to be on my side." Rui shook his head.

"Hey, I am on your side." Squire Dylan smirked. "I'm saving you a lot of time, energy and dignity. Only a true friend would do that."

Rui ignored him. "This is going to be rough." he glanced at the other Representatives, they were mostly expressionless, but he realized that they were all thinking the same thing.

"She's reached the very pinnacle that Martial Apprentices can possibly reach, generally." Squire Kyrie said. "She would even be able to survive a brief period of time against weak Martial Squires, frankly."

Rui's eyes widened at those words.

"The gap between Martial Realms isn't exponential." Squire Kyrie explained, noticing his reaction. "The strongest of Martial Apprentices born with monstrous talent after enough time and resources, like her, are not too inferior to the weakest of Martial Squires who just barely managed to survive the breakthrough and haven't fully adapted to the power yet."

Her words were casual, but the information she revealed was not.

First, she had inadvertently revealed that the breakthrough process to Martial Squire was life-threatening. This added one more piece of the puzzle to the mystery that was the breakthrough process to the Martial Squire Realm.

Secondly, he learnt that Realms were closer to each other than he suspected.

"Is she really the peak of the Martial Apprentice Realm?" Rui asked.

Squire Kyrie thought about the question for a moment. "Strictly speaking, no."

Rui tilted his head, confused.

"Headmaster Aronian informed me you have been informed of the two conditions needed to become a Squire candidate, so I suppose I can reveal some information to you." She paused, before continuing. "The Realms of Martial Artists are common checkpoints along all Martial Paths, in a way. They do not directly correlate with combat prowess, not directly anyway. They correlate to how much progress you've made in the direction of your ideal perfect Martial Art at the end of the journey of the Martial Path."

That was incredibly vague, especially that last part. But he didn't complain, he had already received a lot of information.

"So that means theoretically there isn't a defined known limit on the power of Martial Artists of a certain Realm?" Ru asked.

Squire Kyrie nodded. "Each generation of Martial Artists is stronger than the previous Martial Artists in general, that should tell you there isn't defined power scales and limits purely theoretically."

Rui's thoughts turned back to Fiona. This meant that she wasn't the very limit a Martial Apprentice could achieve. Perhaps someone even more talented would be stronger. She would probably surpass herself as she got older.

But even if she wasn't at the peak, it didn't matter. She was absurdly strong, and Rui would have to defeat her to win.

Chapter 260: Analysis

The first round had come to an end. The matchups of the next round were automatically decided.

The first match of the second round was Ian Nepomniachtchi versus Freund Gamor.

The second match was Servil Bisha versus Rui Quarrier.

The third match was Ferlicia Ernand vs Mia Marnt.

And the final match of the round was Kaerts Omegde vs Fiona Roschem.

The winners of the round would go onto the semi-finals of the tournament.

"Aaaand with that we have come to an end to the first round ladies and gentlemen!" The host announced. "It was a spectacular round with amazing fights featuring the best of the youngest generation of Martial Artists! The next round will be commenced tomorrow at the same time, be sure not to miss it!"

Soon all the representatives dispersed from the viewing balcony back to their luxurious living quarters. Squire Kyrie and Dylon followed Rui back to his, they intended to have a thorough discussion of what had happened, and what was to happen.

"That was one hell of a first round." Rui sighed as he crashed into his bed. "My worldview of Martial Art widened more in the span of those several hours than it has in many months now."

Squire Kyrie smiled at those words. "And yet there is much more, as you'll slowly come to learn."

Rui smiled wordlessly at those words. "Now then, back to important matters. My next opponent is representative Servil Bisha."

"Hmm..." Squire Dylon hummed. "She's strong alright. You'll have to watch out for her offense, her mastery over vibration-based permeation of impact is truly remarkable. It increases the lethality of her attacks to a very high level. If you take too many of those, you'll be coughing out your organs in no time."

Dylon told him. Rui took his words quite seriously, as the head Squire instructor of the offense department, his words on offensive techniques could effectively be treated as fact.

"Still." Dylan continued. "It's not that there aren't caveats to her fighting style."

Rui nodded in agreement. "The fact that the actual kinetic energy of her strikes isn't the reason they're lethal means they're easier to redirect."

Powerful attacks contained too much momentum and energy to be redirected easily. It would require a significant amount of power or extraordinary skill to redirect attacks like that.

But for Servil, this wasn't true. Her attacks did not contain an incredible amount of energy, the reason they were lethal despite that had to do with the fact that she permeated that energy deeper into the body.

Thus, her offense was not resistant towards redirective defensive measures.

"Indeed, you figured that out already huh?" Squire Dylan smiled helplessly. "Kind of makes our presence here a little pointless, no? Kyrie, you want to spend the night in my room?"

Squire Kyrie glared at him, though his words held a kernel of truth. The reason representatives were accompanied with two Squire instructors was because they would better allow the representative to fight at their best.

Yet Rui frankly did not need such aid. His knowledge, intellect in combination with his experience with the VOID algorithm made it so that he was more than capable of fighting optimally.

This condition frankly hurt him more than it helped him because his advantage against the other representatives were diminished due to this policy.

Rui had already thought about Servil a lot. Soon his thoughts strayed to the other representatives. He tried predicting and modelling their fights based on the data he had gathered from the fights of the first round.

('Ian is likely to win against Freund.') Rui surmised quickly.

Freund was a fearsome Martial Artist without a doubt. Frankly, Rui did not want to be on the receiving end of his poison at all if he could avoid it.

Yet Ian was just too much. His breathing techniques were incredibly powerful, allowing him have extremely high values in different parameters depending on what he wanted. Although he couldn't have it all simultaneously, the fact that he could switch back and forth made it quite difficult to deal with him. It made inherently tricky and confounding.

The third round's outcome was the most interesting to him.

Ferlicia Ernand vs Mia Marnt.

He wasn't sure which one of them would win. Ferlicia was a powerful heat-oriented fighter while Mia was centered versus sound. Part of his difficulty in modelling this fight came from the fact that his experience and understanding of heat and sound-based techniques were quite limited compared to more conventional techniques.

And when he had to try and extrapolate a fight between Martial Art centered around techniques he had never seen anything even remotely like prior, he was definitely confident of being super accurate as a result.

Still, he could make more basic inferences.

Being a close-range fighter primarily, Ferlicia would likely to everything in her power to close the distance, while Mia would do her best that never happened. After all, Mia was at her strongest at a distance.

Rui simply lacked the data to deduce a probability of victory for either side beyond that point. All he could say is if they succeeded with getting in their desired ranges and keeping it that way then they had a pretty solid chance of victory.

He imagined that their Martial Squire instructors were with them at this very moment telling them basically the exact same thing.

As for the final match, that was the fight he was most certain of. As impressive of Kaerts was, his odds of winning against Fiona were simply too low. He suspected Kaerts would likely be able to hold on for long since his evasiveness was quite impressive, but besides from that, there likely wasn't much he could do. Fiona truly lived up to everything he heard. If her other attributes were even comparably powerful to the speed and power she had demonstrated, then Kaerts could take pride even if he lasted several minutes.

He put the issue aside as he took some rest.