

## Martial Unity 261

### Chapter 261: First match

Time passed quickly. Frankly, there wasn't much for him to do at his quarters. He generally immersed himself in meditation as he thought about his upcoming fight with Servil Bisha, constructing an adapted fighting style for him.

So far, he had only come with a few elements that the adapted style needed to have in order to be suited to fighting Servil Bisha.

Evasiveness and anti-striking counter-offensive were at the core of the style. As long as Rui could negate the lethality that came from the permeation of the impact due to the vibrations, he stood a pretty good chance of negating the threat.

Another means by which he could reduce the formidability of Servil's Martial Art was through grappling. Ground grappling was also another by which he could negate Servil's permeation since Servil needed to inflict impacts to permeate them. He would not be able to land even a handful, if at all any strikes in super-close-range grappling.

Establishing these two elements in his adapted Martial Art was the first step. Now he only needed to finetune it to suit Servil's Martial Art's traits.

This was where he had an advantage compared to the other representatives. They're combat prowess would not change at all between rounds, but he would become more formidable with each round with the greater amount of data and time he had to thoroughly create the most suited Martial Art for taking each of them down.

This was normally something he would have to do mid-fight, but he would achieve better results if he had more time to flesh it out.

Soon, the day passed. He hadn't left his quarters for anything besides from his meals, occasionally running into the other representatives, only half of the original sixteen were present. Yet Fiona was the only one who bothered interacting with him. She remained as eccentric as she was the day prior, asking him all kinds of random questions as she satisfied her curiosity.

"How are you so strong?"

"What's your favourite colour?"

"Did you dye your hair black?"

Rui simply answered those questions as shortly as he could.

Soon, a day had passed and it was time for round two. Rui went through the same procedures until he found himself in the contest viewing balcony yet again.

"Welcome back to the Martial Contest ladies and gentlemen! We will soon be commencing the highly-awaited second round of the contest! Today's matchups are..."

His voice faded into the background as Rui closed his eyes, zoning out. Prior to the start of the Martial Contest, he always thought the festive nature of the contest was a good thing, but now he couldn't help but disagree with his initial notions.

Thankfully, the nonsense ended quickly and the first match was announced.

"In the first match of the second round, we have Ian Nepomniachtchi and his Breathing Mountain Style of the Farund branch facing off against Representative Freund Gamor and his Dreamy Poison Style of the Villimaine branch. The Breathing Goliath faces off against the Toxinmonger!"

The two contestants entered the arena, their powerful minds weighed on the onlookers as tension brewed in the atmosphere.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Ian took a neutral stance while Freund's stance leaned more towards offense and speed.

One thing Rui found curious was that Freund took down his mouth mask this fight. He wondered if there was any significance to that.

"Grown stronger, have you?" Ian asked coldly. "Unfortunately, it's not going to be good enough. This fight is going to end the same as last time."

"Hmph." Freund snorted. "You talk too much. I'll show you how things have changed since last time!"

There appeared to be a deeper history between them, though it wasn't entirely clear.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the fight.

WHOOSH

Freund blitzed out at Ian with his hand reached out. His intentions were clear. His entire skin was poisonous, but he needed to make contact to apply it against his opponents. He had other kinds of poison too, but they all generally had the same condition.

WHOOSH

Ian avoided Freund cleanly. The sheer speed at which he dodged told Rui that he was using Lightning Breathing to amplify speed. Rui paid close attention to his breathing. He had to face Ian in the next round if he won his match in this round, he hoped to gather as much as information as he possibly could.

Ian was continuously avoiding Freund's attacks. To the untrained eye, it merely seemed like he was being passive as he avoided. But Rui actually approved of his decision. With Freund's poison being as potent as it was, it was best not to touch him unless the gains outweighed the losses. If his poison was like Avi's then even clothing wouldn't be too effective as a defense.

WHOOSH

BAM!

Ian dodged a strike as landed a fearsome kick on Freund's neck, staggering him in pain. It was only strikes to the vitals like this one that were worth coming into physical contact with Freund for. Only with attacks that did meaningful damage could Ian always ensure that he was inflicting more damage on Freund than the latter was on Ian with his poisoned skin.

In this way, Ian could take his time and slowly weather Freund down for a guaranteed win.

Or so he, and even Rui, thought.

Ian's vision blurred just for the tiniest moment. His eyebrows knitted in confusion.

('Is his poison affecting me already?') Ian wondered incredulously. ('But that makes no sense! His poison wasn't this strong and quick last round. There is no way he upgraded it within twenty-four hours.

He staggered mildly as he realized that even his sense of balance was very slowly starting to get affected.

Rui didn't miss that, realizing what had happened. He too was surprised.

('It has to be another poison, but how is Freund applying it?') Rui wondered as he closely watched their interactions.

There was very minimal contact, and in fact zero contact since Ian discovered he was being affected. So what exactly was happening?

Chapter 262: Outcome

And that's when Rui noticed something odd.

Freund was continuously breathing with his mouth open. Not just a little open, he looked like he was trying to pump out air as much as possible. If he was exhausted, Rui would not have minded, but he shouldn't have been that exhausted that quickly. Furthermore, there weren't any other signs of exhaustion that accompanied heavy breathing.

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

('He's exhaling poison!') He mused with absolute incredulity.

Rui couldn't even begin to fathom the kind of body conditioning Freund Gamor had put himself through to obtain that kind of technique. It also explained why he removed his mouth mask. Everything fit.

Furthermore, this technique was especially effective against Ian. Ian was abusing breathing techniques the entire fight, taking in an impossible amount of air every second.

A technique that poisoned the very air was a technique that was extremely well-suited to taking Ian down!

Down there, Ian had immediately shifted tactics when he realized that he was being poisoned even though he avoided Freund like the plague.

If that was the case, then he simply had no choice.

He lashed out at Freund with Lightning Breathing, and began an onslaught with Fire Breathing. If he could not avoid or even minimize the rate at which he was being poisoned, then there was only one thing left to do.

To ensure that rate at which Freund was being damaged was even higher.

He peppered Freund with an enormous amount of power! Only Fae and Fiona could match his offensive prowess.

Freund fought back valiantly, yet he was enduring damage at an astronomical rate. Wounds appeared on his body every second. After just fifteen seconds, he was already bleeding from multiple places, and half his body had been bruised badly.

Yet he fought.

As long as he could come maximize the amount of poison that entered Ian's system, he had a realistic chance of victory.

BAM!

A swift kick crashed against his jaw, rattling his brain.

THUD

He fell to the ground, unmoving.

Several moments passed as the referee check up on him.

"Winner; Representative Ian Nepomniachtchi!" The referee declared.

"Aaaand we have a winner folks! Representative Ian Nepomniachtchi managed to snatch victory from the jaws of loss! He will be moving onto the third round of the Martial Contest!" The commentator announced

Immediately after, Ian fell to one knee as he was unable to maintain his balance very well for any longer. His vision was blurring too much to. He knew more than anyone how incredibly close that fight was.

Rui, on the other hand, was very impressed.

Freund was quite strong. Furthermore, he had a solid compatibility advantage against Ian too. Yet, Ian managed to win despite that.

He was strong, there was no doubt about that.

"Rui." Squire Kyrie called to him. "It's time."

"Mmm." Rui nodded. He turned around, heading towards the exit. Servil Bisha had done the same, taking a different route that would lead to the entrance on the other side of the arena.

Rui was already prepared.

He quickly gathered his concentration, honing his mind.

His attention gathered.

Bit by bit.

Drop by drop.

He had been finding it easier to enter states of absolute concentration recently. His command over his own mind had been growing rather well.

"Aaaand for the next match we have representative Servil Bisha, the Flickering Ghoul, and her Flickering Core style representing the Gragol branch! On the other hand, we have representative Rui Quarrier and his Flowing Void style representing the Hajin branch!"

The two of them entered the arena, stopping at a distance from each other.

The atmosphere tightened as the two fighters stared at each other without breaking eye-contact.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Servil brought both her fists in front of her, with her center of gravity leaning forward and her legs closed and centered. It was a stance that focused on offense and mobility.

Rui immediately understood her intentions.

They were within his predictions.

He centered his legs, crouching while bring his open-handed palms to his chest.

A stance that had a strong grappling affinity to it. But it also had a lot of mobility.

"Begin!" The referee instructed.

WHOOSH

Servil shot straight at Rui, launching a fist. But Rui had simply cleanly avoided it. At his current level, his reaction and reflexes were extremely quick. His reincarnated-enhanced mind, the depth of his Martial Path, the VOID algorithm and the Primordial Instinct technique ensured his reflexes were far above what most Martial Apprentices could possibly have.

Nel was his equal because he had superhuman reflexes even before he broke through, while only Kane was his superior because of his affinity for speed, as well as the reaction speed-oriented techniques.

Landing a strike when he was going his best to avoid it, was a difficult task as Servil was coming to learn.

WHOOSH



WHOOSH

WHOOSH

Rui simply avoided the initial flurry of blows. He wanted to win, but he also wanted to hold back his trump cards. It wasn't a pleasant feeling to try and balance between the two.

Suddenly Servil paused, she was getting nowhere, she realized. Rui was as slippery as an eel. The best she was able to do was land some imprecise angled strikes, that too only if she significantly sacrificed accumulating power for quickness. She wouldn't be able to win this way.

Her stance changed as she stomped one foot in front of her.

RUMBLE

Rui's eyes widened as the entire arena started vibrating sharply. He had to focus just to maintain his balance.

Servil short forward, maintaining the vibrations with every step.

Rui understood her plan. It was clear she was extremely accustomed to vibrating surfaces, most likely thanks to extended training. She was using the fact that her opponent was not comfortable under such circumstances to increase their vulnerability.

Rui felt a sharp sense of danger as Servil rushed towards him. He needed to be extremely careful with how he dealt with this.

Chapter 263: Clashes

WHOOSH

Rui avoided the first strike, barely.

BAM!

The second strike, however, crashed into his guard. It was only then that Rui understood the threat that Servil Bisha posed.

The impact freely permeated past his guard, through the skin and flesh of his abdomen. It penetrated all the way to his diaphragm, stunning the muscle and stunting his breathing a bit.

It was almost like his defenses did not matter at all. Rui was shocked, he had never experienced an attack like this.

Even though his raw power was not quite remarkable, the sense of threat his offense was no different from what Rui felt against Nel. If Rui did not have Inner Divergence that dispersed impacts across the entirety of his body uniformly, he would have suffered critical damage. He might have even gotten knocked out if his diaphragm suffered too much.

He could not afford to take many of those attacks. If anything, he felt a lot of respect for Arjun Erigaisi, who withstood countless such blows for a long time in the first round.

Rui was only able to avoid a portion of the blows, the remaining struck him, inflicting damage even though he did his very best with Elastic Shift, Acute Edge and Inner Divergence.

He was waiting.

Waiting for the right moment.

Servil threw a weight blow at Rui's face, hoping to knock him out.

('Now!') Rui rolled with the strike, as he fell backwards.

CLASP

His four limbs wrapped around Servil's arm, tightly coiling around it.

Before she could even mount an attack;

CRACK

"Aargh!" She grimaced collapsing to the ground as Rui dislocated her elbow cleanly, bending it at an unnatural angle.

But he wasn't done.

He slowly maneuvered to her back, lashing out at her neck the right timing. With his right arm wrapped tightly around it and his left hand on the back of her head pushing her into the chokehold. There wasn't much she could do. She struggled as she used her vibration permeation as she attacked with blows over and over. But soon her vision blurred as she struggled to breathe.

A proper chokehold severely restricted or completely blocked blood flow to the brain. She had several seconds before she lost consciousness.

Rui endured all of her attacks as excruciating as some of them were.

"Winner; Representative Rui Quarrier!"

The referee announced after he confirmed Servil had momentarily passed out. That was enough for Rui to fulfill the win conditions.

He let go of her as got up, struggling. Even in a brief period of time, she had managed to damage the joints of his lower body with her permeation technique.

She was strong. But unfortunately for her the VOID algorithm was remarkably compatible with her Martial Art.

"Aaaand we have a winner folks! Representative Rui Quarrier also secures his spot in the third round of the Martial Contest after a brutal victory against representative Servil Bisha!"

The crowd cheered loudly at those words amidst the applause.

On his way back, he pondered about his fight.

Servil was strong, but he had pronounced strengths and pronounced weaknesses. That made him very incompatible against someone like Rui. Someone who was very good at negating pronounced strength and exploiting pronounced weakness.

His next opponent was not going to be that simple, however. Ian Nepomniactchi was extremely strong, and he hadn't probably even shown all his cards yet.

That made Rui wary of him since he did not know what else Ian had. However, even if he had somehow revealed everything he could do, he was still an incredibly strong menace.

Rui shook his head, dismissing the matter. He had enough time to consider the matter later.

He returned the viewing balcony.

"Well done." Squire Kyrie congratulated.

"You nailed that quite well." Dylon threw a thumbs up. "No doubt thanks to my brilliant guidance, of course."

Rui ignored his remark as he focused on the arena. The next match was just about to be commenced. The outcome of this match was most interesting to him.

"Moving onto the next fight. We have representative Ferlicia Ernand of the Frtizer branch and her Blazing Fury Style. On the hand we have representative Mia Marnt and her Echo Blast Style representing the Fellen branch!"

The two women stepped into the arena, walking in and facing each other. They were incredibly determined and it reflected, not just on their face but in the heavy aura they exerted on the atmosphere.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Ferlicia reverted to her offensive grappling stance while Mia also reverted to her odd stance that focused on facilitating her sound attacks.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the fight.

WHOOSH

Ferlicia dashed towards Mia as her skin reddened with heat.

Mia immediately cupped around her mouth and roared as invisible sound bullets as she leapt back trying to maintain distance.

They both were already aware of the fighting style of their opponent, and were also aware of the win conditions to the fight, one way or another.

If Ferlicia managed to close the gap and get a hold of Mia, it was over. If Mia managed to keep Ferlicia at a distance, then she would be able to win the fight.

Ferlicia's toughness wasn't great. It wasn't bad, of course. But most of her defense came from the fact that nobody could touch her. However, Mia didn't need to touch her in order to damage her. She only needed to pepper her with sound bullets from a distance.

They both had little to no defenses against other. This battle had become a race. Ferlicia needed to close the gap and get a hold of Mia before she sustained enough damage from Mia's offenses, while Mia had to avoid ever getting into contact with Ferlicia. As a grappler she would undoubtedly get a hold of her and roast her alive, literally, if that ever happened.

Rui was quite curious about seeing how the two of them would go about this, it would also likely force them to use everything they had. Which was good for him.

Chapter 264: The Fourth Outcome

WHOOSH

Ferlicia leaped away as Mia launched a sound bullet in her direction. But the attack forced her put some distance between her and Mia, much to her chagrin.

She summersaulted away as sound bullets struck the ground where she was just a moment prior. The battle had gotten stuck in a deadlock, having been prolonged for some time by then.

POW!

Ferlicia grimaced as she got hit by a sound bullet. But it happened, and sooner than Rui had predicted. Ana was able to dodge Mia's attacks for as long as she did because she had three dimensions worth of maneuvering and was not restricted to terrain, but Ferlicia did not have that advantage.

She had managed to last a while because she was quick herself, as a consequence of developing a style meant to outmaneuver her opponents who try to maintain distance from her. But in the end it wasn't nearly good enough.

Mia's eyes narrowed as she launched several more sound bullets in her direction.

It should have been game over, yet suddenly;

WHOOSH!

A wall of flames erupted from her mouth, intercepting the bullets. Even though flames weren't solid and couldn't impede the path of the sound bullets, somehow the sound projectiles were largely dispelled by her flames.

Rui watched the sight with great intrigue. Her flames had raised the temperature of the air as a medium, disrupting the sound wave largely. He hadn't been sure whether Ferlicia's flames would be capable of feat prior, but it seemed like her flames were indeed potent enough. Even if sound was particularly vulnerable to disruptions of its medium, he was quite impressed by her feat.

She rushed in having finally found a way to break through, and was quite close.

She released another wall of flames when Mia tried to spam more sound bullets at her in attempt to prevent Ferlicia from enclosing in.

Yet it was in vain, Ferlicia emerged from her flames after they dispersed the sound bullets. She bullrushed towards Mia, charging for a takedown.

To her surprise, Mia didn't try to evade or escape, she instead rushed in herself throwing a haymaker at Ferlicia, seemingly hoping knock her out.

WHOOSH

Ferlicia calmly shifted her head, avoiding the blow. Just as she reached her;

BANG!

A loud sound echoed through the colosseum, hurting everyone's ears.

Down at the arena, Ferlicia was frozen, inches away from Mia.

Mia's right hand was besides Ferlicia's ear. Her fingers in a snapping position.

THUD

Ferlicia fell to the ground as right ear began bleeding.

Rui's eyes widened, having witnessed exactly what happened.

After Ferlicia evaded the strike, Mia unballled her fists and snapped her finger right next to Ferlicia's ear. Rui guessed she must have used a technique generate an extraordinary amount of sound with a snap.

The sound burst Ferlicia's eardrum and had also subsequently caused blunt force trauma, knocking her out.

THUD

Mia fell to her knees as her arms cupped her ears.

('It seems it's a technique she's not entirely immune to, either.') He noted as he saw blood dripping from her ears. Regardless, it won her the match, and the fact that she would be healed fully was more than enough justification for her choice.

It was a strategy he approved of. He would need to be very careful fighting her, she had proven herself to be clever.

"Aaaand we have a winner folks!" The commentator announced after the referee declared Mia the winner. "Representative Mia Marnt has earned her spot in the third round after a smashing victory against Representative Ferlicia Ernard!"

Rui had already updated her Mia's profile with the information he had obtained from this fight. He would create an adapted style later when he had more time. Besides, he wasn't sure he would even fight her even if he won his next match. She still had to fight the winner of the next match.



('That's not going to be easy to do.') Rui mused.

"Aaaand for the next match we representative Kaerts Omegde and his Soul Reader Style versus representative Fiona Roschem!"

Rui raised an eyebrow at that announcement, once more reminded that Fiona's Martial Art didn't even possess enough individuality to have a name. Which he still found incredibly surprising.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Kaerts took a neutral stance, while Fiona didn't bother taking a stance at all, once again. Yet Rui could feel that she wasn't putting on airs, nor was she being condescending.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the fight.

WHOOSH

Fiona dashed at Kaerts with fearsome speed, launching an incredibly powerful attack. Yet the fight didn't go as smoothly as it did last time.

Kaerts dodged her blow cleanly, much to everyone's surprise.

Not to Rui's, of course. He had already identified Kaerts' predictive prowess from the very start. It was quite compatible against Fiona's speed.

He even launched a speedy jab, but she calmly evaded the attack and began her own offense.

Kaerts responded with a desperate combination of evasion and defense. He used his insight to react to her attacks as early as possible, beginning the evasion maneuver even as she began her movements to get out of the trajectory of her attacks. But his physical ability was lacking. It seems his incredible predictive prowess that even Rui found respectable had carried him thus far.

The match did not end immediately, but it did not prolong for too long either.

BANG!

A powerful blow crashed into his solar plexus. The sheer impact sent him fling even as he coughed out blood.

He crashed into the arena walls, before collapsing to the ground, unconscious.

Rui shook his head, sighing. The sheer amount of force she was outputting could frankly give even Fae a good run for her money. Rui had understood what Kane and Hever had said back then about Fae maybe not being the strongest striker in their generation. He had ran into not just Fiona, but also Ian, who was a contender for that position.

Chapter 265: Third round

"Winner; representative Fiona Roschem!"

"And there you have it folks! Representative Fion Roschem makes it to the third round as well! This brings us to an end to the second round. Be sure to be here at the Martial Colosseum same time tomorrow to catch it in time!"

The crowd cheered loudly in response.

Rui sighed as he left the viewing balcony along with squires Kyrie and Dylon, deep in thought.

The following matches of the third round were;

Ian Nepomniachtchi vs Rui Quarrier.

Mia Marnt vs Fiona Roschem.

The winners of those would go onto fight each other in the finals.

"Freshen up a bit." Squire Kyrie told him before parting ways. "We'll meet in an hour."

Rui nodded as he headed his own way.

He had a lot to think about.

His next opponent was Ian Nepomniachtchi. He definitely had a lot to think about.

He had already gathered two round worth of data on Ian. Not idea, but not bad, and definitely better than nothing.

Yet he couldn't help but feel a smirk come on his face at the prospect of fighting him. Ian was incredibly strong, Rui would probably test his limits with his ability and Martial Art in that fight.

He immediately fixed himself a tub bath, soaking in, relaxing as the warmth permeated his ability.

He skimmed through all the information he had on Ian. A breathing technique specialist that generally fought by amplifying his parameters by using specific breathing techniques.

There were generally two traits that made him quite a formidable opponent. The first was that the degree to which he could amplify certain parameters by was incredibly high, matching and even surpassing dedicated Martial Artists to those parameters and fields.

The second was the fact that his parameters kept changing, making it incredibly tricky to fight him, far more so than any of the other contestants. One moment he was a speedster, the next moment he could be an offensive striker, the next moment he could be a defensive fighter.

In a way, he countered Rui extremely hard in a way. The fact that he was ever-changing meant that Rui couldn't just create a single adapted fighting style, he needed to create multiple adapted fighting styles. Furthermore, he needed a way to account for the rapid shifts and changes in Ian's parameters.

He sighed. If he was able to use the higher-end pattern recognition systems of the complete VOID algorithm, it wouldn't be a problem, but he couldn't. It was too difficult. He would need to analyze and memorize immense amounts of data in the middle of the fight and process them through the VOID algorithm.

This was also the main reason the VOID algorithm was not a viable fighting style in his previous life. It was simply too data-intensive in its entirety. That problem had not yet been solved in this life either, he had been able to mitigate the problem to a certain degree with his powerful mind, but that was not good enough by itself.

He needed to find a way to overcome this barrier, otherwise he wouldn't be able to travel his Martial path for too long.

He shook his head, putting asides such nebulous thoughts. They weren't relevant to the issue at hand.

Another thing he wasn't sure about was whether he had the leeway to hold back. So far, he had just barely managed to hold back Phantom Step, Blink and the Stinger.

Rui was absolutely certain he would need the Phantom Step to fight Ian, bare minimum. The worst-case scenario was that he would end up using all his trump cards and still end up losing. If he could do it, he would likely to keep the Blink plus Stinger combo hidden until he fought Fiona.

Time passed, eventually he met up with his instructors.

"Just do you best and hope for the best." Squire Dylan told him.

"You need to be wary of his everchanging flexibility." Squire Kyrie had told him. "In a way, his fighting style is not too dissimilar to yours."

Rui nodded at those words. He agreed. Ian was also able to change to fight his opponent. Of course, he did this in a different way than Rui did, only time would tell who did it better.

Soon the day passed and the third round was ready to commence.

"Welcome to the third round, ladies and gentlemen!" The commentator welcomed. "In the first match of the third round, we have representative Rui Quarrier and his Flowing Void Style representing the Hajin branch facing off against representative Ian Nepomniachtchi and his Breathing Mountain Style representing the Farund branch!"

The crowd cheered loudly, hyped for this anticipated matchup.

Rui and Ian entered the arena simultaneously as they walked up towards each other, never breaking eye contact.

"The promised time has come." Ian coldly stated. "I'll show you your place."

Rui stared at him wordlessly. He didn't care to engage in a juvenile exchange of insults.

Instead, he closed his eyes, emptying his thoughts.

There was nothing.

Soon, he focused every ounce of attention. Gathering every iota of concentration he could get his hands on.

The escalating focus could be felt. The very weight of his mind pushed down on all onlookers.

"Take your stances." the referee instructed.

Ian took a neutral stance, which Rui chose to mirror.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the match.

Ian immediately crossed the distance in an instant, throwing a mighty blow at Rui.

WHOOSH

The attack crashed into Rui, yet it was only after the image of Rui dispersed had he realized it was a feint.

Rui had immediately employed Phantom Step right off the bat. Ian could effectively move nearly as fast as Kane did while throwing blows only Fae could overwhelm. He was not arrogant to enough to hold back that many techniques.

POW POW POW

Rui threw a powerful combo of strikes, yet they merely banged on Ian's guard.

('Earth Breathing.') Rui mused. He had employed his defensive breathing technique.

Chapter 266: Eventually

Ian's defensive breathing technique was incredibly strong by itself. Rui was sure that it was stronger than all three of his defensive techniques combined.

POW!

An incredibly swift blow slammed into Rui's guard. Rui gritted his teeth as he used Inner Divergence, Elastic Shift and Acute Edge to mitigate as much of the impact as he could.

WHOOSH

Rui cleanly dodged the next attack with a well-timed feint, throwing a swift lower kick.

POW!

Ian merely threw an arrogant look at him. As if trying to say the blow didn't hurt him at all. The worst part was that it was probably true.

('Okay, let's try something else.')

Rui opened up some space between them, leaping back. Yet Ian immediately pursued, shifting to Lightning Breathing to increase his speed.

Yet rather than trying to retreat faster, Rui immediately paused and rushed back at Ian.

BAM!

A powerful impact crashed into Ian as Rui threw his most powerful blow; a Flowing Canon boosted with Outer Convergence, Vital Pressure, Parallel Walk and Balanced Direction. The sheer momentum and power of this attack was the highest of all of his attacks.

Not even Ian could shrug it off. He turtled behind his guard, even skidding back a meter from the impact.

It looked great, but Rui knew that the attack wasn't truly meaningful. Sure, it probably hurt and bruised him a bit, but in the long run that meant nothing. He needed to defeat Ian, not just hurt him.

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

WHOOSH

Rui evaded several strikes from Ian. His evasiveness was quite high, and he was confident of evading most of Ian's strikes.

Problem was that he was finding it really hard to develop a thorough adapted style. It was without a doubt the most difficult fighting style that Rui had ever had to try and adapt to. The sheer complexity of the issue at hand made it even worse than fighting all-rounders.

Rui had to cleanly navigate the issue with an incredible amount of thoroughness and care.

WHOOSH

POW POW POW!

Rui evaded a strike from him as he threw a flurry of strikes.

He made some observations about Ian based on all the data at hand. Most of it was centered on how he employed the breathing techniques.

He used the Lightning Breathing any time he wasn't defending or attacking. Every time he did attack, he coupled it with Fire Breathing when he was about to launch an attack and completely shifted to Fire Breathing when he was sure the attack would land.

BAM!

Ian managed to get him with a powerful haymaker. Rui grimaced as he retreated. Ian's offense was not something Rui could afford to be hit with too often. His defense was good, no doubt, but Ian was at a level where he could hit above what Rui could consistently take.



Normally Rui dealt with this issue by adapting a complete style suit to taking Ian down, but he didn't have that here.

POW POW POW!

Ian managed to land a flurry of weighted jabs yet again. He was almost adapting Rui in his own way. This was the problem with someone with such an unnatural level of flexibility.

WHOOSH

Rui fainted avoiding a strike as he tried to land a Flowing Canon, but alas.

POW!

Ian intercepted him with Lightning Breathing.

The fight prolonged for a bit, yet the scales only ever tipped in his favour.

BAM!

A powerful kick sent Rui flying away.

('Guess I have no choice.') Rui sighed. He could not really win as things continued. The need for using at least another trump card was starting to get unbearable. He would lose at this rate, without a doubt.

But Rui had to wait, a trump card was most powerful and effective when it was unknown.

Ian chased after him launching a powerful weight straight punch.

Rui waited as much as he could, ducking only when the punch was incredibly close. The punch extended closer and closer as Ian drew in closer and closer.

Yet before it could hit Rui;

PEW!

Rui's right toe went flying as it burrowed itself in Ian's gut.

Rui had waited until the moment Ian switched from Lightning Breathing to Fire Breathing to launch a more powerful attack when he saw Rui unmoving initially.

This was effectively the same way he unleashed the Stinger on Fae. The difference was that this was even more effective because Ian had already transitioned from Lightning Breathing to Fire Breathing, meaning this had occurred after his speed had dropped.

He had extended too much with trying to land that strike on Rui that Rui's toe had already long exited his periphery vision.

Furthermore, he had been not using any Lightning Breathing during the end of that strike, focusing purely on Fire Breathing trying to launch a powerful attack on Rui's face, trying to knock him out.

This was exactly what Rui was aiming for.

Only when Ian was not using his Lightning Breathing could this tactic work, and so Rui waited for a moment where he had a high probability of not using Lightning Breathing. He had to time it carefully because otherwise he simply would not be able to apply the Stinger that effectively.

Ian's Lightning Breathing and Earth Breathing were both quite powerful and would have foiled this attack after all.

The wound was deep in his abdomen. Rui had aimed for the diaphragm, the muscle that was the source of his breathing techniques.

"You bastard...!" Ian cursed in pain as he retreated. The diaphragm was quite deep and thus Rui was not able to mortally wound the muscle, however just inflicting a wide enough open wound on him was probably good enough to cripple his breathing techniques partially, if not entirely.

It would all depend on how good Ian's endurance was. In the worst case scenario, the difference wouldn't be significant enough, and Rui would effectively need to beat only a slightly weaker Ian who was also now aware of the Stinger.

He would find out eventually.

Chapter 267: Clashes

BAM!

Rui's eyes flew wide open as Ian struck him with a more powerful blow than ever before. Rui skidded away as he gazed at Ian with a surprised expression. Why was he suddenly stronger than before despite the wound?

Ian had a furious expression on his face. "You bastard...!"

He coughed up a little blood.

('He's pushing himself to the absolute limit.') Rui realized. Ian was essentially pushing himself to his peak at the cost of accelerating the deterioration of his condition.

WHOOSH

Ian abused Lightning Breathing even as blood splurged out of his wound, to move faster than he ever had, reaching Rui in an instant.

BOOM!

Rui grimaced as an immensely powerful blow crashed against his guard. His body shook with the impact as he leapt back. Even the combination of his three defensive techniques weren't able to mitigate the impact.

Rui's senses heightened as he realized they had entered the final phase of the battle.

He abandoned all offense and shifted all of his focus on evasion and defense. Whatever happened, he could not afford to make a mistake! A single mistake was all Ian needed to turn the tables around for himself.

WHOOSH

Rui carefully evaded a strike with a feint as he immediately activated his maneuvering techniques to open up distance between them.

However, Ian was relentless.

"RAARGH!" he snarled as he shook the very ground with the sheer force he was accelerating towards with Rui with.

WHOOSH

Rui ducked sharply as he evaded yet another strike from Ian.

BOOM!

He spun out of the path of a drop kick that cracked the ground Rui was upon a moment earlier.

The entire colosseum was absorbed into the battle, frozen.

Everyone understood that they were witnessing the decisive part of the battle.

And yet, the clinch came suddenly.

WHOOSH

BAM!

Ian's blow crashed into a feint as Rui sneaked past his guard, launching a FLOWing Canon on his wound.

"ARGH!" Ian snarled in pain as he crouched clasping his wound.

BAM!

A powerful kick landed on his jaw, disorienting him. He ignored his condition, lashing out a flurry of wild attacks, but his condition had deteriorated too much, he was barely able to use breathing techniques.

POW!

A simple uppercut to the jaw pushed his blunt force trauma beyond the threshold.

THUD

Ian collapsed to the ground as he bled out, unmoving.

"Winner; representative Rui Quarrier!" The referee declared.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then the crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

"And there you have it folks! The winner of this fight is representative Rui Quarrier! Against all odds he managed to overcome one of the favourites with a stunning victory! He moves onto the finals of the Martial Contest!" The commentator cried.

Rui exhaled, as he calmed his beating heart. He threw a deep look at Ian, who was being treated. He did not respect his character, but he respected his power, his perseverance and his determination. He never gave up until the very end, despite his condition.

He left the arena immediately after.

"Nicely done my boy." Squire Dylon smirked, throwing him a thumbs up.

"You have managed to reach the finals, win or lose this is an achievement you have every right to take pride in." Squire Kyrie told him.

"Thanks." Rui smiled wryly. He was not blind to why she was saying that. He was relatively certain she thought he had a high chance of losing in the finals. She was just being more tactful about it. Squire Dylon on the other hand was very candid about that.

Frankly, Rui appreciated when people were blunt in such circumstances, Dylon even managed to be funny about it. Though he did appreciate her sentiment.

"Aaand onto the final fight of the third-round folks." the commentator announced. "One on hand, we have representative Mia Marnt and her Echo Blast Style representing the Fellen branch. On the other we have representative Fiona Roschem representing the Vargard branch!"

The crowd erupted in cheers as the atmosphere lit up with excitement.

The two representatives entered the arena, facing each other. Rui could merely be surprised at the contrast between the two representatives. Mia was in her early twenties while Fiona was fifteen, like himself, furthermore she was short and petite for someone her age. It really did look like an adult was trying to bully a child.

Yet no one in the colosseum entertained that notion for even a second. If there was a bully at all, it would certainly not be Mia Marnt.

Fiona simply gazed at her, yet she exerted pressure on those who beheld her.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

Mia adopted her usual neutral stance with her hands in position to immediately begin attacking with her sound bullets. Rui approved of this decision when considering how fast Fiona was, she needed to maximize her chances of being able to keep Fiona at a distance.

Fiona on the other hand, yet again, did not adopt a stance.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the match.

WHOOSH

Fiona crossed the distance between them in an instance.

Yet, for once, things didn't particularly go her way.

BANG!

A powerful sound bullet collided into her, pushing her back.

Rui raised an eyebrow, impressed. Mia had launched an extremely potent singular sound bullet, instead of a barrage of sound bullets. Rui approved of that decision. Stopping Fiona should be her greatest priority since Mia would not be able to withstand even a single attack from her.

Knowing that she would lash out and bull-charge like she normally did, a single sound bullet with high power had better chances than a barrage of sound bullets. Since the energy was more focused, rather than spread out.

However, it didn't deter Fiona for too long. She simply lashed out once more, this time even harder.

BANG!

The sound bullets had the power to blow her back but not enough to hurt her much, seemingly.

What ensued was a ferocious battle between the two of them.

Chapter 268: What Else?

Fiona threw herself at Mia multiple times, being blown away each time. She could have chosen a route where she used evasive maneuvering to dodge Mia's aim, but instead she thrust herself headfirst into Mia's super-powered attacks.

Yet each time, she managed to reach further and further.

FLICK

She managed to touch Mia's face, earning Mia's shock, before the sound bullet touched her.

BAM!

She swiftly landed a blow before the attack could push her away



Mia skidded back despite guarding it, immediately setting up a sound attack.

Yet it was too late.

POW!

A swift kick to the jaw sent her flying across the arena. Fiona didn't even wait for her to gain her bearing.

BAM BAM BAM!

She pummeled Mia ruthlessly.

POW!

The second strike to the jaw.

THUD

Mia collapsed as she lost consciousness.

"Winner; representative Fiona Roschem." The referee declared.

"And there you have it folks! Representative Fiona Roschem will be taking her spot in the finals against Representative Rui Quarrier! The finals will be conducted here tomorrow at the same time. Be sure not to miss it!"

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

Rui exhaled at that sight, deep in thought. He had expected as much, so he wasn't too surprised.

What he found interesting was that Fiona had had to exert herself more each round. In her last fight, Mia was actually competitive to a certain degree.

Thankfully, Rui had gotten three rounds worth of data on her. He would be able to construct a better style.

However, Fiona was an all-rounder. The type that the VOID algorithm dealt with the worst. In order to adapt to her to the degree Rui wished he could, he would need to employ the higher-end data science-driven pattern recognition systems of the VOID algorithm. But he was currently unable to use it because it was too difficult, the amount of data he had to memorize and process on the spot was just too much even for his enhanced cognition.

Rui sighed inwardly. He was truly beginning to experience his limitations. So far, even his incomplete and partial mastery of an insufficient VOID algorithm had always been enough, but in this tournament, he had been shown his limits.

Ian Nepomiachtchi first and now Fiona Roschem. This tournament had exposed him to a new tier of power than showed him the VOID algorithm's inadequacies.

His urge to perfect the VOID algorithm had grown much deeper than it was before. He had always been driven, but only now was he truly impatient.

Unfortunately, the finals were in twenty-four hours, and he could only give it his best shot.

But he vowed to tackle the problem of the VOID algorithm more seriously once the tournament ended.

For now, he had to find some way to defeat Fiona.

He left the viewing balcony, exiting the colosseum accompanied by his instructors as they headed towards the living quarters.

"We'll have to talk once you get some rest." Squire Kyrie told him once more, as they split ways.

Rui simply nodded as he headed down towards the cafeteria to get something to eat. He was lost in thought, he didn't even notice Fiona until he almost bumped into her.

"Woah." He paused abruptly, startled.

"Hi." She said. "Going to grab a bite?"

"...Yeah." Rui replied.

"Great! I was headed there myself." She said. "Let's go together, there's nobody else left here except for the two of us."

Rui simply stared at her, before shrugging. "Sure."

As they headed down, Rui simply walked in silence, unsure of what to say to her. They weren't friends, after all. Hell, they were going to be fighting against each other in the finals of the Martial Contest. He didn't know anything about her, though he was curious about her.

"You know..." He began. "I was surprised that you haven't named your Martial Art yet."

"Really? Why so?" She asked, curiosity flashing across her silver eyes.

Rui wasn't sure what to say, Headmaster Aronian did say that the significance of naming Martial Art was not something they revealed to Martial Apprentices, so he did not know if she knew. He did not want to meddle and make things inadvertently harder for her by telling her the importance of it.

"Because you're so strong." He said. "Not to mention you've been a Martial Apprentice for a long time, I thought you would have named it by now."

She shrugged. "Never felt the urge to name it. Martial Art are no more than collections of techniques anyway, what's the point of naming such a thing?"

Her words essentially confirmed that her Martial Art definitely did not have much, if at all any, originality and individuality at all.

So basically, she had gotten this far through some combination of sheer talent, resources and mundane albeit hard work.

"Do you enjoy Martial Art?" Rui asked.

"No." She said.

"Do you enjoy fighting?" Rui asked.

"No." She replied.

"Do you enjoy power?"

"It's helpful, but I don't particularly enjoy it, no."

Rui had partial expected her answers. He had sensed it when she fought. She showed more life and energy in her talks with him than in her fights in the Martial Contest.

"Then why do you fight? Why do you traverse your Martial Path? Why do you practice your Martial Art?"

"Because I'm good at it." She shrugged. "A bit too good at it, in fact. What else am I going to if not this?"

Rui was speechless at her answer. It was not something he ran into often, if at all. All of his friends had a core motivation, goal or interest.

Fae fought for her family.

Kane fought for freedom.

Nel fought because he loved fighting.

Hever fought because he wanted to pursue his Martial Path.

Even Milliana and Dalen fought for similar reasons as well.

Yet, he realized he shouldn't be all too surprised. Even back on Earth, people often did things because they were extremely good at it.

#### Chapter 269: Insights

So, her logic wasn't all that surprising with that consideration in mind. Talent was often an opportunity, and it was an opportunity she had taken.

"What about you?" She asked, curiosity flashing through her eyes. "Do you enjoy Martial Art?"

"With every fiber of my heart." Rui unhesitatingly replied. Normally, he would not say something that cheesy, but he did genuinely believe what he said. It was the unadulterated truth.

He would not have dedicated half his life to Project Water had he not truly wanted to fulfill his dream. Dying, reincarnating and being given an even greater opportunity to fulfill not just that dream, but also his original dream of wanting to become a Martial Artist, had only made his desire far stronger than they were.

Back on Earth, he was constrained by all kinds of limits. Not just personal limits such as his health and other personal circumstances, but also the limits of the importance and capability of martial arts.

On the other hand, Gaea was a miraculous world that often felt like it had been hand-crafted specifically for his sake.

"Hmmm..." She hummed at his words. "Is it really that fun? What are you trying to accomplish?"

Rui paused, he wasn't sure he should tell her, frankly it could help her against him in the finals tomorrow.

But he supposed it didn't matter, by now the bare basics of his Martial Art would have undoubtedly been leaked, just like how he easily got his hands on the bare basics of the Martial Art of the other representatives.

"My Martial path is perfect adaptive evolution. I wish to create a Martial Art that allows me to perfectly adapt and evolve to not just all Martial Art and Martial Artists, but all entities that can engage in physical conflict." He said, confidently.

Fiona's eyes widened at those words.

What an incredibly ambitious Martial Path! The sheer difficulty of creating and mastering such a nigh-omnipotent Martial Art could not possibly be stated!

She couldn't even begin to imagine what such a Martial Art would even look like!

"..."

She was speechless.

"... I see." She had managed to squeeze out. Her instructors had told her that Rui's Martial Art was fluid and formless and took on a shape that was more optimal at dealing with his opponent, but hearing it from Rui was completely different. She hadn't realized just how far it went, and far he intended to go with it.

"Is such a thing even possible?" Fiona asked earnestly, curiosity brimming in her eyes.

Rui suppressed the urge to confidently say yes.

But the truth simply was... he could not possibly know. He was a scientist after a Martial Artist, and a scientist, he didn't make claims that were not only lacking in evidence but perhaps had evidence to the contrary.

He had already failed in achieving his dream once, and when he was given a second chance, the difficulty of success had risen astronomically. He just could not in good faith say that it was definitely possible.

"... I would like to believe it's possible." Rui said slowly, after a brief silence. "But I don't know."

"What if it isn't possible?" Fiona asked, as her curiosity intensified.

"I can never know that." He replied. "It's only truly impossible when one gives up. If it isn't possible, then I'll just die trying till my last breath."

"I see... In comparison to you, I feel a bit shallow to be honest." She said. "Power is something I'm good at, it's also very helpful and useful. But beyond that..." she shrugged.

"Power is a tool." Rui said. "A tool to achieve what one wishes to achieve. What do you want to use this tool for?"

"I'm not sure, making a living?" She pondered.

Rui laughed at those words. "Well, you already have more than enough power to make a living. So why do you pursue power?"

She shrugged helplessly.

Evidently, she wasn't too sure herself. It seemed she was merely going with the flow.

Frankly, Rui could even understand. She was a prodigious genius with unbelievable talent. She discovered her Martial Path at the age of nine. She had instantly been thrust into Martial World at an incredibly young age, with the hopes that she would become a renowned Martial Artist.

Rui vaguely guessed her family was much lighter about the matter. Perhaps if her family had been as oppressive as Kane's family, she would have also developed a desire to break free of her shackles. Perhaps if the Arrancar Family was like the Roschem Family, Kane would have also been less driven than he is today.

He couldn't say.

"Well, nothing wrong with that." Rui said, shrugging. You didn't necessarily have to have a singular goal or ambition. Plenty of people lived perfectly fine lives in this manner.

Though Rui suspected she wouldn't be able to break through to higher Martial Realms with that sort of attitude. To merely become a Martial Squire candidate, one needed their Martial Art to have a certain degree of individuality and originality.

Rui didn't think she would fulfill that condition with that kind of outlook, perhaps she would simply never become a Squire candidate.

Frankly, it was quite shocking to Rui. When he first heard about her, he had pictured someone who stood at the peak of the Apprentice Realm and was on the verge of a breakthrough to the Squire Realm. However, since then, his understanding of the Martial Realms and the Martial Path had deepened significantly.

He kept these thoughts to himself however. The two of them spoke more freely, delving into all kinds of topics as they had dinner together.



"You're telling me Kane's epithet is the 'Elusive Wind'?" Rui laughed as Fiona recounted a tale from the past. She had told him a lot of interesting things about his friends, showing him a side of their lives that he hadn't known of. "He never told me that! That's hilarious."

"He hates it." She giggled. "Every significant Martial Artist gets an unofficial epithet, I imagine you'll also get an epithet, you made it to the finals, after all."

#### Chapter 270: Ready

Rui did a double-take at those words. It was unexpected. Yet the idea of being called something incredibly corny or cheesy or flashy made him cringe.

"Uh. Can they not?" He asked.

"Sorry, they can't not. The Martial community of this Empire loves doing that." She smirked.

They bantered a bit more, until Rui realized how much time had passed. He had truly gotten absorbed into the conversation.

"Good talk." He said, getting up. "But I should return now."

She nodded at his words. "This was fun."

Rui simply stared at her for a second.

"I look forward to fighting you tomorrow." He said, with a serious edge to his voice. "May the best fighter win."

She simply shrugged. "They always do."

Rui simply smiled at those words before taking his leave.

He thought about his conversation with her, having gotten a stronger grasp of her character and personality.

And then his thoughts soon proceeded to how to defeat her. Ultimately, that was what he would be setting out to accomplish.

His instructors came to his room shortly after, discussing the matter about her.

"Well." Squire Dylon put a hand on Rui's shoulder. "Do your best, we'll console you after."

Squire Kyrie glared at him. But frankly, she didn't have anything more meaningful to add. Although she was a Martial Squire and had vastly more experience than Rui, knowing how to fight specific opponents optimally was quite literally Rui's entire Martial Path. And he had shown everyone time and time again that he was exceptionally brilliant at it.

"There's a high chance she'll begin the fight lashing out with a bullrush." Rui said. "Thus far she began every fight in that manner and didn't stop even when it was clear that her opponents were quite prepared for that approach. Nor did she stop even if it was the sub-optimal solution, she's demonstrated remarkable rigidity and lack of flexibility in her tactical approach."

Squire Kyrie nodded at that. "She's quite arrogant in her fighting style in that sense, only someone who doesn't believe they will lose, fights like that."

('Or someone who doesn't care too much if they lose.') He thought inwardly. He too had thought her carelessly rigid fighting style stemmed from deep arrogance, but after talking with her for a while, he had started to realize she simply wasn't as invested in the fight as he was. She did her best, but only physically.

The two instructors tried giving Rui several suggestions and tips. Some he agreed with and some he didn't. Ultimately, it was up to him. He was the one fighting, after all.

Soon, time passed, a lot.

"Fuuu..." He exhaled, as he closed his eyes.

He emptied his thoughts, one by one. He could hear nothing except for his heartbeat and his breathing.

And then the image of Fiona manifested in his mind.

His concentration accumulated.

His focus sharpened.

His mind gathered.

It weighed on its environment, pushing down on it as it exerted incredible pressure.

An unknown amount of time passed as Rui remained in that state of mind.

"Rui." Squire Kyrie knocked on the door.

Even she raised an eyebrow, surprised at how well Rui had focused himself. She had been worried he would have been too anxious or demoralized to win. But witnessing the determination in his eyes reassured her.

"Good." Squire Dylan said. "You're at your peak, maintain that."

Rui wordlessly walked past them, he simply did not want to waste even the slightest bit of energy on anything not useful. Even in the short journey to the Martial Colosseum, he merely closed his eyes. Shutting off as much input as he could.

His mental state was powerful, but it was also delicate, it could easily crumble if his attention was drawn away even slightly. Doing so would not weaken much at all, but being at his peak mental state would always ensure that he brought out his very best.

He immediately walked towards the arena once they arrived at the Martial Colosseum.

"It's here folks!" The commentator cried. "The fight we've all been awaiting! The finale of the 27th Martial Contest!!"

The crowd erupted in volatile cheers and applause as chaotic excitement sizzled the atmosphere.

"On one hand we have the highly anticipated Fiona Roschem, known as the mighty Chosen Incarnate, she is the representative with the highest estimated odds of victory according to the gambling pool! She will representing the Vargard branch!"

Fiona walked into the arena, taking her spot.

"On the other hand, we have the dark horse of this tournament! Securing victory after victory, he made it to the very finals where he'll be fighting with everything he has for the title of Martial Champion!" The commentator cried. Earning deafening cheers and applause from the crowd. "Representing the Hajin branch with his Flowing Void Style. His unique yet potent, fluid and everchanging style has earned him the title of the Voidbringer in the Martial Community!"

Rui froze even as he walked in, Fiona merely threw him a short smug smirk. Rui could almost hear her saying 'I told you so.'

He sighed, shaking his head slightly. He hadn't planned on getting distracted but he couldn't ignore such a ridiculous epithet.

The Voidbringer?

Rui wanted to crawl under his bed and hide forever every time he thought of calling himself the 'Voidbringer.'

Who was the idiot who named him that? He would not spare him!

"Take your stances." The referee instructed.

And immediately, all of his emotions on the matter melted away as his mind immediately recentered itself at those words. His subconscious mind had cooperated, realizing the significance of the upcoming fight.

Immediately, the atmosphere grew taut.

His raw focus cut through through the shallow excitement and chaos in the atmosphere. Its sharpness drew attention of every person.

It pressed on them, threatening them.

The full weight of his focus and concentration driven by unfathomable emotions triggered an instinctual sense of danger in nearly all those who beheld him. They felt fear merely gazing upon his form.

He was ready.