

Martial Unity 201

Chapter 201: Matchups

Rui and Kane had already arrived at the sparring facility at the reporting time and had signed the attendance register. Now they simply waited for their friends and scheduled matches to arrive.

Rui glanced at the scoreboard.

There were twelve people tied for rank one. These Martial Apprentices were consisted of the eleven that Rui was scheduled to fight across the span of eleven days as well as himself counting for the twelfth contestants.

Rui glanced around the facility, he could feel attention on Kane and himself. And it wasn't just because of his black features or Kane's status. The two of them both had sixty-seven wins and no losses. Everyone paid extra attention to all those who tied for rank one.

Rui's eyes skimmed through the rankings, taking note of how everyone else performed.

"Oh...?" He murmured.

"Hm?" Kane glanced at him.

"Gale's at rank number nine." Rui said. "Impressive."

"Well, he's strong." Kane said. "Even if we did beat him up easily."

He had had fifty-three wins and fourteen losses, meaning he only lost to two people outside of the top eleven tied for rank one. Outside of the top eleven, it could be said that he was very close to the next best.

"Dalen's at rank fifteen." Kane noted. "That's not bad at all either."

"As far as pure defensive prowess goes, he should be in the top three." Rui agreed.

The two of them sparked up a discussion about the rankings, eventually talking about the top eleven, the most interesting and also the most relevant of them all.

"Who are you most worried about in the top eleven?" Rui asked, out of curiosity.

"Hmph, I'm not worried about losing to anybody. I'm actually worried about not losing." Kane snorted.

Rui chuckled at that response. "Alright, who are you least worried about then?"

"Hmmm..." Kane scratched his chin. "Fae, as much as I hate to admit it, is one of the few who I'm least worried about. Her offensive power is absurd. I might actually die if she manages to get a clean hit on me."

His body frame was built for speed, agility and mobility. It was not trained for defense in mind. If she struck him with a full-powered blow...

Kane gulped at the very thought of such a thing happening.

Fae's power was so high that she shook the very air and ground with nearly every movement. Even Nel, who was blessed with superhuman power, was not nearly as strong as Fae. She was almost in a league of her own.

He turned to Rui with a sharp gaze. "Don't tell her I said that though."

Rui burst out into laughter, his relationship with Fae was truly entertaining and amusing.

"So, who else?" He asked. "You said one of the few."

"There's that Martial Psycho guy Nel." Kane said. "I dunno how he's that strong two months after becoming a Martial Apprentice, but he's really tough."

"And yeah that's about it." Kane shrugged.

"Nobody else?"

"Nope."

"You sure?"

"Yep. I can't think of any other Martial Apprentice who is strong enough to beat me besides from Nel and Fae." He shrugged exaggeratedly, before turning to Rui. "Why, you have someone else in mind?"

"Ha. Ha. Very funny." Rui grumbled, earning mischievous laughter from Kane.

The two of them bantered back and forth until Fae, Milliana and Dalen arrived, immediately grouping with them.

"The three of you prepared?" Fae asked. "It's the final run and it's going to be the toughest for the three of us."

Kane shrugged. "It is what it is. No big deal."

"As prepared as can be." Rui replied.

Today Rui was scheduled to fight Feela Garron. A powerful ranged fighter, and a senior Apprentice at the Martial Academy. She was the strongest ranged fighter in the entire Academy, because she had pursued range to an absurd degree. It was truly mind-boggling to see the sheer amount of range this woman had come to possess.

She could strike people ten meters away!

She did this by devoting herself to an extremely high-grade technique that allowed for the clean dislocation of limbs, via conditioning of the ligament as well as well-timed simultaneous expansion of the biceps and the triceps and other skeletal muscle groups.

This not only gave her extra range, but also greater power and speed.

This was because the strike accelerated over a greater amount of distance. Her impacts were extremely quick and devastating. Although they weren't at Fae levels of power, she wasn't too much less threatening than Fae. Especially considering Fae had a range weakness while range was Feela's greatest strength.

After Fae, Nel and Kane, she was one of the people Rui was wariest about. In certain scenarios, she was likely even more dangerous than them.

He would be fighting her today. And if he lost, he would certainly be thrown out of any realistic chance of winning the preliminary contest.

Fae was to fight Avi Seth, a poison-oriented Martial Artist. Rui had seen him fight before, and he was curious about poison-oriented Martial Artist would handle a conventional Martial Artist of Fae's calibre. It was quite intriguing because this fighting style was one of those fighting styles that his previous life's knowledge as least useful against.

Kane was scheduled to fight Sahar Kal, a strong all-rounder. Now this match Rui was interested in, he wanted to see how a strong all-rounder dealt with Kane. This would give him a lot of useful data on what worked and what didn't against Kane and help him make the final set of preparations before their fight.

Nel on the other hand was bound to face Hever Mendelieve. A rare balance centric specialist. He fought in an incredibly novel way that relied on an extraordinary sense of balance combined with supreme flexibility. Rui was curious about how the two would fight each other.

Thankfully none of the fights of the rank one Martial Artists were simultaneous, so Rui could take his time observing all of them.

Chapter 202: Ranged Combat

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier." A staff member called out to him, breaking him out of his reverie. "Your scheduled fight is soon to commence, please wait by the assigned ring."

"Sure." Rui nodded. "Alright, see you guys later."

Rui left after they bade him good luck. Once he reached the ring, he saw Feela Garron waiting at the ring.

She was a tall and lean woman with brown hair and eyes. She had a heavy aura, and was one of the few Martial Apprentices that could make his Primordial Sense tingle with alarm.

"Sorry for the wait." He said with a friendly smile.

"No problem." She replied calmly.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

Feela proceeded to take the most bizarre stance Rui had ever seen in his life. Her right arm went back, with her hand hanging behind her. Her left arm went to the right side under her right armpit, as though she was trying to hug herself. She shifted all her weight onto her left leg, and her right leg was behind her with heels lifted off the ground, merely touching the ground at the toes.

It was a bizarre stance, but it made sense when one knew what her Martial Art was.

The arms were positioned the way they were because her attacks were extended swings, and chops that required a large amount of swinging distance, thus she was merely coiling up her arms and giving them

as much room as possible. It was like stretching rubber band as far as possible so that it would hit back as hard as possible.

She had shifted all her weight onto one leg because she was an immobile fighter. She generally planted herself at the extremes of the ring and sniped her opponents with ranged swings from the corner of the ring. It was easier to launch strikes with one leg quicker if that leg didn't have any weight it was forced to support.

"Fuuu..." Rui exhaled. He had already begun constructing an adapted Martial Art in his mind.

She was a ranged Martial Artist and Rui's range was significantly shorter. He would be unable to strike her if he fights her at range.

Thus, the first trait his adapted fighting style would need to have was being able to close the distance between them. This way, he would be at a range where he could actually do damage to her. Another reason this trait was important was because ranged strikes were useless in close quarters. What was the point of striking ten meters away if your opponent was one meter away?

She would be forced to exchange normal arm-length and leg-length close quarters blows with Rui which he could certainly win.

Why?

Because assuming she spent most of her resources into becoming the best at ranged combat and beating people at range, it logically followed that she was weak at close range quarters. Rui excelled at that range.

Thus, this first condition he had set for the adapted fighting style was the most important.

Rui adopted his stance.

Feet close to each other, weight equally distributed and constantly shifting, arms close to the body propped up defensively.

It was a defensive maneuvering stance. Aimed at ease maneuvering and defending against attacks. Since Rui could not attack, he did not need to take up a stance that catered to ease of offense. His primary goal was closing in on her.

"Begin!" the supervisor commenced the match.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, Feela's arm blurred.

And all hell broke loose.

BOOM

Rui narrowly avoided an impact where he was standing a tenth of a second prior. Just as he paused, his instincts tingled as he felt danger swinging down on him.

BOOM

He narrowly avoided yet another impact.

('Damn! She would have knocked me out if I hadn't mastered Primordial Instinct!') Rui cursed.

The speed of her whips was absurdly fast, far faster than Rui was. The reason he was able to dodge them despite that was because they had to travel a longer distance than Rui had to avoid them. But as far as raw speed went, they were nearly as fast as Kane was although much less fluid and flexible. Furthermore, when they stretched, they became thinner, making it harder to follow them with the naked eye.

BOOM

Rui spun to the side as a gust of disheveled his hair. She'd almost got him that time.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

Every time he tried closing in, she launched swift and powerful blow, cutting off his path. Her timing and placement were spectacular. Rui could tell she'd had an immense amount of experience at keeping people from entering close quarters range against her.

Rui could see how she'd managed to come this far with zero losses. Most Martial Apprentices would not be able to beat her.

He leapt away, increasing the distance between them before pausing.

She didn't attack him.

('So she has a range limit.') Rui noted. He took the opportunity to reconfigure his adapted fighting style.

Another trait his Martial Art needed to have was to be able to close the distance despite her restrictive attacks. This either meant avoiding them, or enduring them.

Both methods were feasible, the question was which was the least risky and had the highest chance of victory?

He could for evasive infiltration with Parallel Walk, Balanced Direction, Phantom Step and Primordial Instinct.

Or he could for the enduring infiltration with Parallel Walk, Balanced Direction, Inner Divergence, Elastic Shift and Acute Edge.

He inputted the variables and parameters into the VOID algorithm, before adopting his stance.

"Both it is." he murmured, before gearing himself for the infiltration.

He inhaled, and exhaled. Breathing in deeply as he calmed his body down, and focused his mind.

His concentration grew deeper and deeper.

Until everything disappeared.

The only thing he could see was his target.

Feela gritted her teeth as the pressure Rui was generating began skyrocketing. She didn't understand how someone much younger, who had only been a Martial Apprentice for less than two years could possibly generate such weight.

She mirrored Rui, taking up her stance, as the two faced off once more.

The second stage of the battle was about to begin.

Chapter 203: Outcome

"Fuuu..." Rui exhaled.

The next moment his muscles grew taut as he gathered as much energy as he could, preparing for the charge.

DASH

He dashed towards her. Yet, the moment he was close enough;

BOOM

WHOOSH

A powerful whip landed onto him, only for him to disappear!

('A feint.') Feela realized.

He had been using feints to mislead her attacks, allowing him to avoid them.

This was a particularly effective solution as Feela needed rely on predictive measures in order to strike her targets from such a distance. Meaning feints were particular effective against her.

She immediately escalated the attacks.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Rui barely managed to avoid getting hit as three impacts struck around him. He glanced at her with surprise.

('Damn, she's using both arms and her leg simultaneously.') Rui realized. Meaning the number of attacks had tripled.

By using all three limbs at once, she was dishing out three separate ranged-attacks at any point in time. Thus, even if the first whip missed him because of a feint, the second or the third would undoubtedly strike him.

BOOM BOOM POW

The third whip landed square on Rui, pushing him back.

The strategy was effective, but it was not without caveats. By increasing the number of strikes, she was forced to reduce the lethality of each strike. Making withstanding them a much more practical solution.

Rui dashed towards her once more.

BOOM BOOM

He fainted out of the first two strikes, but the third was set to hit him!

POW

He used Inner Divergence, Acute Edge and Elastic Shift to negate the impact, before pushing forward.

BOOM BOOM

WHOOSH

POW

He got past yet another set of whips, making even more progress. By carefully choosing when to feint and when to endure, he was able to make use of a combination of both of these approaches to close the distance between him and Feela.

BOOM BOOM

WHOOSH

POW

He timed his defensive techniques perfectly this time, enduring no pain or damage whatsoever.

He was just five meters away.

She had only one last chance!

If Rui crossed the last barrage, the range would be too short for her whips to gain the speed and momentum they normally had.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Rui fainted, throwing two of the whips off target while throwing up his guard and charging through the last whip with all of his defensive techniques.

('Shit-') She didn't even have time to curse.

BAM

Rui charged at her with his maneuvering techniques, accumulating momentum and striking her with Flowing Canon.

Although having her back face the corner meant no one could ever take her back and attack her from a blind spot, it also meant that the probability of her getting knocked out of the ring was much higher. The ease of doing so was greater than if she were at the center of the ring.

As predicted, her capabilities at close quarters were limited and she simply did not possess the techniques needed to deal with one of Rui's most powerful attacks.

WHOOSH

The attack launched her flying, as she skidded across the ground.

('Winner; Rui Quarrier.') The supervisor immediately declared.

"Fuuu..." He exhaled in relief. ('Ten more battles to go.')

He was quite comforted by the fact that he was able to beat Feela handily, especially without needing to use his trump cards. It gave him greater confidence that if he went all out and used all the techniques that he had at his disposal he would be able to combat those he was most worried about.

"Good fight." Rui had offered her a handshake after he exited the ring. "You were quite strong."

"As were you." She returned his gesture. "Now that you beat me, my chances of being chosen as representative are all but gone. You better win."

"I intend to." Rui smiled.

He exchanged farewells with her before returning to his friends.

"Good fight." Kane said.

"That was clean." Fae agreed.

"Thanks." Rui replied, consuming a rejuvenation and healing potion, before glancing at Fae. "You're up next right?"

She nodded. "My match will begin soon, so I should probably get going."

Rui nodded. She was scheduled to face another rank one fighter; Avi Seth. The reason Rui was particularly interested in the outcome of this fight was because Avi Seth was a Martial Artist with a Martial Art centered around poison.

It's not that he hadn't seen poison based Martial Art, it's just that he hadn't seen it at higher levels. He didn't think Fae would lose unless she was careless, so he was curious to see how Avi fought and what he would do against someone of Fae's caliber.

Rui and the others reached her assigned ring as they spectated. Avi had long red hair, his stature was not particularly large nor too lean, he was perfectly neutral.

What drew Rui's attention were his hands. They were bizarre, to say the very least. His nails were grotesque and purple, as though they were undergoing necrosis.

('Some special conditioning.') Rui realized. There was no doubt in his mind that Avi had undergone some special conditioning training to that led to the strange physical features he had, there was no doubt that this was connected his specialty either.

The human body did not naturally produce poison. In order for poison-oriented Martial Art to exist there needed to be some degree of human modification that had to be made to the Martial Artist or one simply would not be able to make use of poison oriented Martial Art.

Rui suspected that his hands had been modified to either produce poison or store it. The purple pigmentation was likely due to the presence of poison itself.

Which meant Fae should avoid it at all costs. He glanced at her, sensing certain level of caution from her towards his hands. She could not be too rash, lest she be taken down with a potent form of poison!

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

The match was about to commence.

Chapter 204: Poison

Fae took her classic stance. Her right palm tucked at her waist, upside down. Her left palm faced her opponent, her legs crouched, evenly supporting her weight.

Avi took an open-palmed stance with his fingers facing Fae. It resembled a Wing Chun stance from Earth.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the match.

Avi immediately dashed towards Fae, launching a palm jab. Fae simply stepped back, avoiding any contact with his hands.

WHOOSH

She avoided a palm jab by sidestepping.

"She's being uncharacteristically passive." Dalen remarked.

"She's cautious of his poison. She doesn't want to make contact with him easily." Rui said.

"She sucks at evading though." Kane noted. "She's just running away and avoiding it by ceding space. Eventually she'll run out of room."

Fae was cognizant of this, and before long, she changed her approach.

POW

She launched a light jab after avoiding a palm jab from Avi. He skidded back, barely putting together a guard.

Fae had purposely made the jab as short and quick as possible. She wanted to minimize the amount of contact she had with Avi's body, even it came at the cost of power.

WHOOSH

He simply tried jabbing at her with his palm

POW

She managed slammed him with a palm attack, as he just barely managed to throw together a guard in time.

WHOOSH

POW

WHOOSH

POW

WHOOSH

POW POW POW

Fae grew more and more comfortable and smooth as she grew accustomed to this fighting style. She had been apprehensive at first, but the fight was starting to go smoothly.

('Too smoothly.') Rui frowned. Was this man really a rank one Martial Artist? His attacks were simple enough to avoid, and his defense was meagre. He would not be able to withstand Fae's palm attacks.

He didn't understand how Avi managed to not lose a single time in the past nineteen days.

Just as he was wondering what he was missing, he noticed something strange with Fae.

"What's with her arms?" Kane asked aloud, frowning. "They're faltering...?"

Rui's flew wide open as he paid more attention. Fae's expression had morphed into alarm and confusion too, she had to exert serious effort to keep her arms up in her stance.

"Don't tell me..." Rui realized. "It wasn't just his fingertips. His entire arms is covered in poison!"

Fae had consistently struck his guard with each strike, this was on purpose. This explained why he always put up a guard even if there were better options.

Although it looked like Fae was the one attacking him, in reality he was attacking Fae each time he defended himself!

Rui hadn't yet adopted the right mindset when it came to poison due to his inexperience and ignorance in regards to this field of Martial Art and techniques. But he did in fact realize, that this application was quite overpowered.

If his entire arms were covered in poison, that meant he had an incredibly vast attacking area. He only needed to make contact with his opponent in order to poison them.

Furthermore, this poison didn't need to be ingested or be injected into the body, Fae had only made contact with his skin. Yet the poison was starting to affect the entirety of her arm. This meant the poison had high penetration and a short timeframe within which it would start affecting performance parameters.

"The finger tips drew our attention and subconsciously made us assume that it was the only poisoned area." Kane understood.

"Right." Rui agreed. "It doesn't even matter if his nails are or aren't poisoned or not. Their true purpose is a red herring."

Suddenly their attention was drawn as Fae dashed at Avi.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Kane narrowed his eyes in alarm. "Why the fuck is she blasting him with powerful attacks? Has she not realized what is going on?"

"She surely has." Rui had no doubt about that. Fae was an intelligent fighter. "It's the right move."

"How so? Won't this just accelerate the poisoning?" Kane frowned.

"Yes, but..." Rui continued. "It's her only choice. The poison had just kicked in, meaning it wasn't done yet in all likelihood, as time passes, it will likely have incapacitated her even more. A race against time is a race she would have lost."

"I see." Kane murmured as he realized. "So she wanted to pummel him as hard as she could to end the fight as fast as she could?"

Rui nodded.

"Wouldn't it make more sense to attack parts of his body that aren't guarded by his arms?"

"Not really." Rui shook his head. "He's carefully guarding the easiest and closest parts of his body to attack. All other parts of his body would require Fae to launch longer attacks and require her to alter the trajectories of her attack to land clean hits on. The difficulty of it is high given her arms are partial incapacitated, furthermore, greater distance means greater timeframe which allows Avi enough to poison her anyway. Either with his arms or his nails. Furthermore, the rest of his body might be poisoned too. Perhaps if she wasn't poisoned already, this plan might have been more feasible, but in her current state, she needs to end this fight quickly."

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Rui could sense her desperation and determination. Seeing how far Avi was able to push someone of her caliber, he no longer had any doubts about his competence, Rui could easily see how he could have beaten small fries with that ridiculous poison.

However, it didn't mean he was having it easy.

Avi gritted his teeth as he guarded for dear life. Although his plan was working, he had underestimated how absurdly powerful Fae's full-powered blows were. Even the light jabs she had struck him with at the beginning were more powerful than anything he had been hit with in the entire contest!

These full-powered blows were devastating.

BOOM

CRACK

His arms were already filled with hairline fractures and even some clean cracks. She made a complete mess of his wrist and his entire arms were purple, and it wasn't because of his poison!

Chapter 205: Outcome

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Fae unloaded an unbelievable onslaught of attacks onto Avi as the latter struggled to stay on his feet. His arms were broken already and the damage was no longer being restricted to them. Because his arms were broken, they were no longer able to guard the rest of his body effectively.

His ribs, joints and muscles were all reeling from the impact. He had already begun to cough blood due to some internal bleeding in his body.

He wouldn't be able to last much longer!

('Just how much power does she have?') He cursed. Praying she would be done soon.

His prayers were answered.

Suddenly her onslaught stopped, and her arms dropped, dangling freely. Her fair skin had taken on a sickly darker hue.

Time was up.

It was over.

Her mighty feared palms had failed.

Failed her, when she needed them the most.

Avi's eyes twinkled. Yet just as he launched himself at her;

BAM!

"ARGH!" He coughed blood as her kick cratered into his ravaged body.

POW

A high kick struck his jaw, rattling his brain.

The human mind was funny, it often failed to make the most elementary inferences. This was often caused by a variety of factors outside of intelligence. Conditioned inertia, when something abnormal

becomes so normal that people forget that it was ever abnormal in the first place. Intense emotions in the heat of suspenseful moments also created psychological blind spots.

For Avi, and perhaps for a lot of onlookers, it was the both of them.

In the past two years, not a single soul had seen Fae kick. It was an unheard-of phenomenon and one that most people wouldn't even conceive of. In that high-intensity situation, when Fae's formidable palms and arms collapsed, he had immediately felt incredible ecstasy and confidence.

In that moment, he had just simply failed to realize that 'hey, maybe she can use those perfectly functional legs of hers to kick me.'

If it was anybody else, he likely would not have dropped his guard and rushed in like he did. But Fae's weakness, or what he considered to be her weakness, turned out to be his.

His ravaged condition, and the final high kick to the jaw rattled his brain, causing immediate brain trauma.

THUD

He hit the ground like a bag of rocks, unconscious.

Avi Seth had lost.

Not just the match, but also his chances of being chosen as the representative.

For several seconds, there was silence.

"W-Winner; Fae Dullahan!" The supervisor shook his head, breaking out of his reverie. He had been so engrossed he had forgotten he had a job to do!

Fae was breathing laboriously. Even the skin near her neck had gone from fairer to the darker hue her arms were completely coloured in. The poison was taking its toll, and she had come in contact with it countless times after she had begun her final assault on Avi.

She didn't even return to her friends. The medical team immediately rushed her to the temporary section and gave her many potions of different colours.

The Academy, of course, knew of all the techniques that the students purchase, since they were the ones who sold them to them in the first place. They were well-prepared for all outcomes, including the poison techniques of Avi Seth.

Soon, her skin retained its original colour, and she was back on her feet feeling invigorated after a rejuvenation potion.

"Great fight Fae." Rui complimented her.

"That was intense." Kane offered. He couldn't help but admit she had a great fight.

"That was close too." Dalen noted.

Fae nodded. "Thankfully I managed to get in that last kick, which along with the earlier damage I inflicted was enough to put him out of commission."

"How are your arms." Milliana asked out of concern.

"Ah." Fae glanced at them. "They're fine. The medical team fed me detox potions that cleared out the poison from my system. "I'm perfectly okay now."

"Good to hear." Rui nodded. He would have been really dismayed if she was not at her peak in her succeeding matches. He would take no pleasure in beating her when she was in a weakened state. With this, he could put aside any worry and go all-out against her when they would eventually fight in the coming days.

They chatted a bit, before it was Kane's turn for the day.

"Apprentice Kane Arrancar." A staff member addressed him. "Your scheduled fight for the day will commence soon. Please wait at the assigned ring immediately."

"Yeah. Will do." Kane nodded. "Alright guys see you later."

He left after having been bade good luck.

The four of them quickly made their way to the ring as Kane's fight was about to begin. Both he and his opponent were already on the ring.

"Who do you guys think will win?" Fae asked as she glanced at Sahar Kal.

"Kane." Rui replied unhesitatingly

"It's hard to imagine Kane losing." Dalen agreed as Milliana nodded.

His shocking performance at the beginning of the preliminary contest had left a deep impression on all of them.

Dalen and Milliana had already fought him and lost miserably. Fae and Rui on the other hand had yet to, and did not think victory would be anything short of extremely difficult.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

Sahar Kal was a strong senior Martial Apprentice with an all-rounder Martial Art. She adopted a neutral stance, positioning her arms equally defensively and offensively while balancing her weight equally between both legs with a foot of distance between them. The quintessential neutral stance. It was a stance that Rui himself often used when he lacked information on his opponent.

Kane instead nonchalantly relaxed his body and arms, lightly hopping between both feet. It was a stance that catered much more to maneuvering more than a rigid stance like hers. In this stance he would be able to enter top speed in any direction extremely quickly.

"Begin!" The supervisor waved his hand, commencing the match.

Chapter 206: Potential Solution

Everyone tensed when match commenced.

No one could get used to it.

Kane exhaled a puff of air and sashayed out of reality.

It was as though he had ceased to exist.

Could one fight someone who may as well no exist?

That the herculean task Sahar Kal was faced with.

('Now then...') Rui mused as he closed his eyes. ('What does she plan to do?')

By now the entire Academy was aware of the magician that Kane had come to be. Surely Sahar must have had some plan against him.

"RAAARGH!" She swung at empty air all around her.

"..."

"HYAAAH!" She drop-kicked empty air.

"..."

BAM

She body-slammed empty air.

Rui could sense with Seismic Mapping and Primordial instinct that Kane hadn't landed a single attack at all since the match began. He was merely circling around her.

('He's probably laughing his fucking ass off right now.') Rui couldn't help but chuckle at the thought. He sighed; a bit depressed. He was hoping he could get some useful data, but it seemed that this was merely unrealistic optimism on his part.

Suddenly, Rui vaguely sensed Kane had begun moving towards her while she continued swinging empty air.

Whether by some sixth sense, or sheer luck. She coincidentally launched a sweeping kick just where Kane was about to attack from.

WHOOSH

The attack missed, of course. Kane would never get hit by such a kick.

But he was visible the instant he paused, before becoming imperceivable again.

('This...') A realization dawned Rui. The Void Step technique was a technique that misdirected attention and cognition of observers via maneuvering-based misdirection techniques. It employed the same tricks that magicians used in order to perform magic. Once someone was paying attention on the user, the user would move while misdirecting their opponent's attention away from them and the direction they were moving in. Meaning in order to actually execute the misdirection, he needed to maneuver; to be in motion.

That also meant if he ever had to inadvertently pause or stop in order to avoid an incoming attack, the technique would also cease to function for the brief moment of time.

He needed to constantly be in motion for the technique to constantly be in effect, it seemed. That one brief moment of Kane appearing had given Rui some hints about potential shortcomings in the technique's mechanics that could potentially be exploited.

Although this wasn't the first time Kane had become visible in a battle, it was the first time Rui was able to associate a cause with the phenomenon. Since he hadn't purchased the technique, he wasn't familiar with all its mechanics.

POW POW POW

Kane had begun his onslaught. Peppering his opponent with a volley of strikes.

Ever since he had mastered the Void Step technique, he had inadvertently become more offensive in his fighting style.

This wasn't because of any changes to his Martial Path.

It was simply because he was too strong, he didn't need bother using his real Martial Art against most Martial Apprentices.

What was the point of being super evasive if his opponent couldn't even sense him, let alone come close to touching him?

If he did run into a Martial Apprentice who could counter the Void Step technique and sense him despite it, he would immediately revert back to his evasive style, since his opponent could now land strikes on him.

But if they couldn't even sense him?

There was simply no point in wasting time. Victory could only be won through offense.

He launched many strikes across her entire body. Targeting not just her vitals. He was cautious but not worried, he didn't think there was anything she could really do against him.

POW POW POW

He jabbed at her throat before casually evading a wild haymaker with ease.

Sahar Kal had grown more and more frustrated, swinging around more and more wildly as she endured more and more damage.

BAM

He launched a strong kick to her solar plexus that left her grimacing.

POW

A swift kick to her jaw caused brain trauma, knocking her out immediately.

She collapsed immediately, as Kane came to be perceivable again.

"Winner; Kane Arrancar!" The supervisor declared as Kane walked off.

"You must have laughed your ass off at the start." Rui chuckled.

"You goddamn bet I did." Kane laughed. He had laughed so hard that he almost deactivated the Void Step technique by mistake!

Perhaps if Rui wanted a sure-shot way of taking Kane down he ought to arrive to their battle with stand-up comedy prepared.

"Clean win Kane." Fae nodded warily.

"As ridiculous as always." Dalen agreed.

Rui had grown engrossed on his thoughts from early on in the battle. Could there be a way to exploit the fact that the Void Step technique could only be operated when in motion? Perhaps, but Rui didn't think it was that simple. For him to be able to exploit this trait would mean that he was somehow able to exploit the fact that Kane would be visible for a brief instant.

But how was that exploitable exactly? A brief instant was just that; A brief instant. He did not think it would be easy to exploit. Even if Kane was visible briefly, there wasn't too much that could be done. Even if it was a bit more than just a brief instant it would not be easy. Kane was quite strong even without the Void Step technique. Just because it was inactive for a moment didn't mean he was suddenly extremely weak.

Even without the Void Step technique, Kane could probably beat most of the Martial Apprentices. Admittedly he would need to go all out and there might even be several close calls, he should be able to make it to the top unbeaten, though there he would likely be defeated by one of the rank-one candidates.

The Void Step technique greatly enhanced an already strong Martial Apprentice. Rui did not think he would have an easy fight even if countered it.

Chapter 207: No Longer Denied

"Fuuu..." Rui exhaled as he calmed his pounding heart.

He didn't want to get too excited.

He had been waiting for this day for quite some time. If he screwed things up because he was too excited he wouldn't forgive himself

He glanced at his personal schedule for the preliminary contest.

[Fae Dullahan vs Rui Quarrier]

It had been five days since the Academy pre-scheduled the remaining matches. In the following days after his fight with Feela Garron, he went onto fight Jane Francis; A powerful grappling specialist, as well as Avi Seth and Sahar Kal.

In his fight against Jane Francis, he had adapted his fighting style into that of a distant ranged striker with elements of evasive maneuvering. This was one of the best solutions against an aggressive grappler, range to exploit their weakness, and evasiveness to counter their only means of compensating for their weakness. He had eventually won the battle with a well-timed Flowing Canon which knocked his opponent out.

Against Avi Seth, he was truly tempted to use the Stinger. The Stinger was one of his trump cards that would have been extremely effective against Avi Seth because it inflicted critical damage while minimizing contact with poison skin. Allowing him to take Avi Seth out far faster than the poison would incapacitate him. It would have been trivially easy for Rui one-shot Avi had he gone all out. But he decided to preserve the trump card for when it was truly needed.

Instead, he took Avi down by abusing his maneuvering techniques and Phantom Step, carefully avoiding his palm jabs while also avoiding his arm guard. This turned out to not be as challenging as he expected, he came to realize that Avi had potent poison that he employed in tricky ways, but once Rui figured out the trick, the VOID algorithm chewed his Martial Art and spat out a counter-adapted fighting style which Rui used to dominate him start to finish.

He ended the battle with a clean ring out.

It definitely helped that he had spectated Fae's fight with him.

His third fight against Sahar Kal was the most dominant of all three fights. Despite being an all-rounder, she had poor adaptability and fought very straightforwardly. This is why Rui was able to cleanly handle her despite the fact that all-rounders were harder for the VOID algorithm to adapt to. He exploited the holes in her style without missing a beat and eventually defeated her with a chokehold, forcing her to tap out.

In the past four days, the top twelve Martial Apprentices of the Academy who were tied for rank one had been whittled down having faced each other. At the current moment, of the original twelve that had a zero loss win streak, only five managed to maintain their win streak.

Rui Quarrier.

Fae Dullahan.

Nel.

Kane Arrancar.

Hever Mendelieve.

And now the day had come for him to fight Fae.

He headed to the sparring facility immediately, there wasn't much time left for his match.

He ran into all four of his friends on the way to the ring.

"Oh, he's here." Kane remarked.

"Hey guys." Rui said, before turning to Fae. "Hey Fae, are you ready?"

She nodded. "I am. Win or lose, no hard feelings, I won't hold back."

And Rui could sense that. She was pumped up to go all-out.

"I couldn't ask for anything more." Rui grinned. "May the best Martial Artist win."

Soon, the match was to be commenced.

There was an immense amount attention on this fight.

All Martial Apprentices who weren't participating in a match themselves had chosen to spectate this particular match. This was important. This was a match that would likely eliminate one of the top five candidates from the position of rank one.

Furthermore, everybody was curious to see who would win between Fae and Rui. The two of them were both incredibly remarkable and had reached the very best of all the Martial Apprentices of the Martial Academy!

Regardless of the outcome, they were in for one hell of a fight.

These official preliminary matches were very different from the routine mandatory spars the Martial Academy held between Martial Apprentices. The spars were spars, most people did not go all-out during them, but rather used them to train certain parts of their Martial Art, certain techniques, certain tactics and strategies. They were much more training than they were competition.

The preliminary contest was different. Every single Martial Apprentice was absolutely serious and did everything they could to in order to win. Each Martial Apprentice had grown stronger in the past few years having accumulated a lot of power. The preliminary contest was the one place where all of this growth and power would be used to the absolute maximum.

This fight would truly show them which one of the two titans were the strongest.

"Take your stances." The supervisor instructed.

Fae coiled her right arm to the side, tucking her taut open-palm upside down at her waist. That arm was a serpent waiting to last out at its prey. Her left palm faced Rui. This palm was positioned in manner that allowed her to launch quicker and lighter jabs, and also aid her right palm into landing powerful attacks successfully.

She exhaled, spreading her feet and dividing her weight between them.

She stared at Rui with narrowed eyes. In this fight, she would not treat him as a friend. She valued her relationships. But she was absolutely clear about dividing them from Martial matters. She was far too driven to allow herself to be moved by such matters. Her muscles shook with restrained power, she would hound him the second the fight began and mercilessly pound him to the ground.

Rui grinned.

Even as Primordial Instinct screamed at him about the sheer power in Fae's frame.

He grinned.

Even as the weight of the attention of all Martial Apprentices and even Squires fell upon him.

He grinned.

He had been waiting for this for a long time. He would no longer be denied!

Chapter 208: Slugfest

Rui had already created an anti-Fae style in all the time he had known her. This was one of the best parts of the VOID algorithm, the growths he made against a particular fighter would accumulate. He would come closer and closer to victory the more he fought against one particular fighter as the adaptive evolution of the VOID algorithm grew more and more refined and accurate.

But he yet never beaten her. This wasn't because he was too weak, they simply hadn't had a chance to fight seriously in recent times, The last time they had a serious spar was nearly a year ago, more than two of his training phases ago, a little before the winter holidays.

Although they had sparred when Rui was training the Outer Convergence technique, that was far from a real fight with many restrictions, furthermore Rui hadn't mastered Outer Convergence back then. Thus, the results of those training spars were entirely irrelevant.

After that Rui had been on a non-stop back-and-forth between training and mission phases, and he simply never fought her seriously. The two hadn't tested their recent capabilities against each other.

('Today, that changes.')

He adopted a kick-boxing stance with an emphasis on leg room and kicking mobility. The first trait his adapted style needed to have against Fae was greater range. Fae's Martial Art was centered around open palm attacks. Palm attacks had shorter range than fists and much shorter range than legs. By adopting a stance that catered to launching long-range attacks quickly and swiftly, he would be able to hurt Fae while she would be unable to land strikes on him as easily.

However, by the estimation of the VOID algorithm, she would be able to launch a greater number of attacks, meaning he wouldn't be able to prevent her from penetrating past his range-restrictive defense.

Thus, Rui estimated, via the VOID algorithm, that his Martial Art would also need a focus on evasive maneuvering.

The end-result outcome as a ranged-striking evasive Martial Art that would pepper Fae with strikes from outside her Martial Art while also evading any advances on her part to get into palm-striking range.

All of this was done in the span of a few seconds.

When Rui focused, time almost slowed down to him. Catering to him.

He could feel every cell in his body cooperating as they gathered energy at the core of his body.

He could feel his concentration accumulating.

He could feel his focus honing.

When he opened his eyes, he saw but one thing.

His opponent. His target. His objective.

Fae narrowed her eyes as she felt a faint pressure from Rui's stance.

The two of them grew increasingly engrossed, the sheer pressure they emanated could be felt even by distant onlookers.

"Begin!" The supervisor commenced the match!

BAM!

Fae pushed down on the ground with her feet with such force that it shook!

She blasted forward towards Rui, launching a tremendous palm attack at him. The sheer momentum she had generated caused the generation of air cones around her attack.

WHOOSH

Rui was no fool. He avoided her attack with his maneuvering techniques, ceding ground. But she had no intention of letting him run away.

DASH

She charged at him, launching yet another fearsome blow!

WHOOSH

The palm crashed into a feint; missing Rui cleanly as he launched a speed high kick.

POW

She cleanly deflected Rui's attack out of her way with a smooth palm attack. Yet just as she tried to close the gap.

POW

The kick she deflected pulled back and struck her in the back of her head, curbing her progress.

The first clean hit of the battle had finally been landed.

DASH

She charged again, launching a flurry of palm strikes!

This was where the wisdom of the VOID algorithm had begun to show its true formidability. Rui avoided almost every single palm strike with a combination of evasive retreatment with his maneuvering techniques as well as counter-evasion with feints from the Phantom Step technique, throwing her attacks off.

Fae was slower than he was, and had a hard time staying on him, and even harder time punishing him with palm attacks because of the constant gap between them.

Furthermore, she had to deal with longer-ranged jabs and kicks that came from outside her striking range.

It was frustrating. She had known about Rui's adaptive evolution for quite some time and had seen it in action as well. But Rui's ability to adapt to his opponent and fight in precisely the manner that would make it most difficult for them to win was truly annoying!

She didn't truly understand just by spectating. It was impossible to.

The sheer prowess of the VOID algorithm in the field of combat optimization.

Only when one experienced the suppression firsthand, did one comprehend.

At this rate, she would lose, she could feel it. Something needed to change. His style hard-countered hers. And she had to exert much more effort than he did in order to inflict much less damage. She barely landed a few strikes on him, the few that he was unable to avoid despite inhumanly perfect timing of the VOID algorithm supported by the Primordial Instinct technique.

He avoided ninety-percent of his blows, while she could deflect only fifty-percent of his blows. Even if her offense was much stronger, she could not compensate for the gap in their striking rate. The odds were stacked against her.

But she was far from resigned!

The air and the earth shook as she generated more power than she had up until now. She abandoned defense and launched waves and waves of attacks.

"Guh!" Rui grimaced as the onslaught increased. It became twice as hard to avoid her ferocious blows. With such a high number of attacks, the effectivity of Phantom Step reduced tremendously. He couldn't mislead such a large number of blows with Phantom Step.

The decrease in the effectivity of Phantom Step meant that an even greater number of blows landed on him.

The battle had devolved into a slugfest as both of them volleyed weach other countless attacks!

Chapter 209: Tables and Palms

The Martial Apprentices spectating gaped at the sheer power that Rui and Fae displayed. They were shocked at the display of Martial prowess, and for good reason. Even among the upper echelons of the Martial Apprentice population of the Academy, Rui and Fae were special. They were genuine realistic candidates for the position representative of their Academy, and now, everyone could see why.

BAM BAM BAM

Fae drew every ounce of power from deep within her. Her body vibrated with unbridled power as she poured everything into the avalanche of earth-shaking palm blows.

Yet;

WHOOSH WHOOSH BAM

Two out of every three attacks landed into feints! Rui was abusing the Phantom Step technique to avoid her attacks. He did his best mitigate the damage of the attacks that landed with Inner Divergence, Elastic Shift and Acute Edge. However, Fae's offense was too strong, he could only partially mitigate the damage she inflicted.

POW POW POW

Fae gritted his teeth as she endured his powerful blows. Even though his striking power was much weaker than hers, it was also true that her defense was weaker than his. He compensated for the remaining disparity with evasive tactics and that unbelievable timing of his.

The end outcome?

Despite the maelstrom of offensive power that she unloaded onto him, she was hurting more than he did!

It was unbelievable, yet painfully evident. The difference wasn't large, or even significant. But it existed, and it existed in Rui's favour.

Rui was one of the few people who could fight her head-on and gain an advantage against her.

She, who was nigh invincible in close-quarters combat, was being pushed back?

Her expression steeled as boundless determination welled up from within her.

('Not on my watch!') She swore as her eyes burned with defiance.

She had come too far. She yet far to go.

She could not afford to fall here!

('I wanted to save this trump card against Kane and Nel but...') Her expression grew grave.

But she had no choice.

It was now or never.

She coiled her right arm, twisting it to the highest degree she could accumulating enormous amount of power.

Her muscles strained.

Her bones creaked.

Her veins popped struggling to contain her raging blood!

Rui's hair stood up as he felt a shiver going down his back. Primordial Instinct was screaming at him to retreat.

But before he could even decide...

BOOM!

A twisting impact burrowed itself his gut, blasting him back.

"Fuck!" Rui grimaced. The sheer power of the blow was above anything she had him with thus far. He could only mitigate a portion of the impact, it had still inflicted considerable damage on his body.

DRIP DRIP

Rui's eyes flew wide open as he glanced down.

"...Blood?" He stared at a large open wound where the skin of his abdomen ought to have been, dripping blood.

What?

What had happened?

How on Gaea did she skin his abdomen?!

Before he could even process what had happened, his nerves and instincts tingled as Primordial Attack warned him of an incoming palm attack.

WHOOSH

He managed to avoid it in the last second. The wound had hindered his physical parameters, slowing him down.

This was what Fae had hoped for.

This was her trump card.

Outer Convergence: Whirlpool

One of the most powerful and highest applications of the Outer Convergence that required a mastery of the Outer Convergence that was well above even that of Rui's. This technique gathered power from all muscle groups just like the ordinary Outer Convergence technique. However, through incredibly precise and accurate muscle control, it allowed the user to gather and convey the power in the form of rotational energy and torque, rather than kinetic energy.

The rotation allowed the impact to damage flesh more thoroughly and effectively than just a straightforward blow.

However, that was not the extent of the lethality of Fae's attack. She had added an extra element. She had gone so far as to condition her palm to be extremely rough.

The sheer power of the rotational impact in addition to Fae's conditioned rough palm scraping against Rui's skin had cleanly sheared off not just his skin and the outermost layer of flesh with a single blow!

This was the trump card she had prepared.

She had persevered immensely to keep this trump card hidden. The nature of this move was such that it would have the greatest impact if her opponent did not know about it. She didn't think she could defeat the likes of Kane and Nel without it, and it turned out she wouldn't be able to defeat Rui without it.

She had almost used it against Avi Seth, but ultimately decided against it. The poison had brilliant compatibility against the Whirlpool variant of the Outer Convergence, and singlehandedly crippled the technique. It took her everything to perform the attack, and she would not be able to in her poisoned state.

However, in this fight, she had decided she would no longer hold back. Perhaps against other she would have tried to outwit her opponent with tactics and strategies, but not against Rui. Everyone knew that nobody outwitted Rui, it was a fool's errand to even try.

Having truly been backed into a corner, she had no other choice.

BOOM

Rui leapt back as he avoided her Whirlpool impact. He had gone into full evasive mode, abandoning his attack temporarily. In his eyes, Fae's lethality had skyrocketed.

Even being near her was too dangerous!

Fae, on the other hand, was ecstatic. Her trump card had fulfilled her expectations, which brought an immense amount of relief to her. With the wound she had inflicted, there was no doubt she possessed an advantage now. She lashed forward, pushing herself to the limit as she launched a flurry of attacks while preparing to use the Whirlpool impact.

Rui paused, he had reached the corner of the ring. He could no longer run.

His wound had already bled profusely, he didn't have much time, he didn't have much space either with his back facing the corner.

He had no choice.

He steeled his will and dashed towards Fae.

This would be the final clash!

Chapter 210: Outcome

The Martial Apprentices that had gathered around the ring spectating this important fight were gaping with their jaws dropped. The sight of Fae unveiling a powerful trump card no one had seen before was rather shocking.

At this stage, almost all of them had fought Fae at some point or the other, and all of them had lost. However, when they realized that she could have shaved their flesh off at any point during their fight, they all gulped, sweating inwardly. A few of them even felt a bit relieved that they weren't strong enough to force her to use this terrifying trump card.

At the same time, they felt powerless in comparison. She swept past all of them cleanly and smoothly without even using her strongest weapons? It was a humbling realization, albeit unpleasant. Even the former rank one Martial Apprentices of the top twelve Martial Artists couldn't help but grow a bit bitter. Many of them had fought her and believed to be not too inferior to her, despite losing.

But she had showed them how misguided their notions were.

Even Avi Seth, who had pushed her the most asides from Rui, realized they if they had a rematch now, she would almost certainly crush him if she went all-out from the start.

The reason she didn't use this move against him was probably because she had already been too poisoned to employ the sheer amount of force the attack probably required. If they fought against, she would just use it from the get-go and skin him alive!

His expression sank as he watched Fae and Rui dash at each other.

Rui had been bleeding due to the gaping wound, especially because he had subjected himself to high-speed maneuvering, exacerbating the issue.

He didn't have much time.

If this continued, his condition would fall below the tolerable threshold and he would lose any realistic chances of winning.

WHOOSH

Rui carefully avoided a Whirlpool impact from Fae with his maneuvering techniques and Primordial Instinct.

BOOM

The attack struck the ground, cracking and grinding the ground.

('I need to time it perfectly.') Rui's alertness skyrocketed.

This was it.

If he waited any longer, it would be too late.

He subtly shifted all his weight to his left leg, completely freeing up his right leg for a swift attack without any warning, as he flexed the muscles in the big toe of his right foot, turning the toe into a rigid bullet.

Fae launched herself at him.

Just one more Whirlpool impact.

If she could just land a single impact, the fight would be over. Rui's condition would have degenerated to the point where he simply couldn't sustain optimal fighting condition.

Just one.

Just one!

('Just one!')

Fae's determination skyrocketed. She would do anything to land one last Whirlpool impact. She rejoiced when she saw Rui standing stationary as she approached him.

('He made up his mind.') Fae realized. He was no longer running away, that strategy had already failed.

That was good enough.

The ground shook as Fae gathered every ounce of force from every strand of muscle fiber!

She coiled her left arm, launching herself at Rui. Her left palm rotated with such force that even the very air helplessly followed suit, forming a miniature tornado!

Rui stood his ground as the attack approached, even as Primordial Instinct begged him to run.

WHOOSH

The Whirlpool had arrived.

He ducked to avoid the attack.

('Too late!') She thrust her attack forward, abandoning defense.

She was willing to endure whatever Rui threw at her!

As long as the impact landed, she would win!

The attack swiftly soared forward, chasing after Rui.

Half a meter.

Quarter.

Ten centimeters.

('It's over!') Fae rejoiced as the attack was centimeters away from Rui's face. It was too close!

Too close.

Yet, too far.

CRACK!

Fae froze. Excruciating pain assailed her mind.

The attack was almost there. Just a single centimeter away!

Yet she froze.

Victory was almost there.

Yet, she froze.

"It's over." Rui whispered.

Fae glanced down at the source of her pain. Her eyes widened as she beheld a bewildering sight.

His toe!

His toe was in her chest!

It was only then.

It was only then she understood.

The crack she heard was not from Whirlpool landing on Rui.

Not at all.

It was from her very own sternum breaking.

She was still frozen.

And she wasn't alone.

For the briefest of moments, everyone was frozen. It was such a wildly abrupt outcome that their minds struggled to keep up!

SPLAT

Rui extricated his toe as he retreated. Blood gushed out immediately.

It was a success.

The sternum guarded important blood vessels, such as the Superior Vena Cava and the aorta. The fragments of her sternum as well as the Stinger had punctured multiple blood vessels.

('I just need to stop the bleeding!')

Fae pressed her hands against her chest, desperately trying to stop the bleeding with pressure. Rui had bled much more than her. As long as she contained the bleeding, she was still in the fight!

Yet, her focus was on the wrong thing.

The most dangerous thing wasn't her wound.

No.

The most dangerous thing was the one who had inflicted that wound.

The pain, the shock and the panic had eluded this simple fact from registering, causing her to divert too much of her attention to her plummeting condition.

That was all Rui needed.

He launched the swiftest swing he could, exploiting her delayed reactions.

POW

A clean uppercut slammed into Fae's jaw, rocking her head wildly. The abrupt and intense oscillations shook her brain, triggering blunt force trauma and causing her consciousness to shut down.

THUD

She collapsed.

A pool of blood had begun to enlargen immediately, from her collapsed body.

THUD

Rui fell to his knees. The entire front half of his Martial uniform was drenched in blood. If not for Helical Breathing supplying increased levels of oxygen, he would have fallen unconscious during the battle.

He glanced at her as a team of medics worked furiously to heal her. Her condition was not light. Neither was his.

Rui's vision blurred as the world spun.

THUD

The world went dark as his head hit the earth.