

Martial Unity 141

Chapter 141: Considerations

This was one Rui's first serious spar after his training session ended. He was quite satisfied with his performance, though he still yearned to be stronger. The most recent techniques he had mastered

The mastery of Inner Divergence had bolstered his defense to the point that Kane couldn't even hurt him unless he went all out with his offense instead of his usual stinging jabs. Outer Convergence had increased his power to the point that fighting Rui head-on was a losing battle, Rui would always hurt and damage Kane faster than Kane could do take down Rui.

Seismic Mapping had gotten rid of his blind spots, he was able to track Kane's movements, maneuvering and position even when Kane escaped his peripheral vision quite accurately.

These three techniques successfully bolstered his foundation making him a solid Martial Apprentice even without the aid of the VOID algorithm.

Still, despite all that Kane was able to keep up with Rui despite all this. His speed, agility and maneuvering were always ridiculously high but after he learnt to maintain his top speed constantly, he had truly become incredibly difficult to deal with.

Furthermore, the tactic he had used to beat Kane this time was not a tactic that could be abused. If they fought a second time, Kane would not fall for the same trick, all he had to do was avoid a belligerent attack when Rui entered a closed defensive stance, and the battle would just end up being a stalemate.

In truth, Rui did possess a way to win even without the tactic he used.

The fourth technique he had learnt; Blink. His trump card.

There were several moments in the fight where Blink would have allowed Rui to get a hold of Kane, which would probably have ended with Rui as the victor most of the time since Rui was the better grappler between them.

However, Rui had decided to not use the technique ultimately. The capability of the technique was at its highest when his opponents weren't aware of it. Using it in the open in the Apprentice sparring facility was unwise, the facility wasn't exclusively being used by the two of them, after all. There were many Martial Artists in the facility that had kept an eye on their spar.

Maybe it didn't make much of a difference at all. After all, Blink wasn't overtly flashy. Perhaps not a single one of them would notice.

Still, Rui didn't want to take the risk. So he decided to opt out of using the technique at all.

The spar had given him idea what he could do to further improve his versatility. All this time he had primarily focused on primarily the fundamental aspects of combat; Offense, defense, maneuvering stamina, striking, grappling etc. Now that he had truly bolstered all of these areas with twelve Apprentice-level techniques, he could focus on expanding the versatility of his Martial Art beyond these basic fields.

On Earth, there wasn't much more to MMA combat sports beyond striking, grappling, defensive guarding as well as evasive and offensive maneuvering.

But this wasn't the same for Martial Art in the world of Gaia.

There were many more exotic systems of techniques and esoteric techniques based on principles and mechanisms that would be no more than pure fiction back on Earth.

Now that Rui had truly cemented the foundation of his Martial Art to be rock hard and solid, he could focus on expanding his Martial Art to these more exciting fields. The idea was extremely alluring by itself, but there were strong concrete reasons for doing so.

The biggest reason was the refinement process of the VOID algorithm, which was designed for the limited martial arts off Earth and not the near magical Martial Art of Gaia.

This would not be possible without incorporating an effective counter-deductive system, which could not be done with intimate understanding of these techniques, and without mastery of these techniques and fields.

Of course, he had already taken the first step in this regard. When he purchased and mastered Seismic Mapping and Blink; a sensory and stealth technique, he had already taken a step in widening the versatility of his Martial Art in fields outside of the fundamental fields of combat.

He intended to continue that trend. Of course, doing this wouldn't be easy. The further away he got from the fundamental fields of combat, the more useless his MMA and combat sports research background was. He might end up taking longer to master these techniques due to this. Furthermore, a lot of these techniques were not cheap, he recalled how expensive many of the techniques in the stealth and sensory sections were. Purchasing them would take an immense amount of time and successfully completed missions.

Since the tournament was a bit over half a year away, he had already decided to grind like crazy with the missions and undergo one last time before undergoing a final training session just before the Kandrian Martial Festival rolled up.

"Huff." Rui got up. "You wanna go another round?"

"Sure, but are you sure?" Kane asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you forget what was there today?" Kane asked. "The Squire combat exhibition."

Rui's eyes lit up in elation as he recalled. He'd been so engrossed in the four techniques he had been training until just recently, as well as the matter of the Martial Festival he had totally forgotten about the event scheduled today.

A Martial Squire combat session between the Squire instructors of the Martial Academy. Rui had seen Martial Squires use their Martial Art before, heck he'd even fought Squire Kyrie before, but this was different.

Unlike when she fought them, she wasn't going to be holding back most of her power. He would finally get to witness the true power of a Martial Squire with his own two eyes!

Of course, the Squires wouldn't be going all-out, but just seeing them spar seriously was enticing enough of an event to Rui, who dreamed of obtaining that otherworldly power.

Chapter 142: The might of Martial Squires

Martial Squires possessed power that was a whole realm above that of Martial Apprentices, literally. Rui had never gotten a chance to witness two Squires fighting each other, so he was as excited as a child would be in their first theatre experience.

There were many Martial Apprentices who had come to witness this, having all been seated at a considerably great distance from the arena.

This was done on purpose. Martial Squires were so ridiculously powerful that just being near them was incredibly dangerous. Furthermore, they were so superhumanly fast that if the Martial Apprentices were too close, their eyes would be entirely unable to follow the fight on any level whatsoever.

It was easier to perceive speedy objects from a distance rather than up close. Rockets moved at dozens of times the speed of sound yet human had no problem keeping track of them with the naked eye from a distance.

There was a general sense of excitement in the air, when suddenly multiple heavy presences pushed on the atmosphere.

Squire Kyrie and Dylon walked into the facility with their Martial uniforms on, they were Squire instructors Rui was familiar with, having trained by them until quite recently. The Squire uniforms were quite different from the ones Rui was accustomed to as a Martial Apprentice. They made their way to the center of the Squire facility, ignoring the students. This wasn't an academic event, and the students were free to watch or leave if they wanted to.

Of course, an overwhelming majority of students were interested in observing Squires fight seriously, only a few of them, even from Martial families had experienced this before.

Squires Kyrie and Dylan took their positions on the arena first, putting five meters of distance between them.

"It's been a while since we sparred, Kyrie." Dylan chuckled. "Since this is a special occasion, let's make a bet. If I win, you have to go out on a date with me."

That earned a bit of a commotion from the students.

Kyrie merely snorted wordlessly, taking a neutral stance with an open-palmed arm extended forward and a closed-fist arm tucked a bit behind.

Dylan on the other hand, chose an aggressive offensive stance with one fist at his waist, coiled with power ready to lash out and the other fist a bit in front of him at chest height, pointing straight at Kyrie's face.

Their stances reflected their styles, Dylan was naturally an offense-oriented Martial Artist as the head instructor of the offense training facility, while Kyrie was an all-rounder, being the head instructor of the combat training facility.

As their concentration and alertness heightened, the atmosphere grew heavier by the second, weighing on the minds of the Martial Apprentices.

The fight did not begin bombastically. Squire Dylan shuffled as he slowly closed the distance between them, while Kyrie remained stationary, unconcerned.

POW

Blasts of wind erupted as he threw a light jab, which Kyrie promptly blocked with ease. He threw several light jabs against Kyrie's guard, just checking her.

And then the real fight began.

Dylon threw a kick with tremendous force.

SWISH

Kyrie withstood while rotating to deflect the strike off her body.

POW POW POW

She threw a flurry of strikes of different forms.

Fist.

Knuckle.

Palm.

Chop.

Her striking was incredibly diverse.

However, although she had great versatility, Dylon seemed to have even more. He launched an even greater barrage of attacks, leveraging his stronger physicality to gain an edge against her in striking.

"Squire Dylon is amazing, he's gaining an edge against Squire Kyrie." Kane murmured.

"I dunno Kane." Rui replied, with an engrossed expression. "The fact that Kyrie can still hold parity against him despite being an all-rounder while he's an offense specialist is even more incredible."

All-rounders often had to spread themselves thin, it was generally not possible to be extremely good at any one field. Rui himself knew this all too well.

The power and speed of their techniques was truly amazing. Their clashes shook the earth, sending mild reverberations and shockwaves as far as the Martial Apprentices, earning their shock and awe.

Yet Kyrie performing as well as she did in a contest of blows was rather amazing.

But, as close as she was, she was still inferior in that regard.

Eventually she disengaged, leaping back exhaling.

"I suppose I can't best you in contest of offense." She admitted.

"Hehe." Dylan chuckled. "It's only natural."

"Still, I don't intend to lose the fight." She adopted a different stance, relaxing her arms in a lower stance in front of her with her legs centered closer to her body.

('That stance sacrifices offensive potential for mobility and evasion.') Rui noted. ('She's planning to change her approach a bit.')

She dived in with lightning swiftness, escaping the eyes of the Martial Apprentices despite the distance between them, leaving nothing but a shockwave behind.

She appeared right behind Dylan.

BAM

Dylan barely managed to guard the impact in time, grimacing from her power nonetheless. She launched a flurry of strikes, however this time, she used different Squire-level techniques this time. These techniques placed more weight on swiftness than power, unlike before. She continuously pecked and stung at him.

Dylon tutted, growing more frustrated as he launched a powerful side kick hoping to send her flying. She quickly stepped out of range to avoid it and simply resumed her offense. Dylon launched a barrage of blows hoping to inflict damage on her.

She either dodged, deflected and redirected or did a combination of all three, as opposed to blocking like she did before.

Very few strikes had managed to cleanly land on her.

If they exchanged strikes straightforwardly, Dylon's offense would overwhelm Kyrie's defenses faster than Kyrie's offense would overwhelm his defense, such was the offensive prowess of an offensive specialist.

Instead, she made the battle asymmetrical by using her mobility, redirection and speed to dramatically reduce the number of hits that Dylon managed to land on her.

Slowly, she managed to gain the advantage.

Chapter 143: Unclear

WHOOSH

Kyrie evaded a blow from Dylon, while striking soft and sensitive areas at specific angles with differing hand forms to inflict the maximum amount of pain and damage, earning grimaces from Dylon.

POW POW POW

"Isn't that Vital Pressure?" Rui asked, just barely managing to recognize the familiar characteristics of the offensive striking technique after a few hours into the fight. Kyrie was so blindingly fast that he truly struggled to make out anything about her impacts at all! He would have instantly recognized had he seen a Martial Apprentice.

However, Kyrie's attacks were indistinguishably fast.

"I can't say for sure. But I think it is." Kane admitted as he squinted his eyes, ducking his head forward trying to keep up with Kyrie's onslaught.

('Not even Kane is able to perceive her attacks cleanly.') Rui thought. Kane was by far the fastest among his friends, if even Kane was this inferior, it spoke volumes to the prowess of Martial Squires.

He wouldn't be too surprised if Kyrie was using Vital Pressure. It was an extremely useful and fundamental technique; it was the type of technique that wouldn't lose its relevance even at higher Realms of Martial Art combat.

Every living being possessed soft, weak and sensitive spots. As long as these vital spots existed universally, they could be pressured in various ways to inflict higher amounts of pain and damage. This was the principle that Vital Pressure was based. It truly was a foundational technique. Nearly every Martial Artist he had seen that used striking to some degree, used Vital Pressure.

('Maybe I can integrate that fact into the VOID algorithm.') Rui realized. ('If Vital Pressure is this universal, then developing a counter-deductive system specifically built for that technique might be quite useful.')

He could apply the tactic he used against Kane earlier to the Vital Pressure technique. Vital Pressure did reduce the number of strike locations because the number of weak and sensitive striking locations on the body was a minority of all the striking locations on the body, making it easier to predict his opponent's moves in advance and adapt his counter to those attacks more optimally.

He shook his head putting aside such thoughts and focused on the battle, he could think more deeply about this later.

He began to notice that Squire Dylan's movements were starting to grow more and more sluggish and lethargic. Compared to the start of the fight, where his movements were sharp and energetic, he had undoubtedly grown slower.

His face was covered in sweat and his breathing was strained, whereas Kyrie on the other hand appeared much less fatigued.

Rui immediately connected the dots together.

('As an all-rounder, she probably has better stamina than someone like Squire Dylon.') Rui mused. As far as he could tell, she had adopted an approach to combat that maximized her all of her distributed strengths as an all-rounder while diminishing the significance of offensive power.

('Huh, what do you know.') Rui thought to himself. ('She's basically doing something similar to the most elementary tier of the VOID algorithm.')

He wasn't too surprised. The VOID algorithm at its simplest iteration was just a systemized data-drive protocol form of common sense, in a way. He didn't think the VOID algorithm was something invincible that higher Realms of Martial Art couldn't replicate. Higher Realms of Martial Artists had traversed their Martial Path far, far deeper than Rui had, which almost certainly mean their minds were much superior in combat than his own mind, likely even with his reincarnation double-growth advantage.

In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if higher Realm Martial Artists possessed such superior cognition that they were capable of producing results that were superior to his algorithm.

As it currently was, the VOID algorithm was a relic that was special back on Earth, however Earth was astronomically inferior to Gaea as far Martial Art went. He was not arrogant enough to believe it was unsurpassable.

However, it didn't mean he was resigned to let it be that way. Project Water and the VOID algorithm were at the core of his Martial Art. The more he developed the VOID algorithm and upgraded and evolved it to encompass Martial Art in Gaea, the more his Martial Art would grow stronger.

Even if his Martial Art and VOID algorithm, as they were now, may just happen to be obsolete at the highest levels of Martial Art, he didn't they would remain that way by the time he reached the peak of Martial Art.

GRASP

A sudden shift in the fight's monotonous flow broke Rui out of his reverie. Squire Dylan had purposefully tanked an attack from Kyrie in order to get his hands on her, in order to turn the fight into a grappling contest.

He had managed to get his hands on her shoulder and refused to let go. His intent was clear to Rui, he wanted to get rid of Kyrie's maneuvering advantage by dragging her into an all-out grappling contest. As far as Rui could tell, it was working.

The two wrangled on the ground fiercely, consequentially cracking the hard tiles that were especially built to withstand the power of Martial Apprentices without a single scratch!

Squire Dylan had a physicality advantage, he had a stronger body, by virtue of being of a higher weight-class and also having a Martial Art in which raw power was important.

Grappling was a field where physicality mattered much more than in striking.

In a striking contest, it was possible for an inferior striker to defeat a superior striker thanks to a single well-timed and well-placed strike due to dumb luck.

There were no flukes in grappling, there was only inevitability.

('However, inevitability could swing both ways.') Rui noted. ('His stamina is much more depleted than Kyrie's stamina, and her stamina consumption is lower than his because of her higher conservation of energy, likely due to a Squire-level breathing technique.')

The fight had entered its final stage, and the conclusion was anything but clear!

Chapter 144: Insights

Squire Dylan's goal was quite simple; to exploit his superior raw power to the absolute maximum in order to win as quickly as possible. He knew he was on a time limit, especially since attempting an offense in grappling was much more energy-consuming than attacking via striking.

Squire Kyrie's goal was also equally simple, to stall the fight for as long as possible and drain Squire Dylan's stamina as much as possible. She knew she had a stamina edge, once her opponent was exhausted, she could begin her offense and win due to a lack of sufficient energy from her opponent. She had an edge in grappling defense since Dylan was largely offensive as a Martial Artist, so she was confident that she could hold on.

The wrangled for quite some time, even spending a lot of time just immobile. Some of the Martial Apprentices grew a bit bored, since the fight had become less exciting than it had been prior. But Rui only grew more and more engrossed.

And after a while of shifting and rolling, the moment came.

Squire Dylan's grip lost its firmness or just a split second as he felt just a mild wave of light-headedness.

But it was enough.

WHIP

Kyrie broke out and whipped her arm around his neck.

A chokehold!

That too, a sleeper chokehold. An extremely dangerous and nigh-unbeatable lock that put an unfathomable amount of pressure on the neck, the throat and the arteries. Rui gulped at the sight, with how strong Squires were, he was sure that if he was in Squire Dylan's place, his neck would have long been crushed to a pulp by her the sheer force of her hold.

Dylan struggled to the best of his ability, hitting Kyrie as hard as he could with Outer Convergence but in that position, with his exhaustion as well as Kyrie's formidable defense, he wasn't able to break out.

Eventually he tapped her arm thrice, indicating his resignation and defeat. Kyrie exhaled a deep breath of relief as she let him go, while Dylan gasped for breath as he inhaled as deep as he could.

Both of them were quite exhausted.

Immediately, several assistant staff members brought them several rejuvenation and healing potions.

"Shame I won't be getting my date." Dylan shrugged with emphasized melancholy, merely earning a snort from Squire Kyrie.

"My, I didn't think Instructor Dylan was someone who attacked women to get them to go out with him." Fae teased with her classic sophistry. The Martial Apprentices had already moved to their instructors once the fight had ended.

"Hey, you make it sound like I was committing a crime!" Dylan complained, receiving a bout of laughter from the students, and even a smirk from Kyrie.

"That was an amazing fight Instructor Kyrie, Instructor Dylan." Rui complimented. "Seeing your combat prowess makes me want to return to training even though I just finish it."

"Don't be so hasty my boy" Dylan waved. "With how dedicated you are, you'll surely surpass me as long as you dedicate yourself to your path. This is true for all of you." He said directing a glance to all the students. "Do not be discouraged by our performance, it is meant to inspire you. Each and every single one of you can obtain the power you have witnessed."

Squire Kyrie nodded. "Talent matters less and less the further down your Martial Path you traverse, many of the most powerful and prominent Martial Artists of the past and present were not extraordinary geniuses who broke through to Martial Apprentice at an extremely young age, and many Martial prodigies did not make it past Martial Squire, and in some cases, even Martial Apprentice."

"What matters most is how far down your Martial Path you walk, it requires perseverance, dedication, determination, suffering and sacrifice." Squire Dylan added. "You can be the most talented Martial prodigy on the entirety of the planet of Gaea, but if you lack the will to walk down your Martial Path, you may never even become a Martial Apprentice."

Those words were quite surprising to a lot of the Martial Apprentices gathered. They had all believed talent was the most important determining factor, or at the very least one of, despite the denial of others. But being told so in such a manner really made them think about what they ought to be focused on.

Rui understood this well, this was true even on Earth.

Talent allowed people a head start, but if they didn't run, they would lose the race one hundred times out of one hundred. Whereas someone who may even be set back, would win as long as they ran with everything they had, one hundred times out of one hundred.

Rui knew this, but right now he was too engrossed in the fight he had witnessed to think about that. He had no objective proof, but he could sense that Martial Squires were fundamentally different. It wasn't just a matter of being stronger, faster and durable, or having a greater evolved mind.

It was as if their bodies were constructed different, as if underneath their skin, they were robots running on motors and pumps powered by a powerful engine and energy supply.

He recalled Squire Dylon's words, that the 'quintessential foundation of their material bodies was different'.

It sounded like utter rubbish the man had conjured up to confound and confuse Rui, but perhaps the truth was more literal than Rui had initially thought it would be.

Rui had always had vague suspicions, but only after witnessing two Martial Squires fighting seriously had he actually come to notice differences between Martial Squires and Martial Apprentices. Their mass and weight, the distribution of mass across their body and center of mass, the elasticity of their flesh and their muscular power to body mass ratio.

There were many physical discrepancies that Rui had come to notice.

('Could it be...') Rui conjectured as an explanation came to mind. ('Could it be that the breakthrough to Martial Squires alters the body deeply on a cellular level?')

Chapter 145: Different Level

Rui wasn't sure, yet he didn't bother asking for clarification, it had already been made quite clear to him that nobody who knew the truth would reveal it so easily. Fae and Kane had both not been told about the breakthrough to Martial Squire, and Squire Dylan himself had refused Rui the truth, being purposefully vague and unspecific.

Still, Rui wasn't too bothered by this, he knew he would learn about the truth and even experience it himself as long as he traversed down his own Martial Path.

Once the event ended, Rui remained in the facility, looking for others to spar against.

Although he had tentatively mastered each individual technique alone, he hadn't fully gotten used to using all of them in combat. He'd decided he wanted to get more experience with them, it was better to refine it in the same environment of the Academy where he could afford to make mistakes than do so in the middle of a dangerous mission and lose his life as a result.

Especially so since the Academy had upgraded his Martial Apprentice grade from grade three to grade five. Meaning, from now on he could routinely take on missions that posed some degree of a threat, albeit not much, all by himself.

He would have only himself to rely upon.

The first course of action he wanted to do was test himself against different Types of Martial Artists, with different specialties. This gave him a wider dataset for him to evaluate how well he used his newly mastered techniques

He had already tested himself against an evasive maneuverer of Kane, and had been reasonably satisfied with his performance. Now he just needed to fight as many different types as he could. He could fight Fae for an offensive striker, Dalen for a defense-oriented Martial Art, Milliana for a stamina-oriented Martial Art. Felix for a grappling-oriented Martial Art.

He didn't particularly have anyone else he was acquainted with.

He shrugged, approaching other Martial Apprentices who had also stayed behind looking for anyone who was interested in a spar.

The sparing match he had gotten into now was just that.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

"Huff..." Rui exhaled as he put a foot forward, while extending his left arm open-palmed towards his opponent, while tucking his right fist at his ribs. It was a fairly neutral stance that didn't put too much weight on offense, defense or maneuvering.

His opponent, a girl named Karura, folded both arms to the absolute limit, as though she was trying to crush something in between her forearm and bicep, while raising her elbows, while crouching with bent knees

The stance undoubtedly drew attention to her elbows. This alone suggested to Rui that her Martial Art was a super close range Martial Art centered around elbows. It reminded him of the elbow centric technique that Fae had learnt half a year ago.

"Begin!" The supervisor began the match.

Karura immediately closed the gap between them, something that was within his expectations. She wouldn't be much of a super-close-range fighter if she didn't close the gap between them.

Naturally Rui did not intend to cooperate peacefully, he immediately dashed backwards, maintaining the distance between them.

What surprised him was that she was actually faster than he was, which meant she had invested a lot into mastering maneuvering techniques to bolster her speed and mobility.

('She's thought her Martial Art and repertoire remarkably well.') Rui thought. He could understand why she had built up her maneuvering foundation.

As a super-close-range fighter, her very obvious weakness was people with greater range who could attack her from outside her range while she couldn't. The

The most common-sense strategy against her was for one to keep her distance outside of her striking range, any moron could come up with this strategy as long as they thought hard enough. Rui was relatively certain that she had encountered this strategy many times until she chose to significantly bolster her maneuvering prowess so that she could close the distance every time they tried to open it, and force them to fight on her terms.

Rui suspected that in terms of raw techniques, he was probably inferior to her in super-close-range combat. Still, he didn't feel any threat or fear, his sense of security had risen tremendously after his latest training session

Just as she reached three meters away, Rui calmly stopped running away and instead ran straight into her.

A look of surprise flashed across her face, as this was the last thing she'd expected him to do.

BOOM

A tremendous impact let loose a huge gust of wind and that drew the attention of everybody within visible range of their spar.

What they saw when they glanced at the source of the explosive noise was Rui standing nonchalantly with an fist extended midair.

And a girl flat at his feet, coughing blood.

Their eyes flew wide open as they realized what had happened. Those who had already been watching the fight gaped with dropped jaws.

A single strike! Rui devastated her with a single attack

When Rui switched direction and ran towards her, he had accelerated to his top speed with Parallel Walk and Balanced Direction in her direction

Just as they were a meter away, he all three of his striking Apprentice-level techniques; Flowing Canon, Vital Pressure and Outer Convergence.

Flowing Canon used the accumulated momentum of his acceleration via Parallel Walk and Balanced Direction to ensure the power of his strike surpassed that of his normal strikes.

Outer Convergence drew power from all his muscle groups.

And Vital pressure finished the job by ensuring the strike landed in a way the maximized as much pain and damage.

It was an attack that was fueled by the power of a whopping five Apprentice-level techniques and was the single most powerful strike Rui could possibly launch.

Karura had tried to defend with an Apprentice-level technique, but it was nowhere near enough. She had tried counter-attacking as well, but having been caught off-guard with an already shorter range than Rui ensured that Rui's attack landed first.

And whence the attack landed, the fight ended.

Nay, it was over before it had even begun.

Rui had achieved a different level of power.

Chapter 146: Resumption

"You feeling better?" Rui asked.

Karura nodded as she finished consuming her rejuvenation potion. When she had collapsed, the match had ended and a team of paramedics had immediately rushed to the ring and had administered a healing potion to her.

"Glad to hear that." Rui replied.

He said as he extended an open hand out to her, which she promptly accepted, standing up. "Good fight, you're incredibly strong."

"You're quite good yourself." Rui replied.

"Hmph." She snorted mildly. "That's not very convincing coming from someone who defeated me with a single attack."

"I mean it." Rui scratched his cheek awkwardly. "I won because I exploited a weakness in your battle approach."

"Weakness?" She squinted her eyes with curiosity.

Rui nodded. "In exchange for being formidable at super-close-range combat, the natural and obvious weakness that your fighting style has is that you cannot fight well outside super-close-combat."

"Wait." She frowned. "I never told you that I was close-range fighter, how did you figure that."

He looked at her like she was dumb. "Because it was obvious after analyzing your stance."

"..."

"Anyway." He continued. "I could tell that you tried to compensate for this weakness by boosting your maneuvering capabilities so that you could chase down your opponents outside your striking range."

"..."

"That's not a bad solution, but is insufficient and doesn't truly address your shortcoming. It can be dealt with the way I dealt with it. Instead of running away, I turned and charged straight at you, we both attacked at the same time, yet my attack landed first." He paused, before asking. "Why is that?"

"Because you have greater range." She finally understood.

"That's right." Rui nodded. "As long as my attacks have greater range, I can always ensure you are unable to attack me, by attacking you before you are close enough to strike me. That is why chasing people is not a real solution. You'll just be barricaded and restricted to a distance by attacks with greater range than yours."

"Then what do I do?" She sighed with frustration. Rui could tell this was problem that had been bugging her for a while.

"I cannot tell you what to do, though I could give you some suggestions."

She nodded vigorously. "Please do."

"Not all strikes can be used to keep you at a distance." Rui said. "Only attacks with significantly greater range than your attacks can be effectively used to keep you at a distance. Things like hooks or short jabs are too short, your opponents can only really keep you out of range with straight punches and kicks. This can be exploited."

"How does that help me?" She frowned, not understanding.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the maneuvering section of the library has Apprentice-level techniques that allow the user to evade straight attacks and close the distance between the user and their opponent." Rui mentioned. "If you can find techniques like that, you better purchase and master them. Also, I wouldn't be surprised if the offense section of the Apprentice library has techniques that are specifically meant to inflict damage on strikes and attacks optimally. Thus, every time they attack you to push you out of range, their limbs endure damage. Something like that could also work." He said.

She grew engrossed as she realized the solutions he considered 'suggestions' could be the key to erasing the range weakness of her Martial Art. "Thank you for your suggestion! I'll take that into consideration." She said as she rushed to the Apprentice library.

Rui chuckled at her retreating form.

* * * * *

A week had passed by, Rui had finally accrued enough experience with the technique he had recently learnt. He had spent the entire week testing the techniques against different types of Martial Art with different ranges, different specializations in regards to fields, Martial Art centered around different principles, mechanics and systems.

He had gone onto make several adjustments to the way he used certain techniques. He had optimized the way he used Outer Convergence and Inner Divergence, though those were the easy parts. What he had trouble with was optimizing his application of Blink.

For one, he had already resolved not to reveal his mastery of this technique to the students of the Academy. Which meant he could not test his application of the technique against his peers and competitors in the Martial Festival.

Fortunately, he had managed to find a solution. He had trained with his former Apprentice supervisors from back when he was merely a student in the Explorer Stage.

He could have chosen to train with the Martial Squires, but had ultimately decided against that. As helpful, knowledgeable and experienced as they were, they were simply far too strong on a fundamental level to be of use and to be able to provide what he was looking for.

Martial Squires seemed to live and view the world on a fundamentally different level of speed and time. Blink was an Apprentice-level technique that was wholly ineffective against Martial Squires no matter how much they held back. At the very least his remaining Apprentice-level techniques were such that as long as the Martial Squires held back most of their power and reduced their combat prowess to the Apprentice Realm. But the same was not true for Blink, it simply would not work against them no matter what they did.

In comparison, the Martial Apprentice instructors were susceptible to the technique. All of the instructors he had approached had readily agreed to help him out even though mentoring and sparring with Martial Apprentice students was well outside their purview. Rui had an extremely good reputation among the staff of the education department, and was what many would consider the ideal student.

After long periods of training with them, he had finally reached a satisfactory level of comfort and practical real-world proficiency with techniques he had learnt.

With that out of the way. He had completed all the agendas that were holding him back from the next stage of mission completion.

Chapter 147: Unknown

Rui had two goals with the next phase of mission completion.

The first was to diversify his experience with different classes and types of missions. He intended to sign up for different missions outside of the standard bodyguard or protection missions. He had long grown bored of these kinds of missions and wanted to at the very least try out different kinds of missions before returning to a bodyguard mission.

The second goal was to accumulate an even larger number of merits and purchase powerful trump cards that he would hopefully be able to master before the Kandrian Martial Festival would roll around. His foundation was not truly solid as Outer Convergence bolstered his offense and Inner Divergence that solidified his defense, perhaps he ought to strengthen his grappling since it had been neglected a bit, but that wasn't a big issue.

The best way forward was to purchase the most powerful techniques within the library with the highest compatibility with the VOID algorithm that he possible could purchase. This would most definitely cost him a bomb of martial credits. So, he needed to complete as many high-grade missions as he possibly could to stack as much martial cash as he could.

With these two goals in mind. He strode into the Martial library with a determined expression. He pointedly ignored defense-class of missions that called out to him, instead glancing at the other four sections of the library, considering all of them carefully

The first class of missions he immediately crossed out was the Shadow class. This was the class of covert and furtive missions; the requirements of these missions were almost certainly beyond him. Most of the non-trivial mission would likely require multiple stealth-oriented techniques and multiple sensory oriented techniques for surveillance, reconnaissance and espionage.

He had initially sworn off covert operation missions because he wasn't particularly interested them, but since then he had come to realize that if he truly wanted to be able to adapt to any Martial Art, any foe and any threat, he needed to obtain some degree of proficiency in all fields. There would always be certain

But for now, he felt no urge to take up any Shadow Class missions, nor was he particularly qualified.

And with that, he added the shadow class of missions to no-go club where it gave the lonely defense-class of missions some company.

Rui's attention turned to remaining three classes of missions that had yet to be struck out.

Hunter class.

Offense class.

Miscellaneous class.

Miscellaneous class was also not something he was particularly interested in, perhaps even less so than his interest in the Shadow class of missions. The entire class was just a storage place for a bunch of missions that didn't fall into the other four big categories of missions.

That left the hunter and offense class of missions.

The offense class of missions while quite desirable did not offer anything to him from the private sector within the Kandrian Empire. Since Martial Apprentices did not receive international missions, asides from highest grades of Martial Apprentices. If he wanted an offense class mission, it would have to be a

Kandrian-authorized mission, which he would have to directly apply for at the commissions department of the Academy.

The hunter-class of missions was much more accessible.

He shrugged, walking towards the hunting-class section of the Martial library.

He had always been interested in hunting-class missions and had wanted to give them a go, but had lacked confidence in his foundation. But now he was quite confident, and now was good as any a time to apply for a hunting mission.

The hunter-class section of the library was further divided into multiple subclasses and sub-sections.

Extermination-subclass; Missions centered around the extermination of non-human organisms.

Procurement-subclass; Missions centered around procurement of a specified non-human living or non-living target located within a sufficiently uncolonized natural environment.

Reconnaissance-subclass; Missions centered around the procurement of information related to or involved operating within a sufficiently uncolonized natural environment.

Extraneous-subclass; Missions that involved operating within a sufficiently uncolonized environment that did not fall into the former three categories.

Rui noticed that all of them specified 'sufficiently uncolonized natural environment' as a condition for the mission to fall into the sub-class. This was because this was the defining feature of the hunting class of missions. If they did not involve natural environments that weren't colonized by humans, then they simply weren't in the hunter-class of missions.

He didn't have any particular preference for any of the sub-class of missions, so he walked right into the reconnaissance-subclass.

A lot of the missions were centered around overgrowth or over-population of a certain species of flora or fauna in certain parts in the regions in the geographic vicinity of the town of Hajin. Many of them were missions centered around dangerous beasts that had wandered and inhabited areas too close to dense human population.

They were quite intriguing and compelling; it had taken Rui a while to let it sink how different from defense-class missions these missions were. The mindset and the protocols were quite different as well.

Just as he was skimming through the mission bills, one particular mission caught his eye.

[Hunter-class: Reconnaissance-extermination nested-mission]

Mission description: 1) To investigate and deliver a report on a single(suspected) unknown beast responsible for the destabilization of the ecosystem of the Shaia plains via mass hunting and 2) to eliminate said unknown beast(s) if difficulty grade as evaluated by the Martial Academy is within the evaluated difficulty grade of mission

Difficulty Grade: 5

Target location range estimate: Within 10-kilometer radius of (48.5, 39.7)

Initial mission time period: 30 days

Mission commencement: Immediate

Skillset pre-requisites: 1 mid-grade sensory technique, 3 offense-oriented techniques, 3 defense-oriented techniques, 2-maneuvering oriented techniques.

Successful Completion Renumeration: 17 gold coins and 3 silver coins/450 martial credits.]

The reward had drawn him to the mission. He was quite intrigued by the mission as whole as well. Apparently, a myste beast or a group of beasts were responsible for destabilizing the ecosystem

dramatically, however the species of the beast was unknown. Thus, the first part of the mission was merely reconnaissance, where he had to observe and gather as much information and intelligence on the beast. The second part of the mission was to exterminate it if the Martial Academy evaluated the difficulty of the mission to be within grade five.

Rui picked up the mission bill, he definitely wanted to know more about this mission.

Chapter 148: Detail

Nested missions were missions with multiple objectives and goals. These were typically objectives that could not be separated from the other or were related closely enough that it was more efficient to lump them together in a nested mission.

Rui had noticed that the client of the mission was the Ministry of Ecology and Environment. A ministry established by the Royal Family to maintain and regulate the exotic and esoteric fauna and flora of the Kandrian Empire.

Rui had been initially quite surprised that a society as scientifically primitive as the Kandrian Empire had established a serious environmental government organization aimed at regulating the ecology and environment of the Kandrian Empire when he'd first learned of it long ago, but it had come to make more sense the more he learnt about this world.

The natural environments of Gaia, the Panama continent and the Kandrian Empire were far more dangerous than that of Earth's. Furthermore, they were far more economically important than that of Earth's. These natural ecological environments were the source of the many miraculous esoteric and exotic resources of many kinds that served as the foundation of the technological capabilities of not just the Kandrian Empire, but also all of human civilization.

If the environment was not regulated properly, and were to collapse, then human civilization would collapse immediately after as well. The natural environment needed to be protected strictly because of this.

The environment also needed to be limited. Because the many species that inhabited this land were extremely powerful and could only be stopped by Martial Artists or through the proprietary technological solutions of the Royal Family. If not limited, they were capable of inflicting untold suffering

and death upon humans. But they could not be fully exterminated either, because they were part of a delicate ecosystem that needed them.

There needed to be a delicate balance between protection and oppression, which is why the Ministry of Ecology and Environment existed. They ensured the ecological and environmental parameters did not go below a certain level and ensured it did not exceed a particular level.

When the ecological and environmental parameters threatened to exceed the established thresholds, they would usually commission the Martial Union and cooperate with them via the terms and protocols established in the Kandrian Martial Covenant; the contract between the Martial Union and the Royal Family.

This nested mission was one such example. An unknown beast had destabilized the ecosystem of the Shaia Plains, a rich fertile plainland outside of the town of Hajin, and the Ministry had taken action by cooperating with the Martial Union to send a grade-five Martial Apprentice to investigate and potentially eliminate the dangerous beast.

Rui noticed he fulfilled the skillset pre-requisite of the mission, which was not small. He even satisfied the mid-grade sensory technique requirement thanks to having mastered Seismic Mapping. This condition probably existed because the necessity for environmental awareness was much higher in the hunter-class of missions than in the defense-class of missions.

Unfortunately, Rui couldn't gain more information without accepting the mission. This was because of the protection of personal information policy that the Martial Union guaranteed to their clients. A lot of the details of commissions were quite sensitive and confidential. A lot of clientele simply wouldn't commission Martial Artists from the Martial Union if the Martial union hadn't taken such measures to prevent data leaks. The information that was on public display was merely information that the clients had consented to displaying.

('I guess I'll just accept the mission then.') He shrugged. He had already resolved to take a hunter-class mission. This mission was as good as any to start with in order to diversify his experience. It was even better because the mission sounded quite interesting.

He quickly took the mission bill to the application registrar, and immediately took a seat in the library to read more about the mission.

First traces of ecological destabilization in the Shaia plains had been noted about three weeks ago. The population of the dominant herbivorous species like the six-legged deer and the triple-tailed Gazelles native to the Shaia plains had been decreasing rather abruptly. The sightings had begun sporadically since then as a number of native residents who survived an encounter reported a strange multi-legged creature that had been seen coming and leaving out of apparently nowhere at a distance.

The description of the creature was rather bizarre, it had a mouse like main body, covered in scales instead of fur, with allegedly twelve limbs and a long tail and had a very odd-shaped bite pattern based on elementary surveys conducted by the Ministry. This information alone was insufficient for the Ministry to identify its species.

Thankfully, the combat prowess of the creature was estimated to be at a low-mid grade Martial Apprentice Realm, since it was verifiably unable to hunt certain native apex predators of mid-grade Apprentice Realm combat prowess.

Thus came the mission, the mission was to procure as much intel and relevant information as possible, including but not limited to; Appearance, primary habitat, caloric consumption, travelling patterns, means of travel and diet etc.

At first, Rui found it absurd that a Martial Artist could be expected to perform all these tasks, but the mission specified that the Ministry would provide the Martial Artist with user-friendly tools that made it elementarily simple to record the required information. He merely needed to press the right buttons at the right time for a particular recording function. Meaning he didn't need to actually mentally engage in any boring ecological procedures.

If the combat prowess of the beast was at the expected level, then he was expected to proceed with exterminating the beast as a part of the second objective his mission.

The rest of the mission bill went into the protocols that the Martial Artist needed to abide by, as well as some additional information.

"Alright." Rui shut mission bill. "Let's go for this."

He immediately headed towards the Commission department to begin the pre-mission protocols.

Chapter 149: Guidelines and Protocols

"Sign here one last time and you're good to go." A staff member in the dispatch facility informed him. "Good luck on your mission."

"Thank you." Rui nodded as he collected the assigned standard gear. In addition to the mission recording-device he was expected to use to update the Martial Academy, he was also issued an eco-survey device by apparently the commission department of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment meant to be the tool with which he could procure the information and intelligence required by the ministry.

He left behind his mask this time, he was dealing with a beast, not a human that could track him down via his identity. There was no risk associated with not concealing his appearance. He was grateful, as well-made and comfy as the masks were, they were still a pain in the ass.

The Shaia Plains were a good three hours outside Hajin, by carriage. He, however, simply needed to jog and he would reach the place in an hour. Leaving Hajin would require around an hour as well, since it was both big and a dense and populated.

Once he left Hajin, he heaved a sigh of relief.

This was the second time he had stepped out of Hajin for a mission, he had to admit that the less developed uncolonized areas were truly scenic and picturesque natural environments. Last time, he had been too tense to appreciate it well, especially since they were guaranteed to be ambushed by a bandit force led by Martial Apprentices.

This time, however, he was much more relaxed and calmer. He was far stronger than he was before and this mission wasn't nearly as dangerous as his last one.

The endlessly extending greenery across the smooth topography, coupled with the cool breeze of fresh air pierced by the gentle warmth of the rising sun.

Truly a peaceful sensation that did the concept of paradise justice. Especially to someone from Earth. Humans had ruined Earth's atmosphere with smoke and greenhouse gases. Rui was quite grateful that the Panama continent had yet to follow suit. He didn't anticipate they ever would, given that fossil fuels were worthless garbage in front of the miraculous esoteric and exotic resources of the planet of Gaea.

His pleasant surroundings had made the mission seem less of a chore and more of a vacation, and he quickly reached the Shaia Plains, looking down upon the vast plains from atop of a cliff.

It was an endless flat expanse of endless varieties of grass with dense distribution of wide-branched trees that spanned across the plains. In the distance he could see a lot of fauna, herds of six-legged deers, birds and other smaller mammals. The plains were vast enough to expand past the horizon, making for a potentially huge area over which the target of his mission could be located over. Furthermore, the intelligence provided by the Martial Academy and the Ministry indicated that the beast or beasts in question were quite elusive in nature.

There were guidelines for surveillance missions that were created by the Martial Union and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment such as this, to help Martial Artists complete their missions with greater ease. There was even a corresponding protocol system that helped Martial Artists decide what courses of action were most apt for certain situations. Furthermore, in a lot of the missions they provided more direct guidelines so that Martial Artists didn't have to make decision regarding a field they had no expertise in

One of the recommended surveillance methods was static surveillance for this particular mission was; permanent employment of large-scale sensory techniques during the period of highest activity. The Ministry of Ecology and Environment had stated in the mission bill that the evidence they had gathered suggested that the organism in question was primarily nocturnal.

By evaluating past known locations of hunting prey, the Ministry could correspond those locations with the known habitat cycle of the herbivorous species of the Shaia Plains, the Ministry could roughly estimate the time of these hunting incidents. Then after further corroborating the evidence with timings from eyewitnesses, they could generally infer that the beast was most active during the middle of the night.

This was good news for Rui because animals weren't nocturnal and would be at rest at night, it was much easier for his Seismic Mapping technique to allow him to detect movement across much greater distances. This meant that if the target of his mission was extremely active during the night, then its seismic signature would be much more ever-changing than the seismic signature of animal resting stationarily. This meant that the target would be much more identifiable.

Grid searching was another common way of covering land to find the primary habitat of animals. During the day, when the probability of the beast or beasts resting and sleeping was the highest, Rui would scale the Shaia Plains, grid by grid until his sensory technique detected the presence of the wanted beast.

Grid searching was a common method by which forest surveying teams would map and scale forests back on Earth, it was an efficient way of mapping and scaling any piece of area and reduced the margin of error significantly. By focusing thoroughly on one grid at a time, it prevented haphazardous and unstructured surveillance.

These two surveillance methods covered Rui for the day and night. Thankfully, he had brought many rejuvenation potions along with him allowing him to persist over longer expanses of time to increase the speed at which he completed this mission.

The grid search would only be useful during the day when the target of the mission was stationary and resting. If it was active like all the other animals, then grid searching would be utterly useless because the target of the mission would likely not only not be present at its primary hunting spot but also be travelling across the entirety of the Shaia Plains, hunting or doing whatever apex predators did when they weren't hunting.

Chapter 150: Time for Action?

Rui pressed a button his standard-issue mission-tracking device that indicating arrival at the mission location, and another one right beside it, indicating the commencement of the mission. The reconnaissance part of the mission was rather simple, albeit long and tiring.

He had already begun the grid search as per mission guidelines. He divided the Shaia Plains into one-acre squares. One acre was the largest area over which he had confidence of detecting the target of his mission, any larger and the input was too undecipherable. There was too much activity during the day, he would probably be able to expand that range significantly, during the night.

Using some convenient standard-issue tools for hunter-class missions, he was able to begin his grid searching process rather seamlessly.

He closed his eyes, trying his best to focus on the input of Seismic data and deciphering its meaning. Seismic Mapping gave him a rough picture of the topography, as well as objects in the environment. What it couldn't do however, give him an exact picture of the object radiating seismic vibrations. Of course, he could indirectly infer the source of certain seismic radiation, through the number of contact points on the ground as well as their weight.

Humans walked with two legs, with two feet touching the ground, that along with the fact that he could estimate their weight, as well as the shape of their feet allowed him to instantly judge that they're humans. To some degree he could extend this identification process to animals as well, but he needed to be familiar with their seismic signature.

So, before Rui even began the actual grid search, he first spent as much time needed in order to be able to identify and distinguish seismic signatures of the most common types of animal species that could potentially throw his identification off by confusing him.

In order to be able to detect the target of his mission, he needed to know what it definitely wasn't, only then could detect it when it did enter his Seismic sense.

He took his time as he memorized the seismic signatures of the six-legged deer and the triple-pronged gazelles so that he could instantly dismiss them when he detected their seismic signature.

As time passed, he grew more and more familiar with the seismic radiation of the Shaia Plains. Before what was an inscrutable influx of Seismic data was not slowly starting to turn into a clearer and clearer picture.

It had taken a long time before he was finally at a stage where he could proceed with the mission with confidence. He opened his eyes in exhaustion, reaching for a rejuvenation potion.

"Oh shit." He cursed when he saw the sun going down. Seismic Mapping did not tell him the time of the day nor could it tell him that the sun was going on because the sun did not produce any seismic radiation.

He had grown so engrossed that he had completely lost track of time.

"Oh well, I guess I can just start the grid search tomorrow." He sighed. For now, it looked like he would have to begin the static surveillance first.

He brought out the mission bill as he glanced at the local-migration patterns of herbivorous herds in the Shaia Plains. If the target of his mission were to begin a hunting spree, then he would be close to the likeliest locations he would likely run into the creature, or creatures.

He activated Seismic Mapping, and extended his range as far as possible. Seismic Mapping as a sensory technique did not have any hard fixed defined limit as for how far it could allow him to sense seismic radiation. However, the further away the source of seismic radiation, the more muffled and less clear it was. It was, in a way, similar to the auditory sense.

However, Rui was not looking for something detailed or clear. He wanted to locate the biggest gathering of resting herds of herbivores before they went to rest and stopped producing as much seismic radiation, making them harder to detect.

He had already managed to narrow down the directions he conducted the search in thanks to the intel provided by the commission department of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, now all he had to was find the biggest source of general seismic radiation and he could be relatively certain that herds of herbivores were responsible for that. That was because the largest groups of animals of a single species were those of herbivores.

Predators generally were either lonesome or part of a very small pack or pride.

This was Rui's strategy of finding the location of the herbivore herds before the target of his mission did.

"There they are." He said with knitted eyebrows, trying to sense the precise direction of the source of the seismic radiation he hoped was the target of his target.

He immediately began sprinting at top speed, activating both his Apprentice-level techniques to the absolute maximum while also using Outer Convergence to boost his travel speed, sprinting at incredibly fast speeds.

He could sense the jolting seismic radiation that doing this caused. He could feel the earth trembling at every step of his.

Soon, he could more clearly sense multiple sources of seismic radiation in different directions. The closer he got, what he thought was the result of a single source was actually multiple sources. It was just that the seismic radiation had interfered with each other too much over a great distance, making it seem it was coming from a single source.

He stopped running as hard once he was at a distance of five hundred meters from the herd, and stopped using any Apprentice-level techniques whatsoever at three hundred meters away. They would draw too much attention, there was no point in pursuing them if they simply ran away from him.

He crouched, taking cover under the tall grass ubiquitous in the Shaia Plains.

('Alright, it's time for action.') He thought to himself. His heartrate accelerated as his tension and alertness grew.