

Martial Unity 271

Chapter 271: Not Going Down

A drop of sweat trickled down Julian's face as he watched Rui and Fiona facing off at each other with anxious tensions. All of the children were silent for once, staring at the two representatives facing each other off, not blinking.

Julian had seen wonders in the time that they had spectated the Martial Contest. He had witnessed the Martial Artists accomplish magical things one after the other. It shaken his worldview. Although he had worked with research teams that conducted research on Martial Art, he hadn't quite seen anything remotely comparable to this.

However, what truly caught his attention was seeing a side of his brother that he hadn't seen. Rui was normally very pleasant, but when he stepped on the ring, he had become incredibly intimidating and scary. He was also very strong, having made it to the finals.

Yet even Julian couldn't help but feel quite anxious when he saw that Rui had to face that monster girl who thrashed everyone she fought against.

He hoped Rui would be fine.

He was not the only one who felt that way.

"How do you think it's going to go?" Fae asked in a different section of audience stands.

"He has an uphill battle." Hever said calmly.

Kane didn't reply. He hated to admit it, but Fiona was stronger than he'd imagined. They were of the same age, but he didn't think he could beat her. In fact, the only reason they could even have a competitive match was because Kane had the Void Step technique.

He simply ignored Fae and stared at the duo.

"Take your stances." The referee instructed, down at the arena.

Fiona didn't move. However, Rui did expect this. He raised his heels of the ground, lightly hopping. It was a stance that facilitated agility.

"Begin!"

WHOOSH

Fiona crossed the distance in an instant, launching a powerful blow at Rui.

WHOOSH

Her fist crashed into a feint as Rui smoothly evaded her blow. The mildest flash of surprise flicked onto her face. She hadn't expected Rui to be able to handle her first blow that well.

Rui not only evaded her attack but spun as he threw a speedy jab at her face.

BAM!

He felt a heavy blow crash into him quicker than his own attack. He grimaced as he just barely managed to disperse a portion of the impact with Inner Divergence, shocked at her power. Only Fae could surpass her force, the fact that she could bypass his defense with ordinary strikes was ridiculous, not even Nel could do that.

POW POW POW!

She launched a flurry of strikes against him. Rui turtled up as he retreated, trying to mitigate the impacts as much as he could and open up some distance between them. Yet she launched herself at him, throwing a wild haymaker at his head, hoping to knock him out.

WHOOSH

Rui evaded the strike thanks to a combination of the VOID algorithm, Primordial Instinct and the Phantom Step. However, the importance of the role his enhanced mind could not be downplayed either. All of these together resulted in extremely quick reactions that could give even Kane a run for his money.

Not even Fiona was fast enough to overwhelm his reactions in close quarters like she did nearly everyone else.

A mild frown flashed across her face as she sensed that.

Yet, his mind could not make his defenses stronger. Her offense power was overwhelming. Every single one of her strikes was on par with his Flowing Canon.

BAM!

Rui grimaced as a powerful blow landed on his guard, launching him a distance away. Trying to evade every single strike threw was pointless, it as impossible. Her raw speed was extremely high, surpassing his. He was able to compensate with his special circumstances, but not to the degree where he could evade even half her strikes, let alone all. Only Kane could possibly accomplish that incredibly difficult feat.

POW POW POW!

She lashed out against him, throwing a barrage of strikes at him. Each strike was extremely painful, bruising him visibly. His arm had become a mess in a just short period of time.

Yet he was not resigned.

WHOOSH

BAM!

He rushed in misdirecting her incoming strike with Phantom Step, he charged with every ounce of his power, as he threw the strongest Flowing Canon he mustered.

BAM!

She skidded away a bit as she blocked the strike.

Ultimately, it didn't make too big a difference. But it was the first strike he had cleanly landed on her. It was a symbol of his competitiveness, in a way.

She simply lashed out at him, yet to her surprise.

WHOOSH

He cleanly evaded her yet again.

POW!

A second strike landed on her. She barely managed to block it in time, much to her surprise. She lashed out, throwing powerful blows one after the other.

Yet to everyone's surprise.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

Rui began dodging better and better. His timing grew more and more refined as the accuracy of his motions increased in real time.

Adapting to all-rounders was never easy, so how was Rui accomplishing it?

('Your tactical flexibility is non-existent.') Rui mused. ('That makes you easier to predict.')

Because she was so extraordinarily strong, especially for her age, she had become accustomed to winning via the application of her techniques alone. She nearly needed to exert herself and her techniques in the most straightforward manner possible. Very few people could stand up to her when she went all out, and the few that could never last long.

That had always been enough, especially for her character.

This was her greatest strength.

Yet, it was also her greatest weakness, perhaps her only weakness. Yet it was a weakness that one had to be strong enough to exploit.

Rui, however, wasn't flawless.

BAM!

She landed a powerful kick on his guard, propelling him away. She felt a strange sense of defiance welling up in her. The idea of losing to someone as old as her didn't feel nice.

"I'm not going down that easily."

Chapter 272: Surpassed

Rui smiled mildly when he heard that. Yet his smile froze when he she lashed out an even greater speed than before.

BOOM!

He grimaced in pain as he skidded away.

('Just how much power do you have?') He wondered, shocked. He could see a strained expression on her face, contrasting to the calm blank expression from prior.

His eyes widened.

Had she only truly began to push herself?

The notion was terrifying.

Yet Rui's mouth cracked into a grin as he sensed determination in her demeanor.

She was the strongest.

And yet, he grinned.

He could feel her body tensing up as she drew boundless energy from within her petite physique. It shook him unlike any fight he had been in before, pushing him beyond his limits.

His eyes widened.

His pupils dilated.

In that instant, time slowed down.

The world disappeared.

Everything disappeared.

And yet, she was there.

The only thing he saw was her.

Her everything.

From the tiniest strands of her brown hair to the furthest inch of her fair light skin.

From her soft beautiful features to the ferocious power hidden beneath.

He saw everything.

His mind converged into one as he entered a state of absolute awareness and focus.

In that instant, he could feel it.

He was stronger than he had ever been.

"Come." He beckoned. Like a lover would.

Yet it was not her he loved; it was the VOID she had drawn about from within him.

RUMBLE

She stepped. The sheer power of the simple motion shook the very ground.

WHOOSH

She disappeared in the eyes of audience, and yet.

WHOOSH

Rui avoided her blow with motions as smooth as the gentle ebbs of a soft flowing stream. Yet, his powerful attacks resembled a tumultuous violent river!

BAM!

She blocked his strike as she struck him with an immensely powerful blow. Rui spun out of it as he did his very best to mitigate his damage.

What followed was a brutal exchange of attacks as Rui did his best to mitigate the damage from her extraordinary power.

But the odds were stacked against him. He had endured a large number of blows from her at that point, his condition had already deteriorated from his physical peak.

Every inch of his body ached.

Every movement hurt.

His skin was a bruised mess. He was bleeding from more places than he realized.

On the other hand, Fiona was nearly unscratched. The only attack that left a bruise on her was his Flowing Canon.

The only attack in his arsenal that could truly hurt her was the Stinger.

And she knew it.

And he knew she knew it. And she knew he knew she knew it.

That's why he hadn't used it yet. She was being careful of it, yet she wasn't as easy to manipulate as Nel was. If he tried launching the Stinger, she would intercept his leg with ease, being much faster, and probably even break it on the spot before he could do anything with it.

There was only one trump card he had left.

Yet, this was even harder to use.

But because her movements were so explosively agile and fast, he was not able to get hold of a decent opportunity to use his final trump card.

BAM!

A powerful side kick slammed into his guard as skidded away. Yet, in the fraction of a moment she had already crossed the distance to him, and threw a combo of strikes.

WHOOSH

Rui ducked, avoiding them as he threw a sharp spinning kick empowered with all the Outer Convergence and Vital Pressure he could manage.

BAM

His attack stopped dead at her ankle.

He couldn't even budge it.

BOOM!

Rui barely managed to roll out of the way as a drop kick impacted onto the very location he was at just a moment prior.

She immediately spun, dashing at him aggressively, as she launched a shooting maneuver, trying to tackle him and then crush him on the ground with her greater power.

But he was wise enough to decline her wrestling offer. His biggest advantage relating to his evasive reactions would be diminished, while her greatest advantage; her power would be highly emphasized.

He would be an utter disgrace to his Martial Path if he chose to grapple Fiona.

WHOOSH

He managed to dodge yet another attack as he wiped some blood streaming down his face from a wound on his head.

He didn't have much time.

And almost as if recognizing that, his entire body cooperated as it did its very best to prevent his condition from collapsing.

Yet, the end was near. Even Fiona had sensed that as she intensified her attacks.

POW POW POW!

Rui launched a barrage of weight blows, yet Fiona effortlessly blocked them.

BAM!!

A powerful impact collided against him, launching him away as he grimaced in pain. He gritted his teeth as he entered his evasive maneuvering stance. He felt an extraordinarily strong urge to start abusing the Blink technique to mitigate his dire situation. Yet he managed to impose self-control, restraining his urges.

The reason was simple. Frankly, she was so much superior to him that even the Blink technique could not allow him to start winning. It was just not enough. It was a strong technique, yes. But she had many strong techniques as well. Blink by itself could not turn the tides.

The only thing that could turn possibly the tides was timing Blink with a Phantom Step and a Stinger attack with more than ninety-nine percent accuracy and precision, to inflict critical and vital damage on her.

That was it.

He had nothing else.

Yet Fiona had no intentions of making life easy for him.

She crouched as her leg muscles tensed until they were tauter than contorted steel wire bundles, brimming with an unimaginable amount of power. Even her veins bulged, unable to contain the energy she had gathered as her face trembled with effort.

Every single person stirred at what was happening.

And also...

What was about to happen.

BOOM!!!

Rui's instincts screamed as she launched herself charging towards Rui unleashing a swing of untold power.

For just the briefest of moments, her power surpassed the Apprentice Realm.

BOOM!!!

Chapter 273: The Final Outcome

The attack crashed into Rui's vulnerable abdomen, a gigantic impact wave rippling through his body. He did his best as he tried to mitigate as much of the impact as he could with Elastic Shift, Acute Edge and Inner Divergence.

Yet it was sorely insufficient. Rui closed his eyes as he experienced a level of suffering that he hadn't since the conditioning training of the Stinger technique. Every cell in his body ached as he was launched across the arena. Large swathes of his skin were sheared off by the rough ground as he landed into a tree in the arena.

Yet what he did next shook those who beheld his mangled bloody form.

He grinned.

"...Gotcha." He stared into Fiona's eyes with a hauntingly ecstatic smile that cut through his mangled bloody face.

Fiona felt a shiver climb up her spine as she gazed into his intense bloodshot eyes.

Then, and only then, did the pain follow.

SPLURT SPLURT SPLURT!

Blood pissed out of her neck, shocking everyone who witnessed it.

What had happened??

"...Huh?" Fiona murmured, not understanding. Her body was saturated with pain-suppressing endorphins that the human body naturally released in states of extreme excitement.

But reality soon took a grip of her.

She immediately pressed her hand to her neck, suppressing the blood flow as her eyes widened in shock at what she felt.

A hole!

A hole in her neck!

She glanced at Rui in shock.

"...Ha... Haha..." He laughed unsteadily.

THUD

He put one foot on the ground.

THUD

The other foot soon followed.

He grabbed onto the tree, pulling himself up.

He struggled to stand. His body was a mess. No one would be surprised if he simply collapsed that very moment.

And yet.

He took his stance, grinning weakly.

He was exactly where he wanted to be.

"Come..." He squeezed out. "The fight only ends when one of us falls."

She stared at him in disbelief and shock.

Had Fiona known that launching that attack then would have resulted in a toe-sized hole in her neck, she would not have done it.

But she did do it, and consequently, it did.

Rui had thrown her caution of his Stinger off by feinting a weight shift onto his right leg, making her think he was not going to move it and eliminating it as a threat in her mind. And only when the timely blink during the attack came, did he launch the Stinger.

A person's defense was most vulnerable at the moment of their attack. Rui had taken the role a patient hunter, waiting for the right moment to strike.

And yet, even the combination of a never-before seen trump card, along with her own mental blind spot was not enough by itself.

No.

It needed a sacrifice, a sacrifice Rui had to provide. A sacrifice he did provide. He sacrificed defense as he abandoned his guard to land the Stinger quicker, harder and deeper.

That was the price of landing his critical Blink Stinger successfully.

It was a costly price.

He was certain he had broken, at the very least, a few ribs. His bleeding had accelerated. His skin had been torn in multiple areas. His body was bruised essentially all over, even his balls hurt.

Yet, it was not in vain.

The carotid arteries and the jugular veins transported an enormous amount of blood. Furthermore, they carried blood not to any ordinary organ, but to the very brain itself, among all organs.

And Rui had severed nearly half of them in her neck.

So what if he broke a few ribs? So what if his skin tore? So what if he was bleeding from open wounds?

Did it hurt?

Yes, it hurt more than words could describe.

Yet he was more than willing to endure it.

Now he had brought her down to the same level. She no longer had ample time to crush him slowly.

Rui just needed to outlast her!

As long as he could do this, he could win!

Everything rested on whether he could succeed!

"That's right..." He said unsteadily as he wobbled as he began losing his sense of balance. "I just need to... last."

"Last..." His breathing grew more laboured. "...long enough."

His vision blurred, darkening.

"The fi..ght.. Isn't..."

His hands fell limp, as they dangled helplessly.

"...over."

THUD

He collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

...

He didn't get up.

Not a single person moved. Countless people had gathered in the colosseum with immense excitement and anticipation.

Yet, they all froze.

An eternity passed, seemingly, as everyone waited.

Waited for Rui Quarrier to get up.

And yet.

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

"...And there you have it folks! Fiona Roschem persevered through the finals, defeating Representative Rui Quarrier to become the Martial Champion of the twenty-seventh Martial Contest!"

His excited voice cut through the silence, as bands and celebratory crackers lit up, drawing people outside of their reverie.

Medics had long since rushed towards Rui and Fiona, and had long begun treatment after rushing the former to the medical quarters after initial stabilization. Fiona had been supplied with a single healing potion as medics took over the task of applying pressure over her wound.

Rui on the hand was surrounded by medics, that worked furiously to contain his bleeding as they administered depressurized gaseous potions were forcibly pumped into his lungs via medical breathing-aid instruments that resembled masks.

Soon, his skin and flesh healed, followed by his ribs, bones and muscles. Eventually they completed the regeneration of blood as well. It was only then had his skin regained its healthy complexion.

Yet he didn't open his eyes until much later. The potions may have healed him, but he was exhausted on a much deeper level. His body and mind needed to rest organically after being stressed and strained to such a degree during the Martial Contest. Potions restored the body, but they also pushed it. Nobody wanted to push Rui Quarrier after witnessing what he had gone through.

Chapter 274: Aftermath

Rui opened his eyes slowly. A clear sky entered his field of vision.

He frowned.

Where was he?

He got up to his feet as he gazed forward, squinting as his eyes adjusted. A beautiful landscape extended as far as the eye could see as he gazed down at the breathtaking sight, appreciating its beauty.

But he was still confused.

He turned around, glancing at what was behind him, yet what he saw shook him to his very core.

He saw a path.

A path with profound depth.

A path he was on.

Yet what shook him wasn't the path itself.

No.

What truly shook him was treacherous calamities the path winded through.

Monsters.

Earthquakes.

Meteorites.

Land-breaks.

A torrent of devastating catastrophes littered his path.

It was a horrifying sight that inspired primal terror.

And yet, it inspired awe.

Through his terror, he could see profound boundless beauty in that path.

The path enchanted him, mesmerizing him, whispering to him.

It was a path he wanted to walk down.

And yet, when he took his first step, the world shattered into countless pieces fading away.

He woke up a shock, jerking upright as he gasped for breath.

He glanced around spotting his squire instructors immediately.

He squinted, dazed, completely confused. It took him a few moments to remember what had happened.

('The same dream again...') He thought to himself.

"Wait, what happened to my match?" His eyes widened as he glanced at them.

They were both silent for a moment.

"You lost." Squire Kyrie straightforwardly told him impassively. "You managed to get her with the Stinger, inflicting a critical wound. But the damage you took from her last strike had crossed the threshold, you fell unconscious not fifteen seconds later."

"...I see." Rui sighed, closing his eyes.

He was expressionless, but inwardly he concealed immense disappointment and frustration. He had given that fight his everything, but not even his everything was enough.

He took a deep breath as he exhaled deeply, shaking his head.

"If it's of any consolation." Squire Dylon said. "Your performance surpassed my every expectation. You're not even a two-year-old Martial Apprentice and you went against a monstrous prodigy that has been cultivating techniques for six years. The odds were stacked against you in every way, in every possible parameter, yet you managed to not only push her going all-out but inflicted a critical wound that threatened to lose her the match. Frankly, she also got a little lucky there at the end."

Squire Kyrie nodded at his words. "Remember what I told you before the preliminary contest. Your Martial Path extends far beyond the Martial Contest, this is merely a checkpoint in your life. Do not let this halt or hinder your journey. You will one day achieve power that beggars the imagination."

Squire Kyrie spoke those words with certainty. Yet, she wasn't lying. The fact that Rui was already half-way to being a Squire Candidate at the age of fourteen was truly astonishing. Furthermore, he had fulfilled the harder and more important condition of Squire candidacy at his tender age.

She was touted as a genius back in her era, yet even she couldn't begin to even fathom his depths.

('The Voidbringer...') She mused. ('How fitting.')

"Thank you, both of you. However, I do not intend to let this failure hold me back." he said solemnly.
"Instead, this failure will make me stronger, stronger than I ever was."

He stared at his hands, as a slight smile cracked past his gloom.

The Martial Contest had shattered and reforged his world view of what was possible and what wasn't. It expanded his view of Martial Art was capable of.

His grinned widened as he thought of all the various techniques he would master in his next training stage.

His dark eyes had already left the past, greedily eying the future.

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Fiona sat on a chair as she gazed outside the window of her room, as she beheld the lively bustling town of Vargard.

A magnificent sparkling cup sat atop a table some distance away, drawing her attention.

It was supposed to be an honour and a matter of boundless prestige, yet she didn't feel much.

She was in a pensive mood, unsure of what she felt.

No, she knew what she felt. She wasn't sure about how she felt of what she felt.

Shortly after the match ended, she was declared the Martial Champion and given that cup as the crowd went berserk with cheers and applause.

KNOCK KNOCK

"Come in~" She absentmindedly said.

"Miss." Her butler bowed.

"What is it?"

"The Master has summoned you." He said, solemnly.

Fiona simply nodded, having expected that.

She dismissed him as she walked towards the center of the Roschem Family mansion.

Towards the center, where the study of Sage Damian Roschem was.

She breathed deeply as she steeled her mind, before knocking.

KNOCK KNOCK

Nothing happened.

Until it did.

The doors opened slowly. Ominously.

Immediately, she gritted her teeth slightly as immense pressure weighed on her, threatening to crush her if she wasn't strong enough.

She walked in as her eyes fell on the figure seated at the center of the room.

"Fiona."

He murmured a single word.

Fiona's eyes fluttered unstably, as she struggled to stay conscious.

A single word.

And she felt limitless, boundless pressure crush down onto her.

A single word.

And she felt as though the very sky itself had converged onto her.

A single word.

And she felt the very core of her consciousness crumbling.

A single word.

"Dad...!" She just barely managed to squeeze out as her vision began blurring

"Hm?" The figure glanced at her. "Ah, I am quite sorry."

Soon the weight on her mind disappeared as she fell to her knees gasping for air.

"I'm sorry, my precious baby." He softly murmured sorrowfully, careful of exerting himself. "It is difficult to contain every ounce of my mind. Every once in a while, I let slip of just a tiny bit of it, like now."

She got up, glaring at him. "Hmph! You say that all the time but it happens every time!"

Chapter 275: Return

"Oh dear." Damian sighed softly. "Daddy really is sorry, come, why don't you give me a make-up hug?"

"Stop treating me like a child, I'm fifteen-years-old!" She complained as she pouted.

A soft smile emerged on his face, as he got up, approaching his daughter.

"Congratulations on winning the Martial Contest." He smiled affectionately as he caressed her brown hair, patting her softly. "I'm proud of you."

Fiona didn't respond to those words.

"Unsatisfied?" He asked with a knowing smile.

"...Maybe." She replied.

"What do you feel?"

"I want to know..." She said.

He waited for her as he continued caressing her head.

"...I want to know what drives him and his kind down their Martial Paths."

She closed her eyes as she recalled the intense determination that sparkled his bloodshot eyes even as he lost consciousness.

"Is it really worth a path walking down?" She asked, as her intense curiosity coloured her eyes.

"Who knows?" He smiled. "Is it?"

Her eyes knitted in surprise and confusion.

"Isn't it?" She asked.

"Is that upto me?" He asked, amused. "Can you truly know unless you travel down that path yourself?"

She remained silent at that question.

* * * * *

Rui returned back to the Martial Academy immediately. The first thing he did was reunite with all of his friends.

"Welcome back." Fae said. "You did amazing."

"Nice job smacking Ian." Kane threw him a thumbs up.

"Your performance was admirable." Hever calmly told him.

"Let's fight!" Nel grinned excitedly.

"The last round was quite close." Dalen told him. "Good job pushing Fiona that far."

He spent quite some time interacting with them, catching up and bantering back and forth.

"Hehe, good job 'Voidbringer'." Kane sneered.

Rui glared at him. "Thanks, 'Elusive Wind'."

"Wait, who told him?!" Kane's eyes widened as he dismayed.

"Yeah, you thought you could keep it hidden from me huh?" Rui laughed.

Just then, a staff member called out to him.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier?" She addressed. "The headmaster wishes to speak to you."

Rui nodded as he got up to leave. "I'll catch you guys later."

He left after they bade him goodbye, heading to the headmaster's office. He quickly reached the giant doors, waiting for them to open and entering after.

"Headmaster." Rui bowed deeply as he expressed respect for a man who had reached a certain height of Martial power. The immense weight he felt on his mind only made that gesture easier to make.

"Congratulations, Rui Quarrier." Headmaster Aronian smiled. "Your performance was admirable. You have done not only yourself a favour but this branch of the Martial Academy as well."

"Thank you, headmaster." Rui replied.

"How do you feel coming back?" The headmaster asked.

"...Invigorated." Rui replied after some thought. "I may have lost, but I've never been someone who chases after victory first. Victory and loss are consequences of my pursuit of my Martial Path. And I intend to continue doing that. The Martial Contest has expanded my vision of Martial Art. I intend on expanding my Flowing Void Style until it has matured and reached a shape resembling what my ideal vision of it is. In doing so, I will have become a Squire Candidate, and I will have travelled deeper down my Martial Path."

Headmaster Aronian smiled at those words. Rui's single-minded focus and fixation on his Martial Art and Martial Path was even more pure than he had expected. He had summoned Rui, expecting him to be in a gloomy and depressed state, but instead Rui had already picked himself and had begun moving forward.

('Truly, it is hard to believe he is only fifteen-years-old.') He thought to himself. Rui was not showing the maturity one would expect of his age after such a loss. The Martial Contest held an extremely high amount of significance of the Apprentice students, a loss at the final round of the Martial Contest that forever denied them the opportunity to achieve extraordinary fame and prestige would usually at least deal a heavy blow on someone his age.

But Rui seemed to understand what was important and what wasn't, what could be gained from the experience and what had to be done, without any guidance.

In that moment, Headmaster Aronian had a premonition.

This child would step into the higher Realm.

He bore no doubts.

"That's a relief to hear." He replied, smiling. "What do you plan to do now that you're back?"

"Ideally, I'd like to begin training." Rui replied. "But I do not possess any martial credits whatsoever, thus I will undertake more missions and gather a large sum of credits for my next round of training."

"I see. I do approve. Missions broaden your understanding of the Martial World, gaining more and more practical experience at your age will nourish you as a Martial Apprentice. Furthermore, your evaluated grade as a Martial Artist has been upgraded from grade five to grade seven." Headmaster Aronian

informed. "You will be able to undertake missions that will give you valuable real combat experience. At this stage, you may begin undertaking missions outside the Mantian region and experience a higher level of danger in missions."

Rui's eyebrows raised in interest. "What about international and foreign missions?"

Headmaster Aronian paused for a moment as he pondered. "Generally, international missions are usually grade eight to grade ten. But it's not impossible at your current grade."

"I see..."

"I would recommend abstaining from international and foreign missions." Headmaster Aronian told him with a pointed look.

"Why so? If I may ask." Rui replied curiously. He had already mostly estimated why, but still, he wanted to make sure he understood.

"Well, international missions are more dangerous." He replied. "Within the Kandrian Empire, the Kandrian Martial Union had an extreme amount of soft and hard power, meaning to some degree you have a certain amount of indirect protection and support. However, once you leave the Kandrian Empire, the power of the Martial Union decreases significantly. You're taking on a larger burden."

Chapter 276: Personal Comissions

"Because we charge higher rates and fees for missions whose operation requires fielding Martial Artists outside the border of the Kandrian Empire, most of the international and foreign missions we get are not from small-time bodyguard missions by singular individuals with an average occupation or anything such as that." Headmaster Aronian said. "No, most of them are missions from wealthy individuals with high socio-economic status, powerful cooperations, landowners, political or governmental figures, a large variety of Beast Domain missions and things of that sort."

"I see..."

"Your bodyguard mission in the Basara Mountains is a good example of what foreign missions are like, at bare minimum mind you. Foreign missions are regularly fraught with such danger because there are no limits to what can happen in a foreign mission whatsoever. You can run into Martial Artists of higher Realms from different nations who will unhesitatingly slaughter you in an instant. Anything can happen and you're absolutely all on your own, there's no safety net of any kind, you just die from a single mistake."

Headmaster Aronian ended up convincing Rui. At the end of the day, Rui was not a daredevil who enjoyed staking his life for tasks he wasn't qualified for just yet. He didn't mind waiting half a year or so until he was much stronger after mastering even more techniques and diversifying his Martial Art.

"Furthermore..." Headmaster Aronian continued as he stroked his beard. "Although you did not win the Martial Contest, you reached the finals and you put up one hell of a fight. You have already received many commissions from specific clientele who are interested in commissioning you for missions." Headmaster Aronian told him.

Rui's eyes lit up in interest at those words.

He had expected this beforehand, to some degree. Even if he did lose, and even he was not happy about it, the status of a Martial Contest finalist was not low. He was basically the publicly crowned number two of the Martial Artists of his generation.

Considering that the Martial Contest was extremely prestigious, there was no doubt that there would be many clientele interested in many things.

"How many have I received since the Martial Contest began?" He asked, excited.

"Fourteen." Headmaster Aronian replied with a complicated expression. "Much lower than a finalist would receive, in all honesty."

Rui frowned at those words. "Why so?"

"Well, I can't say for sure." Headmaster Aronian shrugged. "But it probably has to do with the nature of your Martial Art. You're not just a Type I all-rounder Martial Art, your fighting style fluctuates completely

depending on your opponent. It's optimized for pure head-on physical conflict. The reason elite and wealthy clientele send commissions to the Martial Contest representatives is because they have proven their competence to be at the elite level. However, missions are generally specialized, while you're an adaptive all-rounder. Do you understand?"

Rui nodded, immediately deducing the headmaster's message. "So basically, because I'm a fluid all-rounder, I'm never the best at any one particular field. Dalen and Arjun will probably always be better than me at defense-class missions, Fae will always be better than me at offense-class missions, Kane will always excel better than me at Shadow-class missions and so on and so forth."

"Exactly." Headmaster nodded. "You excel at adapting and evolving to any opponent. Yet exactly how useful is that to missions? It's probably useful, no doubt. But is it more useful than the specialists? Can you surpass offensive Martial Artists at offensive class missions? Can you surpass defensive Martial Artists at defensive missions? Is there any class, type or even a particular mission that your Martial Art will fulfill better than any other kind of Martial Art?"

Rui narrowed his eyes at those words. He didn't like what headmaster Aronian was telling him, but there was truth to his words.

There were five classes of missions in the Martial Union.

Offense, defense, hunter, shadow and miscellaneous. Four of these classes had dedicated specialists to them, and Rui knew that he could not compete with the specialists in their specialized fields.

The Flowing Void style did not have any particular class of missions it could do much better than any other Martial Art would. His style excelled at adapting to his opponents and fighting them in the most optimal manner needed to take them down.

However, taking down singular opponents in the best manner possible, in a head-on conflict was certainly not most desired or important quality looked for in these four different clashes.

In defensive-class missions, your ability to protect your target of protections was the most valued trait. In offensive-class missions your ability to inflict harm of varying degrees on your target was the most values trait. In the hunter and shadow class missions there were so many different most valued qualities based on the sub-category, however Rui did not excel at any of those fields.

Of course, because of how many techniques he had mastered and how potent his combat ability was, he would always be relevant, but at the elite levels of the four classes, that wasn't enough. If he wanted to gain more personal commissions from upper-class clientele, he needed to show them he could complete missions of a certain kind better than his peers. And that was an area where he had failed.

Of course, his performance was incredible and so he drew more than a dozen personal commissions anyway. But as spectacular and entertaining he was, all the upper-class clientele went to Arjun for defensive-class commissions. They went to Mia, Vyoming, Servil and Ana for all the other classes. They were just more specialized and more suited.

Rui bet that even Ian and Fiona got far more commissions than he did despite effectively being all-rounders. Fiona was just so abysmally strong that she could compete with and surpass specialists in their own fields. Ian could also do that, albeit to a lesser extent.

He shook his head; it was what it was.

"Well, what are the commissions I received?"

Chapter 277: Defensive missions

"They are... well, interesting, I suppose." Headmaster Aronian smiled wryly as he plucked out a file from a drawer and handed it to Rui. "Go over them in your own time."

Rui nodded as he received the file.

"And with that, I have conveyed all that I wished to. You may go if you have nothing you wish to convey." Headmaster Aronian told him.

Rui nodded. "Thank you, Headmaster." He said, bowing deeply, before turning around and leaving.

Once he reached his dorm room, he immediately locked himself inside as he sat down, opening the file. The file had copies of commission applications that the clientele who commissioned him had submitted as well as mission bills created for each of them.

He skimmed through them, reading them each briefly. His facial expressions morphed rapidly as he skimmed through.

Many of the personal commissions in the file were the norm; what one would expect. Bodyguard missions of different types. A hunter-class mission or two here and there.

Yet what surprised him was the sheer number of miscellaneous commissions there were for him. Many of them were bizarre.

A few sought to commission him for representing them in unofficial underground and upper-class Apprentice-level fighting contests.

A connoisseur and collector of unique Martial Artists had commissioned him for his Martial Art.

Prominent Martial Families had commissioned him as a sparring partner for their Martial Apprentice descendents.

A news outlet in the town of Vargard had commissioned him for an interview.

A prominent Martial Family holding an event later on in the Martial Festival had commissioned him to participate in their event.

The Kandrian Institute of Sciences had commissioned him as a research subject, to study his Martial Art. This one was a shocking notion to him.

A Martial Art gear and uniform development corporation had commissioned him for an endorsement of their brand!

Rui couldn't help but be surprised when he saw these strange and abnormal commissions as he read into them in more detail. These were not the kind of commissions he was expecting when he opened the file.

He shook his head as he decided focus on one mission at a time.

He grabbed the first mission bill, glancing at the summary of the mission printed on the cover.

It was a bodyguard mission.

[Defense class: Bodyguard mission

Difficulty grade: 4

Target of protection: Bent Silihillas

Specified/estimated location/range of mission: Town of Vargard, Fastar Convention, 17th main, 15th cross.

Time period of mission: Twelve hours.

Mission commencement period: 39 th Winter.

Successful completion remuneration: 500 martial credits.

Commission clientele: Silihilas Corporation]

Rui raised an eyebrow at that reward. He couldn't help but be surprised at that reward. The man was willing to pay a lot just have Rui be his bodyguard. What struck Rui as odd was the fact that the mission difficulty was a grade four. Meaning the evaluated probability of threat to his life was very low.

Five hundred credits for a grade four mission? That was severely overpriced. What was the point of hiring a grade seven Martial Apprentice like Rui for a grade four mission?

Rui was beginning to suspect that he was being hired only to flex.

The mission location was a convention of conglomerate leaders, Rui had no experience with such gathering, however it did seem like he was merely being hired to show off. Perhaps the convention was a snobby little rich people-meeting, where they all tried to out-flex each other.

This was especially the case when one of the conditions of the mission was performing the mission without his mask.

Rui immediately shook his head.

It was one thing to go maskless in a Martial competition event of peers who consented to a fair competition between each other that was being regulated by the Martial Academies, but he refused to reveal his identity to during a solo mission that could potentially make him new enemies who did not care about fairness and consent. That was just too dangerous.

Furthermore, the mission did not offer him any valuable experience that could help him grow as a Martial Artist. Anything below grade five was frankly too paltry for his current level of power. He wanted a mission that could stimulate him, and this simply wasn't it.

He immediately tossed the mission bill aside.

The other bodyguard missions were also of a similar nature, where he was clearly being treated as a trophy to be showed off to others of a certain community or class, rather than as a Martial Artist who was being paid to protect them.

His status as the finalist in the prestigious Martial Contest would earn them a lot of social points, he imagined. The other representatives of the Martial Contest probably didn't receive such offers since they were already part of their own Martial Family and would not affiliate with an external entity, but he could sense that people were trying to rope him in to some degree because he had no real ties with any individual or entity in the upper echelons of society.

He immediately tossed all of those aside, he had no interest in indulging their vanity. Frankly, there wasn't much that they could offer him that genuinely interested him.

Money? Becoming rich was not his goal.

Resources for growing stronger? The Martial Union far surpassed them in regards to the resources they offered to Martial Artists. Only the Royal Kandrian Family could rival them in that regard.

Social status? Again, he didn't care.

He only wanted to develop his Martial Art and traverse his Martial path.

He skimmed through the hunter missions, intrigued. They were different. Half of them were from private individuals and other half was from the Ministry of Environment and Ecology. They were centered around a variety of different types of missions; reconnaissance, procurement of resources, extermination etc.

He decided to accept all of them, they were more lowkey and gave him real valuable experience that the vanity missions did not.

Putting them aside, he glanced at the set of mission bills of miscellaneous missions.

Chapter 278: Sorting

Rui opened the first one.

[Miscellaneous class mission: Commissioned representative fighter.

Commissioning clientele: Freier Ester Inc.

Mission objective: To fight and win in scheduled matches against Martial Apprentices representing Freier Oil inc.

Frequency: Twice a week (Negotiable)

Minimum remuneration: 100 Martial credits/ 3 gold coins, 8 silver coins and 4 bronze coins (Negotiable)

Successful completion remuneration: 1000 Martial credits/ 31 gold coins, 6 silver coins and 8 bronze coins (Negotiable)

Location: Town of Harrifel]

Rui's eyes narrowed as he skimmed through the details provided by the mission bill. The location of the fight was apparently an arena in a town in the Mantian region about three hours away from the town of Hajin.

The mission bill expounds upon the background a bit more.

In the upper-class of society, Martial Artists were hired to fight against other hired Martial Artists in a competitive setting. It was treated as a competitive and gambling sport within the circles of the upper echelons.

According to the mission bill, these circles were distinct from that of the Martial Community, although they did intersect with each other to a certain degree as Martial Families would send in heirs and descendants to face off against each other as well as the champions of other individuals who partook in the sport.

Freier Ester Inc was a large supplier of Ester in the Kandrian Empire, and esoteric compound that was most widely used for lighting products and devices according to the information provided by the mission bill. They were a major supplier in the northern parts of the Kandrian Empire, encompassing several different regions of the Kandrian Empire.

The scale of Freier Ester Inc was far greater than the Hier Industries or the Lowminer Industries, both which were corporations he had worked with prior. These two corporations were limited to a handful of towns across the Mantian regions, and thus were much smaller than Freier Ester Inc which was a national giant in the Ester supplies industries.

Rui could feel the newfound socio-economic status thanks to his performance in the Martial Contest. He would have never received such interest from a conglomerate titan such as the Freier Ester Inc.

He glanced through the few other similar offers he received for being a commissioned fighter, although none of those clientele were quite as distinguished as the Freier Ester Inc.

He decided not to make a decision on the matter until he met up with his client, to learn more about him and the commission itself.

The commission also specified the required signature of his on a non-compete agreement that was valid for as long as the contract was active. Meaning he wouldn't be able to become the commissioned fighter of any other clientele who sought to commission him.

Which made it all the more important to be careful while making a decision on the matter.

Having made up his mind on that, he put the commissioned representative fighting mission bills aside as he picked up the mission bill of another commission.

[Miscellaneous mission: Sparring partner mission

Commissioning client: The Distar Family.

Mission objective: To serve as a sparring partner for Martial Apprentices.

Remuneration rate: 9 silver coins and 7 bronze coins/25 Martial credits per hour of sparring (Negotiable).

Mission commencement duration: Indefinite.

Commissioned time period: 7 hours a week (Negotiable).]

There were other missions like this as well. Two others, to be precise. The Frial Family and the Shamik Family.

All three of the Martial Families were led by prominent Martial Masters.

Rui understood why he had received three such commissions from Martial Families. Frankly, his Martial Art was quite suited for the role of a sparring partner for Martial Apprentices.

The reason for this was quite straightforward. Sparring with him on a regular basis would force them to fight a Martial Art adapted to them. His adapted Martial Art exploited any and all weaknesses in their style that it could.

Meaning, his Martial Art was the single greatest way to train weaknesses!

Rui had never truly considered this application of the Flowing Void Style and the VOID algorithm. Back on Earth, this would not have really worked as well, and it was never intended to be the purpose of Project Water. Years of that had prevented Rui from realizing all the possible applications in this new world.

By adapting to a Martial Artist, and having them spar against him over and over, they would learn what their weaknesses were and also how to compensate for their weaknesses through experience. This kind of weakness training probably surpassed anything the Martial Academies could provide, Rui dared to say.

The Martial Academies did have experienced Squires for teachers, but Rui did not think their insights could compare to the results obtained by the mind-numbing amount of data science that was used to forge the VOID algorithm.

It seems that the prestigious and insightful Martial Masters that had commissioned him as a sparring partner had come to realize this, and had chosen to capitalize on it.

Rui was inclined to accept this mission as well. This mission would not give him the real-life combat experience; however, he ultimately could not refuse commissions that his Martial Art was perfectly specialized to fulfill unlike any Martial Art in existence!

He immediately made it a point to accept the commission. Funnily enough, each of the Martial Masters had appointed a meeting with him if he accepted the commission. Rui couldn't help but wonder if there was a reason for that beyond just the commission.

He put the three mission bills aside as he shifted his attention to the rest.

He immediately dismissed the commission of the connoisseur of unique Martial Art who wanted Rui to document and pass on his Martial Art to him. He was not interested in sharing his Martial Art for money. Perhaps in the distant future he would entertain the idea of passing on his Martial Art, or at least the core of it. But that would be of his own volition in his own time and place.

Chapter 279: New goal

He tossed aside the commission that wanted him to participate in one of the events of the Martial Festival. He had had more than just enough of participating in competitive Martial events for now, he would rather focus on other endeavors.

He also tossed aside the mission bills of the interview commission and the brand endorsement and commission. He was not interested in fame and exposure; they were utterly meaningless to him.

That left the final mission.

The Kandrian Institute of Sciences had commissioned him to research his Martial Art.

Rui wasn't sure what to make of it. However, he suspected that his unique Martial Art had aroused interest in the scholars of the Institute of Sciences.

He knew from his conversation with Julian during the Kandrian Winter holidays that the Kandrian Institute of Sciences researched Martial Art and Martial Artists.

[Miscellaneous mission: Research subject

Mission objective: Serve as a research subject for Kandrian Institute of Sciences.

Remuneration rate: 20 Martial Credits/ 7 silver and 6 gold coins per hour.

Mission duration: 2 months.

Mission time period rate: 3 hours a day (Negotiable)]

Rui wasn't sure whether or not to accept the commission. There were pros and cons to the accepting the mission.

The cons were that he would be divulging the research of a lifetime from his previous life as scholars collected data, studying it and probably even evaluating the feasibility of reverse engineering it and stealing his algorithm.

He felt extremely repelled by that.

However, it could be what helps him overcome certain obstacles that genuinely may require empirical research to overcome. It might end up being the key to progressing his Martial Art.

He was extremely conflicted. Thankfully there was no commencement date, which meant it was likely an open-ended offer that would remain as long as he didn't straight up refuse it.

Furthermore, his brother Julian worked in the Kandrian Institute of Sciences as a scholar. Rui knew he had even worked on projects related to Martial Art.

Perhaps they would end up working together.

For now, he put the matter aside. He already accepted a whole slew of missions, he did not need anymore, nor did he have time for anymore. He could take his time and consider it very thoroughly.

He was also going to get into a thorough long training stage after this set of missions.

In his last training stage, he felt a bit rushed and constrained since he needed to scramble to obtain power in order to be ready in time for the Martial Contest. That due date had constrained his training options a lot.

But now he felt no burdens on him. He had finally come to realize how much pressure and how many shackles the Martial Contest had put on him.

He could finally enjoy being free!

The things he could do without any worries or cares.

Just developing his Martial Art, traversing his Martial Path with blissful peace.

As peaceful as a Martial Artist's life was, anyway.

His ultimate goal was to develop his Martial Art as high as was possible, to travel his Martial Art as deep as was possible.

He had already set a new foreseeable goal in sight; To fulfill the second condition required for Squire candidacy.

And eventually, to step into a higher Realm of power.

To become a Martial Squire himself.

His body quivered.

The very thought of becoming a vaunted and mighty Martial Squire was unimaginably exciting!

To do that, he would need to undergo the breakthrough process. To do that, he would need to fulfill the second condition to Squire candidacy. He needed his Martial Art to mature and stabilize in its shape.

He had suspected that this condition would be much harder for him than it was for others. His Martial Art needed to be able to do everything, no matter how slight, in order to be able to adapt to everything. That meant he needed to step foot into many different fields.

He quickly jotted down all the aspects his Martial Art would need boost up in before it could be said to have matured.

He needed range. There were plenty of techniques he had seen that could allow his opponent to be able to counter him from range. There were also opponents he himself needed to keep at range in order to defeat soundly. One way or another, he needed to extend his range beyond the normal limits of the human body.

He also needed lethality that bypassed conventional durability. He would run into opponents whom he would struggle to hurt. He did not want to become extremely reliant on Stinger every time he fought a tough opponent. He needed more diverse ways of taking down his opponents. The Martial Contest had shown him that there were several options and possibilities to choose from.

He needed defensive countermeasures against these diverse offensive solutions. Currently his defense consisted of Acute Edge, Elastic Shift and Inner Divergence for strikes, and Shifting Silhouette. He had always knew this wasn't entirely sufficient, but only after the Martial Contest did he realize just how insufficient it was. He had zero direct countermeasures for high tier of poison, heat, sound, vibrations, permeation and nerve striking. He would struggle to adapt against these without atleast a core countermeasure.

Lastly, he also needed to take a serious step in overcoming the problems of the VOID algorithm. He had always been determined to do so, but only after the Martial Contest has he become impatient to fix them.

Currently, there were still two main issues with the VOID algorithm. The first issue was an issue that existed on Earth as well. He needed to fix the viability problem of the VOID algorithm. It was almost impossible to master the VOID algorithm in its entirety. Which is why it was not viable on Earth.

The second problem was, of course the new world problem. Adapting the VOID algorithm to the new world of his second life was something he intended on working on in the next training stage.

He had chalked out his objectives. Now it was time to get around to fulfilling them.

Chapter 280: Meeting

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier, Missus Nartha Freier is ready to receive you." A staff member addressed him bowing deeply as a sign of respect. "Please follow me."

"Alright, thank you." Rui nodded as he got up, and trailed after her.

Today was the day of his appointment with the chairwoman of Freier Ester Inc who had commissioned to him to be a representative champion for Freier Ester Inc. They would likely engage in negotiations over several details of the commission contract.

This was one thing that separated personal commission contracts from regular commission contracts. Since the client had approached Rui and specifically desired him, Rui had obtained some amount of bargaining power. The Martial Union had very little active control over the contract besides from the standard conditions and rules.

Soon they reached an office. The staff member stepped aside, bowing as she gestured to the door.

"Thank you." Rui said as he entered the office.

"Ah my." A feminine voice remarked. "It's a pleasure to meet the finalist of the Martial Contest, Apprentice Rui Quarrier. I am Nartha Freier, the founder and chairwoman of the Freier Ester Corporation."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Chairwoman Nartha." Rui replied bowing a little as she performed the smallest of curtsies. "Thank you for commissioning me, and thank you for the invite."

Nartha Freier was a beautiful older woman, with long flowing blonde hair. Yet her sharp eyes caught his attention more than her aesthetics did. She was a powerful woman; he did not feel particularly comfortable under her gaze.

"Not at all, young man." She laughed dismissably. "I've been looking forward to meeting you ever since I personally witnessed your performance in the tournament. Come, let's have a seat."

The office was extravagantly luxurious, with posh sofas of remarkable comfort. Rui had already figured this was the office she used to greet guests she wanted to impress, hence the impractical architecture and décor that facilitated aesthetics at the cost of practicality.

"Would you like to have a drink?" She asked courteously.

"Water, please." Rui smiled, as Nartha immediately signaled to an attendant in her office to heed Rui's request.

"I have to say, I'm quite surprised that someone of your age made it to the finals." Nartha remarked. "Even more surprising is that someone your age managed to win the Martial Contest. Usually, the Martial Contest is won by an extremely senior student past the age of twenty or something of the sort."

"You flatter me" Rui smiled.

"Am I? I do believe in your potential and prowess, young man." Nartha told him. "What considerations do you have of my commissions? We can negotiate on the price, however I do believe it's a reasonable price."

"I'm satisfied with the price." Rui remarked. "However, I do have some questions and conditions."

"Go ahead." Nartha replied.

"First, I wanted to inquire about the level of the Martial Artists that I will generally be facing." Rui told him.

In reality, Rui already knew the level of the Martial Artists he would be facing. The Martial Academy provided him with reasonably detailed information on the matter that the intelligence department had managed to procure. But he deliberately pretended not to know because he wanted to gauge how sincere and honest Nartha was, it would tell him how careful he had to be.

"I'm not an expert on Martial Artists." She replied thoughtfully. "But I do believe your prowess should be most, if not all, of the representative fighters that participate. There are a few here and there that are powerful enough to be a threat to you, but for the most part, I do believe you would be a force to reckon with."

"I see." Rui replied. This largely matched with what he's learnt from the Martial Academy through the mission bill. "What are the odds that by being your representative, I won't earn the ire and hatred of your competitors and enemies? I may be a Martial Artist, but I cannot make powerful enemies."

Frankly, if he was by himself, he would be less concerned. But he had the Quarrier Orphanage that was extremely vulnerable. He was not powerful enough to protect himself and his family. If he made powerful enemies, the Quarrier Orphanage could possibly come under danger in the worst-case scenario. He was not a naïve fool.

"You do not need to worry about such things." Nartha told him, reassuringly. "It is merely a sport with low stakes. There's some amount of money involved in gambling to make things more exciting, but asides from that, there isn't such a large conflict of interests between yourself and members of the circle whose commissioned fighters you will be fighting. Any conflict of interests will come about between myself and the others."

"I see." He replied. ('Hmph, lies.')

In reality, things were not this peaceful. There was not only money at stake but prestige as well. Commissioned fighters were not excluded from being targeted simply because they won the wrong fight and earned the ire of some arrogant haughty wealthy and power individual.

Of course, it wasn't as though these people would immediately resort to something as extreme as assassination, since such things would be more counter-productive to themselves within their circle and in general, and they would become pariahs. The Martial Union would investigate the disappearances and deaths of Martial Artists as well and nobody wanted to earn its ire.

Still, Rui wanted to be careful.

"I have two conditions." He said. "First, I will take several measures to conceal my identity and any trace of it. Second, I will require you to sign a non-disclosure agreement regarding the details of my identity."

Nartha fell into thought as she twirled her long hair, before sighed and nodding. "I accept those conditions."

"The non-disclosure agreement will need to be officiated by the Martial Union." Rui added. The officiation of the agreement by the Martial Union effectively meant the Martial union would be undertaking some responsibility for ensuring the agreement is fulfilled by both sides. This was a measure Rui had taken to ensure that Nartha would not blab about his identity to show off. With the threat of the Martial Union, she would have no choice but to strictly abide by the agreement.