

Martial Unity 281

Chapter 281: Home

"Is there a need to go that far?" Nartha raised an eyebrow.

"I'm just being careful." Rui replied.

"I see... careful indeed. It's a shame personally, but I accept these conditions." Nartha replied. "Anything else?"

Rui pondered for a bit. "There is the matter of the frequency of the fights." Rui said. "I do not wish to fight daily. However, I am unsure of the exact precise frequency of fights that I'm willing to fight in as of this moment."

Rui had yet to finalize when he was going to do his other missions. He did not want to accept a high frequency of fights, otherwise he would not be able to complete his other missions.

"I'll have to consider the matter for quite a bit." He said. "I'll get back to you on that issue shortly at a later date."

"That's not a problem at all. You can just send me a letter or a crystal message." She replied, referring to the crystal esoteric technology that was used to was popularly used to communicate remotely in the middle and upper echelons of society.

"Will do." Rui replied.

"Well then, it was a pleasure talking to you." Nartha said, smiling as she got up, performing a mild curtsy. "Unfortunately, I have some matters to attend to soon, so I must put an end to our conversation, regrettably."

"I'm sorry for imposing on you." Rui said smiling, bowing briefly. "I'll take my leave then."

They bade farewell to each other as Rui headed back. The meeting had taken place in the town of Hajin, so he wasn't too far from home. He had planned to head back straight home so that he could spend time with his family at the Orphanage.

"RUUIIIIII!" Alice screeched when she saw him approaching the Orphanage from within.

Alice ran out, giving him a big hug.

"You're crushing me." Rui squeezed out.

"Welcome back!" She beamed with a smile. She dragged him in as he was swarmed by the children who all pestered him for attention.

"Big brother Rui, teach me Martial Art!" Max, one of the children who adored Rui the most, said.

"Me too me too!" Mana, another girl who had been enraptured by Rui's Martial Art chimed in.

Rui chuckled as he patted their heads. "Alright alright, not now though."

They pouted as Rui walked in, greeting the others.

"You had an amazing run in the Martial Contest." Horatio told him smiling.

"It felt like just yesterday we were helping you with balance training in winter on the frozen lake." Mica sighed.

"He's come a long way." Farion greed.

Rui smiled at those words. "I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for all of you."

"Rui..." Lashara appeared.

"Mom."

She immediately pulled Rui in a hug.

"My precious baby..."

Rui smiled awkwardly as she held him there for several seconds. "Are you feeling okay? You got hurt in that contest didn't you?"

"I'm fine mom." He laughed. "Those wounds healed a long time ago."

It took him a while before he was able to placate her, however.

"Welcome back Rui." Julian smiled. "Congratulations on your performance in the Martial Contest. It was truly amazing to see how far you've come in the past two years."

"Thanks." Rui smiled.

Soon things died down as Rui settled back, relaxing. He spent some time with his family. It was always refreshing to be able to relax in their presence without any worries.

"I've wanted to talk to you for some time now." Rui told him.

Julian threw him a knowing smile. "I know."

Rui raised an eyebrow at that. "You do, do you?"

"Of course." Julian said as he sipped tea. "I've been assigned the head researcher of the research project if you accept the research commission."

Rui was surprised by that. "Wow, you've reached the position of head researcher this early? That's impressive."

"It's not all that much." Julian smiled modestly. "So what are your thoughts on the matter? For the record, you can speak freely. I'm not obligated to reveal anything to them. The project wasn't proposed by me either, I don't have that kind of authority yet."

Julian was a brilliant scholar who had managed to reach the position of a full-fledged scholar from apprentice scholar in the span of merely two years.

"I see... I'm not sure yet." Rui spoke hesitantly. "Frankly, as of right now there are more detriments to benefits at my current stage. Even if I do accept, no amount of money is enough by itself."

Julian seemed intrigued at that. "What do you mean specifically?"

"I need to benefit from the research as much as the Institute does. The exact avenue of research needs to receive my approval, and I want access to all data collected."

Julian's eyes widened as he understood. "I see, that's thoughtful of you... Hm. That goes against the Institute's norms, but nothing is impossible, I suppose. I don't have anywhere nearly enough authority to take the matter into my own hands so I can accommodate your needs unfortunately."

"That's fine." Rui had replied. "I don't plan on accepting it any time soon anyways. I have far too many matters that require immediate attention."

"Busy as always." Julian smiled. "Why not take it a bit slow? You've just finished the Martial Contest, after all."

"It's because I finally finished the Martial Contest that I'm rushing." Rui replied. "All of the things that I would have done if it hadn't been there have been postponed because of it, it's time get on it and finish it. I urge to take a step forward and reach higher Realms."

A hint of surprise flashed across his face as he understood what Rui was referring to immediately. "...Already? Most Martial Apprentices do not reach this stage until much later." He noted.

"I've been blessed with fortunate circumstances in that regard." Rui said, sipping his tea.

Julian could immediately sense that Rui did not want to divulge anything specific. He did not push the matter out of consideration for his brother's privacy. But he could not help but be curious regardless.

Chapter 282: Offer

Rui had spent a few days at the Orphanage. Spending time with his family and catching up with all of them. He even spent time playfully training Max and Mana for Martial Art. Surprisingly, he found that perhaps their desire to be Martial Artists weren't too outlandish.

Max was quite strong and tough for his age; his muscles were remarkably developed for someone of his age and he clearly spent a lot of time on physically intensive activities. He had potential to be quite remarkable.

Mana on the other hand was remarkably agile and fast. She was remarkably nimble and light on her feet, capable mobile maneuvers.

Frankly, if they underwent rigorous and thorough training, they had a decent chance to eventually crack the Martial Entrance Exam when they were older. Perhaps they wouldn't crack it at the age of thirteen like Rui did, but atleast when they were older, it wasn't unrealistic.

Rui recalled how the most powerful candidates after the Martial Apprentices were the older students who were nearing the age limit of the Martial Entrance Exam. Their physicality and age, along with rigorous long-term training meant that they were among the best of the candidates.

Furthermore, with Rui training them, their growth should be greater than the growth of other future candidates of their age. Decades of studying, learning, research and development on the most optimal physical and combat training had sharpened his training senses extremely high. He was sure he could optimize the growth of their bodies and their combat sense with a customized targeted training plan.

Furthermore, he could prime their mindsets and attitude to be more conducive to discovering their Martial Art. Have them develop the tendency to introspect on themselves and their combat. He was sure the Martial Families did something similar, in perhaps a more thorough way. This would explain why the breakthrough rate to Martial Apprentices was higher in the Martial Community. The children of these Martial Families had been raised in a way that facilitated breakthrough to the Martial Apprentice Realm and discoveries of their Martial Paths.

After spending a several days with his family in a variety of ways, Rui eventually returned back to the Martial Academy. He had far too much to do to take an extended vacation.

First, he had set-up an appointment for each of the three Martial Families that had commissioned him for being a sparring partner for Martial Apprentices of their families.

Today, he was visiting the Frial Family to iron out the details of the commission contract.

Once he had reached the gigantic mansion, he was immediately tended to and guided by an attendant.

"Welcome, Apprentice Quarrier." She said. "Master is awaiting you."

"Thank you." Rui said as he followed her.

Soon they reached a section of the giant mansion as they winded about the giant premises. Just the size and extravagancy alone showed Rui how much of a bigshot this family was.

However, what shocked him was when he felt a dull yet heavy presence as he opened this door. His eyes widened as he recognized the feeling.

Martial Master!

"Are you alright, sir?" The attendant asked as she noticed his expression.

('Does she not feel that?') He wondered. "Uh.. No, I'm good."

She gestured to the sliding door. "Please."

"Thank you." He entered the room.

('I was right.') He thought as he laid his eyes on the sole figure in the room.

Martial Master Rana Frial. The patriarch of the Frial Family.

"Master Frial." Rui bowed deeply. "I'm honoured to meet you. I did not expect to be meeting you today for this trivial matter."

Master Frial was a middle-aged man, on the older side. He gazed at Rui with his powerful eyes as an ancient voice escaped his mouth.

"So you were able to sense me." He noted, ignoring Rui's words. "I had restricted my presence so as to not cause distress to the people around me, yet you have a sharp mind to have been able to detect me anyway. I see, so this is how you overcame the Void Step technique."

Rui did not reply, still bowing. He could feel the difference between Master Frial and headmaster Aronian. For one, headmaster Aronian had grown fond of him and thus was more friendly, he had an easy-going and grounded personality.

Yet, the vaunted Martial Artist before him was different.

Rui could sense a hint of deep pride and a sharper temperament. This was a man who held no particular goodwill to him, nor any obligations. Rui instinctively felt a deep sense of danger.

He definitely needed to be careful with what he did and said.

"Sit." Master Frial said.

No, he ordered.

His tone was overbearing.

As a being who crossed into the upper Martial Realms, he fully expected Rui to heed him.

Despite the extravagance of the mansion, the quarters of the Martial Master were remarkably simple. Despite his immense pride and his overbearing temperament, he seemed to lead a simplistic and pious lifestyle.

Rui sat on the ground at the table with folded knees, opposite to the Martial Master.

"Mmm... It seems Aronian was right. You are special." He remarked.

"You flatter me." Rui bowed his head slightly.

"I do not flatter anyone." He pointedly retorted with narrow eyes. "My evaluation of you is accurate and merited."

Rui didn't reply. He was confused.

"Regarding the contract..." Rui began. "I don't mind the seven hours a week rate, however I wish to complete in a single day of the week rather than a daily one-hour training session."

"I accept." He replied dismissively.

"Thank you, Master." Rui replied, before going silent.

"With that trivial matter out of the way..." Master Frial said. "I have a proposal for you, young man."

He stared right into Rui's eyes with a heavy powerful gaze that sent a shiver up Rui's spine. "Join the Fire Sect. You are worthy of being invited personally by myself to join our ranks, and I can swear in the name of the Frial Family that we will make it worth your time."

Chapter 283: Elaborations

Rui had partially expected this to some extent. Thankfully, Master Aronian had already filled him in with regards to the matter of the Martial Sects

"I believe Headmaster Aronian has already informed you of the matter of the Martial Sects, correct?" He asked bluntly.

"Indeed, he has." Rui replied. "Unfortunately, I still do not think I possess possess a thorough understanding of the entire matter as a whole."

In reality, Rui had more or less completely understood the matter. But there was no harm in fishing for more information to gain a greater understanding.

"A little more than half of all Martial Art techniques and training regimes come from the research and development department of the Martial Union." he straightforwardly explained. "The allocation of the funds and resources within the avenue of research and development is decided by the Union Council in moderated caucuses followed by a voting session where the Council passes the budget bill draft if it gains more than seventy-five percent of the votes of the Martial Councilors of the Council. The budget draft bill itself is proposed before being extensively modified and refined, based on what allocations will be most optimal for the Martial Union, in the moderated caucuses held in Union Council until it reaches the bare minimum number of votes to be passed. The Sects are semi-formal groups of those with like-minded views and interests on the allocation of budget that work together in a variety of ways to gain the budget allocations they desire. Such as increasing the number of Martial Artists that use the kinds and types of techniques they wish to be researched more, roping in more powerful Martial Artists to

increase their political capital, etc. The Fire Sect does precisely this for greater budget allocations for offensive techniques and training."

He paused before glancing at Rui. "Is there anything you failed to comprehend?"

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, as if almost challenging Rui to say yes.

Rui gulped. "No, Master."

Rui found the difference between headmaster Aronian and Master Frial to be rather large. Headmaster Aronian was an easy-going retired old Martial Master that enjoyed to ramble on in conversations. While Master Frial was still an active Martial Master in the field, he had little patience for Rui and compressed all the information he wished to convey as much as he wanted to.

"Good. That's everything a Martial Apprentice like yourself needs to know." He bluntly told. "What is your answer?"

"Answer?" Rui tilted his head.

"To our invitation." He said expressionlessly.

Rui's eyes widened. ('Does he expect me to make a decision at this very moment?!')

"Er... I'm afraid I can't possibly make a decision immediately, Master." Rui squeezed out. "Please do give me some time to consider it."

"Hmph, fine then."

"May I know what joining the Fire Sect will entail for me, precisely? What will I be expected to do, and what benefits will I receive in return?"

"You will be expected to make learn offensive techniques, however in exchange, you will receive offensive techniques at a vastly discounted price." He replied. "You will gain access to certain offensive techniques that cannot be normally obtained easily and you will gain access to tutelage from specialists you normally would be able to learn from."

"I see..." Rui replied, this was very tempting, he couldn't lie.

Still, there were some concerns. "You mentioned I will be expected to learn offensive techniques... What if the degree to which I am expected to learn offensive techniques clashes with my Martial Path?"

He was an all-rounder. He would not let his Martial Art lean too much in the direction of offense.

"If it diverges too much, you will be excluded from the Sect. The Fire Sect is for offensive Martial Artists, after all. If you do not increase the weight you place on offense, then there would be no point in inviting you in the first place."

Rui had suspected this would be the case. Sects increased the population of Martial Artists using their techniques. A greater population would mean a greater amount of people would be benefitted by research in that particular field, and this would translate to a higher allocation of capital to research in the annual budget allocation bill.

However, if Rui did not increase the number of offensive techniques he used, then he was not contributing to the population using offensive techniques by specifically joining them. Which meant he would be gaining all the benefits of being in the Sect without actually contributing anything. The Sects would not allow him to join if that were the case. He would likely need to warp his Martial Art to suit the Sect.

The very idea of altering his Martial Art for the sake of a Martial Sect disgusted him to his core. He would rather die than taint his Martial Art and Martial Path in such a manner.

Still, the benefits were attractive. If he could find some way around it, then it would be incredibly perfect.

For now, he put the matter aside, He still had a lot of considerations. He also wasn't done talking to Master Frial.

"Master, you mentioned more than half of the techniques and training come from the research and development department of Martial Union." Rui told him "Where do the remaining techniques come from?"

"From Martial Artists, of course." Master Frial replied. "Martial Art requires individuality and originality. Uniqueness to set it apart. Only then can you walk down your own path instead of a path paved by someone else. Martial Artists who create their own techniques take huge steps in regards to the individuality of their Martial Art and often sell a license for distributing their original techniques to the Martial Union in exchange for a huge sum of credits and other benefits and privileges. These techniques are then added to the library of existing techniques that can be purchased by other Martial Artists like yourself to be mastered. Often times, Martial Artists cooperate with the research and development department of the Martial Union to for the creation of the techniques and such."

Chapter 284: Learnings

Rui's eyes raised his eyes in interest. It was possible for him to exchange lesser version of the VOID algorithm to the Martial Union for things he truly needed in the future. As far as potency went, the VOID algorithm was very easily a grade ten level technique as far as difficulty and power went. Rui wondered what he would get in turn for lesser versions of the VOID algorithm.

"Train my daughter well." Master Frial. "The head butler of the family will handle the matter of the contract."

Rui nodded.

"Our time ends here." Master Frial bluntly told him. "Leave."

Rui got up, bowing before leaving the room.

He had a lot to think about. He quickly signed the contract before leaving. He would begin the weekly training immediately.

What he found interesting was that his daughter attended the Hrava Martial Academy branch. This was a bit bizarre to him. But technically, Rui supposed he could enter other Martial Academies if it was for the sake of a mission. This made him feel a bit strange, sparring in other Martial Academies as a sparring partner while he was a student of the Hajin branch.

"Also... If she's in the Hrava branch..." Rui pondered. "I might run into Arjun Erigaisi."

Arjun Erigaisi had been the representative of the Hrava branch in the Martial Contest. Rui had only met him once before the commencement of the first round of the contest.

Furthermore, the same was likely to occur with the other Martial Apprentices he was supposed to serve as a sparring partner to. He wondered which branches of the Martial Academies they belonged to.

Having concluded his business with the Frial Family, he left for the Academy. He still had two more sparring partner personal commissions from the Distak and Shamik Families. He intended to visit both of them to iron out his details.

And so he did.

Over the next few days, he visited them both. Almost unsurprisingly, the Masters of both Martial Families extended him an offer to join the Earth and the Lightning Sects respectively. Although they went about it differently than Master Frial did, what they offered effectively boiled down to be the same.

"In exchange for some higher commitment to defensive techniques." Master Gillian Distak had told him. "We offer you a greater amount of techniques, resources, benefits and privileges for a lesser amount of cost. Your defense will undoubtedly grow should you accept our offer, becoming your strongest parameter. Saving your life. Join the Earth Sect."

"Furthermore, you're a rare talent with a unique and powerful Martial Art." Master Verlen Shamik had told him at a separate occasion when he had visited the Shamik Family. "We are willing to extend a certain amount privilege to you in particular. The Lightning Sect will undoubtedly facilitate your speed and maneuvering to rise significantly, you have much to gain and very little to lose

Both Masters expressed a degree of sincerity, however they did not fret at all when Rui did not seem to keen on accepting their requests. They simply wished Rui to take care of the Martial Apprentices he would be training, and did not push him further.

Of course, Rui understood their perspective well enough. While he was probably promising potential asset in their eyes. At the end of the day, he was but one Martial Apprentice. The Fire, Earth and Lightning Sects were the three largest Martial Sects of the Martial Union, since they encompassed offense, defense and motion in combat.

Regardless, Rui learnt a lot about the politics of the Martial Sects from the explanations of the Martial Masters. For starters, the relationships between Martial Sects wasn't exactly straightforward. It wasn't even necessarily competitive, it all depended on the relation between fields the Sects advocated research for.

Apparently, there were smaller sub-sects that advocated for smaller fields that fell within the big fields. Field such as the Fist Sect that advocated for research on fist-striking techniques. The Palm Sect was a sub-sect of the Fire Sect that advocated for palm centric techniques.

Apparently, these Sects came together under the Fire Sect for securing budget allocations for offensive techniques, however once budget allocation for the offensive techniques was secured, they immediately competed with each other for which sub-sect gets the bigger share for the new offensive-technique allocations.

Apparently, a similar thing happened across all of the broad and larger Sects.

Then there were Sects that weren't mutually exclusive. The Fire Sect and the Grappling Sect overlapped a bit with offensive grappling techniques, for example.

There were numerous power struggles that were in deadlocks for such reasons. It was a messy and complicated relationship.

Frankly, to some extent Rui just wished to stay away from Martial Sects entirely. It seemed like a tiring matter to be involved with the Martial Sects at all. This was especially the case when there was no

definitive need to be involved. Even if he wasn't a part of them, he could still work hard and purchase techniques from the Martial Union the good old-fashioned way.

The only thing he would be missing was the prospect of many benefits and convenience, which could help accelerate his growth.

Then there was the matter of the conflict of interest between his neutral path and the Sects requirement of him to put a greater weight and emphasis of the techniques of their Sect above others.

Rui shook his head; he would not do that.

Another thing he confirmed was that there was no all-rounder Sect.

Of course, this made sense and he had predicted it, after all, a Sect that advocated for the research of all fields and techniques was a meaningless and pointless Sect. Sects advocated for research allocations in specific fields over others, an all-rounder Sect would advocate for all fields, rather than one field over another.

"Maybe I can create my own Sect to suit my needs some day." He muttered out aloud, thinking to himself, before chuckling mirthfully and shaking his head at the notion.

Rui creating his own Sect? There was no way such a thing would ever happen.

Chapter 285: Mission begins

PEW!

The Stinger sliced through the air, whistling as it plunged into the vitals of six-armed gorilla.

The gorilla howled as it wildly swung at Rui.

WHOOSH

Rui casually evaded the blow as he closed the distance between them.

BOOM!

A powerful Flowing Canon attack crashed into the gorilla's wound.

The gorilla screamed in pain as it scurried away in fear and pain.

Rui walked forward as he happened upon a transparent tree. Rui raised an eyebrow as he scrutinized its strange features; the tree looked like it was made up of glass.

His eyes turned to one of the fruits hanging, he immediately reached to pluck all of them, placing it in a special container.

"Mission accomplished; I guess." He muttered as he took out the mission tracker device and hit the mission completion button before placing it back and heading back.

This was one of the hunting commissions that he had received and decided to accept. A procurement mission of the Glass Apples, a valuable esoteric resource that existed in the Jalvan Forest far south of the town of Hajin, in the Mantian Region.

The Glass Apples were an esoteric resource that were used in the production of premium high-grade healing potions apparently. The commissions had come from a potion company that had wanted to hire him to procure the Glass Apples since the danger level of the heart of the Jalvan Forest was at the Apprentice Realm.

He headed back towards the town of Hajin. Five days had passed since his signing of the sparring partner contracts with the three Martial Families. Today was going to be the first day of this mission. He would be heading over to the Hrava Martial Academy branch to begin a lengthy period of sparring training.

The name of his training partner was Siera Frial, daughter of Martial Master Rana Frial. He hadn't been given any additional information on her for some reason.

He shrugged, it didn't matter at all, frankly.

Within two hours, he had reached the town of Hajin. And in half an hour, he had arrived at the designated drop-off location; one of the branches of the company.

"Apprentice Quarrier." An assistant bowed deeply. "Thank you for the successful completion."

"Express my regards to chairman William." Rui nodded before getting up to leave.

"Ah, the chairman wished to speak to you about a partnership agreement." The assistant told him.

"Unfortunately, I am busy for the rest of the day. Please convey my regret to him." Rui immediately turned around as he left like the wind, activating both his maneuvering techniques. It hadn't taken him long to reach the Martial Academy at the core districts of the town.

"Apprentice Quarrier." An inspection officer greeted him as he returned. "We have verified the mission completion with the client. Please proceed to complete the post-mission protocols."

"Will do." Rui nodded as he headed up to fill the necessary report and paperwork. It was the one part of missions that he disliked the most. But unfortunately, it was very necessary.

Once he finished that, he immediately headed to his dormitory. Stripping nude as he tossed his sweaty uniform onto the bed. He couldn't wait to take a bath. He was going to be heading to another branch of the Martial Academy. He, the representative of the Hajin branch in the Martial Contest. In the eyes of the Martial Community, it was bad enough that he was a commoner. He bet that appearing sweaty and dirty would make his job much worse. Seeing how much prestige and pride the Frial Family had, he wouldn't be surprised if the Siera Frial was an egotistical, haughty and arrogant girl.

Still, a job was a job. The pay was very solid and he was curious to test the efficiency of the VOID algorithm as a good training and sparring method for others.

Soon he made all the arrangements as he set out for the Hrava branch of the Martial Academy. He couldn't very well walk to the branch, it was much too far, instead he partook in the transportation provided by the Martial Academy.

The Hrava branch was a considerable distance away, outside of the Mantian region. The transportation made the travel more convenient. It was a semi horse-drawn carriage and a semi-motorized vehicle that was remarkably fast.

Rui was impressed that the esoteric technology of this world allowed for motorized technology. He recalled that for the royal capture and rescue mission, the Kandrian Investigation Bureau had made use of wholly motorized vehicles. At the time he was too focused on a personally important life-or-death mission to consider the matter fully.

It seemed that it wasn't ubiquitous, however. For the most part, man-pulled rickshaws were the norm at the lower strata of society, while horse-pulled carriages were the norm for upper classes of society. And it seemed that motorized technology was either too impractical or unviable to mass-produce, or was proprietary technology of the Royal Family and to some extent, the Martial Union.

Regardless, it was quite fast, and in the span of a few hours, he had already arrived at the Hrava branch in the Frixtal region of the Kandrian Empire.

Rui immediately got off, gazing at the gigantic Academy before his eyes. The Hrava branch was no less impressive than the Hajib branch, it seemed.

"Purpose of visitation?" The guards demanded.

"Mission." Rui simply answered as he brought out his signed and stamped mission bill as well as his learner's license, handing it over to the guards for inspection and verification.

"All clear." The guard nodded, handing back the bill after he verified and confirmed the legitimacy of the document and the mission. "Please enter, Apprentice Quarrier."

Rui wordlessly retrieved the mission bill as he entered.

('The structure seems more or less the same.') he mused as he gazed at a map conveniently placed upon entry. The alignment and designation details was a bit different, but otherwise the organizational structure was identical.

"Alright then... time to begin the mission." He sighed as he entered the building.

Chapter 286: Spar

"Please wait here a moment, Apprentice Quarrier." An assistance staff told him. "I will inform Apprentice Sierra Frial that you have arrived."

"Please do." Rui nodded, as took a seat in the reception of the Martial Academy.

Five minutes later, he felt the presence of a tall and burly Martial Apprentice enter the room, recognizing her immediately, the Frial Family had provided him with a picture of her.

"Apprentice Frial." He began. "Pleasure to meet you. I'm-"

"I know who you are." She rudely cut him as she folded her arms. "Follow me to the sparring facility immediately. I want to see what you're made up of."

Her tone had more than just a little hint of challenging hostility.

Rui stared at her for a second, before wordlessly getting up. They both headed towards the Apprentice sparring facility of the Martial Academy. Rui felt like a celebrity as everyone he walked past. Staff, foundational and explorer students, Martial Apprentices etc all recognized him as their eyes widened. It got even worse once he actually entered the sparring facility. It turned out there was an ongoing regular Apprentice sparring session. Nothing odd about that, his Academy had held plenty of those as well.

He just felt countless eyes widened with surprise as each and every single one of them recognized him.

To be fair, he understood their emotions. He would be surprised as well if someone like Fiona walked into his Academy one day wearing her Martial uniform. He just ignored all of them as Siera Frial dragged him to an empty ring.

Yet before they could even reach it. Siera had been flooded with Martial Apprentices who all pestered her with questions.

"What's going on here?!" One of them asked in a barely concealed whisper.

"Why's he here?"

"My Family hired him as a sparring partner." Sierra huffed with a hint of pride. "He's mine for the next seven hours."

A flash of surprise made its way through the small crowd as the Martial Apprentices glanced at him with expressions of curiosity and admiration.

"Enough." A powerful voice drew everyone's attention as all of them experienced a familiar pressure.

"Get back to your places and leave them alone." The Martial Squire instructor of the facility ordered, much to Rui's relief.

Yet just as they were about to enter the ring;

"Hey Quarrier, it's been some time." A deep voice called out to him.

Rui turned around, recognizing the towering, imposing man. "Arjun Erigaisi. I expected to run into you."

"Well, I didn't." He smiled friendlily. "What brings you here?"

"Sparring partner mission." Rui gestured to Siera Frial.

"I see... that's pretty interesting heh."

"Hey!" Siera complained. "Don't waste time, let's go!"

Rui sighed as he turned around. He quickly put his standard gear and kit aside the ring, before entering the ring.

"Take your stances." The referee said.

To Rui's surprise, Siera adopted a closed defensive stance. She brought up her arms up and close to her in a solid guarding position. She even planted her feet apart, a position conducive maneuvering.

The reason he was surprised was because Master Rana Frial was part of the Fire Sect, which meant he was an offense-oriented Martial Artist. Yet Siera was a defense-oriented Martial Artist. It seems that her Family had not influenced her Martial Path.

Rui adopted an offensive maneuvering stance. Positioning his arms in a way that made it easy to launch both quick and powerful strikes while remaining light on his feet.

"Begin!" The referee commenced the fight.

Rui immediately dashed towards her swiftly. As the only fighter with an offensive fighting style at all, the initiative of the fight was in his hands.

POW POW!

He threw two short speedy jabs, yet they harmlessly bounced off of her hefty guard.

('Solid.') He mused.

POW POW!

He swiftly shifted to her side, launching another swift combo. Siera turned trying to block in time, yet she was too slow.

However, he was impressed when his strikes still failed to do any meaningful damage. He wasn't accumulating momentum or using his weight, but it was still a proper strike empowered with Outer Convergence and Vital Pressure.

('That alone is not enough at the higher echelons of the Apprentice Realm, it seems.') He mused. ('How well will she handle a proper swing?')

He swung his fist from behind him as he threw his weight behind it.

BAM!

It crashed into her guard, yet she remained steady even if she had to exert herself.

Rui retreated before accelerating towards her.

BOOM!

A powerful Flowing Canon crashed into her guard.

She gritted her teeth yet she stood her ground, expressionless throughout.

"Is that the best you can do?" She taunted.

Rui's expression broke into an amused smile. He wordlessly rushed in, launching another strike, she quickly shifted to block it.

WHOOSH

The attack disappeared.

It was a feint.

BAM!

She gasped in pain and shock as a powerful Flowing Canon crashed into her gut, the impact overwhelmed her.

She fell to her knees as he head hit the ground. She grimaced as she cradled her wounded gut.

"Your defense isn't dynamic enough." Rui sighed. "It's tough, but it's like a heavy shield that can barely be moved. I can easily circumvent it."

In terms of toughness and durability, she was quite impressive. She just had a gaping weakness that made her easy to take down. Rui could easily see why she was not able to become the representative of her branch.

"There are two straightforward solutions." He told her. "You either improve your dynamic defensive prowess. Or you improve your foundational defense, you need to be as solid as a rock everywhere. Much like Arjun Erigaisi. Although his defense is also more dynamic than yours."

Her eyebrows knitted as she got up. "Shut up!" She shouted defiantly. "You beat me only once! Don't get too cocky you hear me? Let's go another round!"

Rui sighed. "Well, atleast you're not a pussy."

She had the defiance needed to grow stronger, as long as she directed her energy in the right direction.

Chapter 287: Introspection

POW POW POW!

Siera grimaced as Rui's attacks found themselves on her vitals, cleanly dodging her guard. He usually used a combination of the algorithm's predictive prowess in conjugation with his superior speed, agility.

Phantom Step made it overwhelming.

He didn't even think about using Blink or the Stinger. That would just be bullying, at that point. He didn't enjoy tormenting his opponents beyond what was necessary or warranted.

He only went so far as to push her to her limit, allowing her opportunities and avenues to fight back and limiting himself to a portion of his techniques so that the spar would be beneficial to her.

Frankly, Rui could already see small improvements across the fight. Compared to their first round to their final round, she had grown to be able to last much longer. Her raw combat ability, of course, did not improve in the span of merely several hours. However, a shift in her mind-set caused her to take more solid and apt approaches to her predicament. That alone was worth the sparring session.

BOOM!

Rui flipped her flat to the ground from a grappling position.

"Let's put an end to the sparring session for today, I've filled my weekly quota." He sighed before consuming a rejuvenation potion. "Goodbye."

He left her as he gathered his belongings before making his way out of the sparring facility. Yet, just before he could;

"Umm, excuse me!" He heard a girl call out to him.

He paused, turning around wordlessly. A bunch of girls had approached him, waiting for when he was done.

"Can you spar with us as well?" One of them asked.

Rui shook his head. "I was commissioned to spar her specifically, my time is up."

"Th-then if my family commissions you, will you spend time with me as well?" She blushed, averting her eyes.

Rui paused, staring at her until he finally understood why she was behaving strangely.

('Ah, I see...') He scratched his head awkwardly, Rui had been so far detached from anything resembling popular in his school days that he almost failed to understand that the girls were probably interested in him.

Or he could just be misreading them, he was no player.

Rui shook his head. "I'm afraid I won't be accepting anymore commissions for the timebeing."

He turned around immediately, leaving the facility.

Still, the incident made him think. He realized that he couldn't even remember the last time he seriously thought about romance. It was almost a shocking realization.

('How long has it been? Decades? In this life I had been extremely focused on cracking the Martial Entrance Exam with everything I had. After I did, I was then focused on discovering my Martial Path, and now I'm eternally focused on traversing it deeper.')

And in his previous life, he had long given up on romance. He had given a shot at looking for a partner when he was a younger and more energetic man, but as he grew older, he grew increasingly consumed

with his work. Furthermore, his health declined increasingly. He had completely given up on relationships, blocking them away from his mind. Not just with women, but he grew increasingly isolated from any meaningful relationships at all. He had had 'friends' among his fellow research team who would coax him to join them in the occasional meal at the local steakhouse, and he would often oblige, pleased with the many research successes that Project Water got initially.

However even those relations cooled down once the research team had hit a hard dead-end with the viability issue of the VOID algorithm. He died without it ever changing.

In his new life, the sheer positivity he felt as well as all the affection and support he had received had warmed him up again, but he hadn't thought about romance.

He was too young for it most of his life of course. But he was already fifteen now, and his body was undergoing through the familiar process of puberty, and annoying hormones were increasingly starting to plague his brain with annoying urges. Of course, his conscious mind was not weak to them, specially since he was an old man mentally with a mind that had grown twice.

Still, they were there. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing to engage in relationships some day.

The circumstances of his second life were far better than of his first life. He was perfectly healthy, maybe even a tad bit attractive. Who knew, maybe he would one day enter into a long-term relationship with a woman he would come to love.

He shook his head. He didn't think it was likely. He was far too single-minded in nature for this to be realistic. He spent all of his energy on his Martial Art and his Martial Path. Relationships required a lot of time, energy and investment into, and they were yet very fragile with no guaranteed success.

Rui just didn't feel the need to get into one in a spectacular world such as this.

Even if he did, he would likely end up neglecting her and the relationship, which was genuinely a bad thing to do.

Or his relationship would end up in a conflict of interest with his Martial Path. And that would not be a pretty conflict. Especially when he would never forsake his Martial Path for his relationship, or anything.

Ultimately the Martial Path was an extremely personal and lonely inherently. It was a path that only one person could walk on. That very nature made it difficult for a committed relationship. Even if his partner was a Martial Artist. Hell, his partner being a Martial Artist could perhaps make things even worse.

Since both of them would be walking their own individual lonely Martial Paths. Or maybe that shared experience would make it easier?

Rui shrugged, he didn't know. He was neither experienced nor an expert at all. He was just having random thoughts about the matter as he went back home.

Chapter 288: DiVilier

"Apprentice Quarrier, here is the item you requested." A staff member said to him, while handing an object.

It was a mask.

Rui studied the mask thoroughly.

"And this will reliably ensure my identity won't be leaked through normal means?" He asked.

"Yes. The mask is a proprietary product of the Martial Union developed specifically for the purpose of reliable identity protection for sensitive and risky mission." She explained.

"I see." Rui nodded with relief as he put on the mask. "Thank you."

He walked out of the dispatch facility, as he began jogging towards the location. Fortunately, the town of Harrifel was close enough to travel to on foot.

Today was his first mission representing Freier Ester Inc in a fight. Rui had signed a contract for a single fight for a test, if all went well, Rui wouldn't mind signing up for additional fights.

Strictly speaking, he hadn't signed up for a single fight, more of a single day. The fights were semi-formal. There were some fights scheduled and some were spontaneously scheduled on the spot. It was ultimately for entertainment and sport.

Soon, he arrived.

"Apprentice Quarrier." A butler bowed to greet him. "Please follow me this way. Madame will join you shortly."

Rui nodded as he worldlessly followed the butler inside.

"What is this?" Rui paused as the butler led him to what looked like a conjoined luxurious bathing and changing room with several maids waiting inside.

"The madam has tasked me with providing bathing and grooming services and aid as well as appropriate clothing." The butler explained.

"And the maids...?" Rui tilted his head.

"They will aid you with bathing and clothing your body." The butler explained plainly, as if there was nothing unusual with the arrangement.

"I can bathe and clothe myself, thank you very much."

"But-"

"I insist." Rui pointedly said as his powerful mind exerted some weight on the butler.

"Understood sir." The butler gulped.

"Also, what is this about 'appropriate clothes?'" Rui asked.

"The madam wishes you won't fight in your Martial uniform." He explained. "Thus she has prepared clothes for you."

The butler gestured to a pair of pants.

"..."

"..."

"...Is the top missing or on its way?"

"There is no top." The butler crushed his hopes.

"She wants me to fight in just pair of pants"

"Correct, sir." The butler reaffirmed.

Rui stared at him hard looking for any hint of this being a big joke or prank. But the butler's expression was inscrutable, although he was sweating hard due to the pressure Rui's mind was exerting was hi.

Rui picked up the shockingly small pair of pants. "There is no way this'll fit me."

"They're a special product meant to stretch to accommodate your body size and shape. The cloth will contract to accentuate the shape of your posterior for the spectators." The butler explained.

Rui grew pale at those words. "Do I have to wear these?"

"The madam has insisted." The butler explained.

Rui sighed. ('I'm an underage minor. If it's this bad for me, I can't imagine how gross it must be for female Martial Artists. Seems rich people are universally degenerates be it Gaia or Earth.')

His eyes knitted in irritation as he pictured a bunch of gross old men leering at Fae, Milliana and Fiona.

"Alright, I'll handle myself. All of you leave." Rui insisted.

The butler bowed as he took the maids away with him.

Rui shook his head as he sighed. Yet the luxurious bathing area made his eyes raise.

"This isn't so bad." He admitted. He relaxed himself in a tub bath for quite a bit before getting out and drying up.

His eyes hurt whenever he looked at the clothes she had prepared. It took him a while but he got it on, and remarkably, it was comfortable, even if he felt awkward wearing it. The design seemed to be intended for combat, because it didn't hinder his movements at all.

When he entered, the butler was waiting for him.

"The madam awaits, please come this way."

He guided Rui to a spacious office where Nartha awaited him.

"Looking good." She spoke informally. "Are you sure you don't want to show your face? With your accomplishment and your rare features, I'm sure there will be several women who will have an interest in you."

"Firstly, I look ridiculous." He corrected. "And what you said is the very reason I want to hide my identity."

She merely smiled at those words as though he were a cute little toddler who amused her as she donned a luxurious fur coat atop a loose one piece dress. "Shall we be on our way?"

Once they boarded the carriage, it took no more than fifteen minutes to reach.

The location of the event was a large multi-floored luxury gathering hall. Outside there were a number of extravagant carriages each with their own emblems and insignias signifying which family or corporation the carriage belonged to.

The main entrance to hall had its own ostentatious emblem on it, claiming the entire hall. The emblem

"This is the private property of the DiViliers family." Nartha said as she noticed his gaze. "Today's Martial games, as we call it, is being hosted by the DiViliers Family. They're a bigshot in the Martial Industry of the entire Kandrian Empire. The DiVilier Martial Corporation is one of the leading Martial Art esoteric technology producers. They're good at what they do, so much so that the Martial Union and the Royal Family have both independently signed partnership contracts with the DiVilier Corporation. I imagine a lot of the training and mission equipment have been produced in partnership with them. Charles DiVilier is a well-known lover and connoisseur of Martial Art."

Rui's eyes widened as he realized why the name DiVilier sounded so familiar. This was the same family that commissioned him for his Martial Art! The mission bill had listed how Charles Divilier roped in Martial Artists with unique and exotic Martial Art and Martial Paths with lucrative personal commissions initially before eventually dragging them away from the Martial Union entirely.

Chapter 289: Games

Rui was shocked that such a bigshot had reached out to him, even if indirectly. Still, he did not regret his decision, the mission itself gave him absolutely nothing of value that could enrich his experience and help his Martial Art and his Martial Path at all. He would only be fattening his ego while being reduced to a trophy for display. Such vanity might even regress his Martial Path.

The Flowing Void Style was more than a trophy for display. It was the crystallization of decades of research, decades of relentless, maddening blood, sweat and tears, decades of searching. Searching for the pinnacle of martial arts and, now, Martial Art.

Just the thought of it being treated as one of many trophies made Rui bristle, though he wisely hid his indignant range.

The carriage paused as it reached the main entrance of the hall, and the doors opened as butlers of the DiViliers family helped Nartha out, Rui sooned followed suit.

The scene he saw helped him understand what he was in for. Each of the invited guests were accompanied Martial Apprentices.

There were even a few Martial Squires!

They had a sharp and heavy feel them, yet they restricted their emotion, dampening their aura. They did do a good job, none of the ordinary humans seemed to notice them. Yet, all the Martial Apprentices could clear feel power in a higher Realm.

Rui could do much more, he could even gauge which among them was the greatest threat.

"Mr DiViliers, it's been far too long." Nartha's pleasant voice drew him out of his reverie.

Rui sharply turned as his eyes fell on an old man with an extremely groomed appearance. His clothes and skin were practically glowing with a lustre of their own.

He long flowing white hair that extended to his neck. A thick white beard garnished his neck, beginning where his hair ended. He gave one the impression of a majestic lion, with a presence that demanded attention.

"Mrs Freier." A deep melodic voice escaped his mouth, as he smiled. "I'm so happy you could be here."

He turned to Rui. "And this is..."

"He's my representative fighter today." She smiled. "He goes by Thalken."

Thalken was the alias he had decided to go with while his identity remained hidden.

"I see." A hint of interest lit up in his eyes, before he turned back to Nartha. "Enjoy your time here today, if you need anything, I'm happy to help anyhow."

"Thank you for your hospitality." Nartha curtsied as Charles DiVilliers smiled, before proceeding to welcome other guests.

Nartha and Rui proceeded inside, as Nartha joined a circle of women, each of them accompanied by their own Martial Apprentices

"My, miss Freier." One of them greeted. "Glad you make it. Hm? Where's Apprentice Gregory?"

"I let Gregory go. I got my hands on someone even better. Meet Apprentice Falken." She introduced Rui.

"Better?" Her eyebrows rose. "Impressive. He seems quite young too." She said, blatantly eying his body head-to-toe openly.

The women bantered until a booming voice gathered all their attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The booming voice of Charles DiVillier resonated across the hall. "Allow me to express my sincerest gratitude to all of you for joining me as I host our customary Martial games. I'm pleased to inform you that our guest count has peaked in light of the Martial Festival. I hope all of you have a wonderful time today." He said with a pausing tone as he was showered with a round of applause. "Now without any further ado. Let us begin!"

As he said so. The gigantic doors at the end of the hall opened as they exposed a wide circular viewing platform with a large arena visible down below.

The guests seemed accustomed to the phenomenon. They distributed across the ring viewing platform, indulging in the luxurious seating arrangements as butlers and maids tended to them.

"Ladies and gentlemen." A different voice took over. He immediately began hosting the event. "As scheduled; the first match is between Mr Hoerken's defending champion; Apprentice Frillix Hafbor versus Mrs Fellington's challenger Apprentice Havier. Betting officiants are present at every location of the viewing platform, please place you bets."

Two men walked into the arena.

"Take your stances!" The arbiter told them.

Apprentice Hafbor took a stance that prioritized static defense. He planted his legs firmly to the ground away from his center of gravity as if he had no intention of moving from that spot.

Apprentice Havier, instead, adopted a strange stance, his fingers curled as he brandished his hands at Havier, as if they were claws.

Yet they were.

Rui's eyes widened as Havier's's nails grew in length. what were originally nails morphed into claws as he brandished his centimetre long claws.

('That must have taken an enormous amount of conditioning.') Rui mused, surprised. Rui couldn't even imagine what Havier put himself through to get nails like those.

"You may begin." The arbiter stated.

Havier launched himself towards Hafbor with remarkable swiftness, crossing the distance between them in the briefest moments.

He swung heavily, launching his claws at Hafborn with remarkable swiftness.

And yet.

FRAP

The claws tore through Hafbor's cloth effortlessly.

Yet they failed to pierce his skin.

Hafbor took a moment to look down on Havier, staring him down as the latter tried his best to at least inflict a wound.

Yet to no avail.

POW!

Hafborn hit with a jab as Havier opened up the distance, before lashing out at Hafbor with an even more powerful swing.

And yet,

THWACK

His attack never reached Havier as Hafbor skillfully deflected it.

THWACH THWACK THWACK

Havier kept swinging, and Hafbor casually redirected them out of his way. What surprised Rui was that his body was barely moving at all. Meaning he wasn't exerting himself as he calmly Havier's powerful swings.

('He's applying just a few ounces of weight on the strikes.') Rui's eyes widened with surprise. ('He's not pushing them out of his way with brute force, he's destabilizing their flow of power by applying the bare minimum weight on Havier's motions at the right time and place, causing them to destabilize and go off-trajectory.'))

Chapter 290: Defense

The body constantly had to maintain balance. This was easy to do if one was merely standing in one place. However, it was not as simple when launching a powerful attack. A large amount of mass of the body shifted very rapidly when attacks were launched, it was not easy to maintain balance when it was being disrupted so much and so quickly.

It may seem easy to launch a strong punch, but that was only because the sub-conscious mind worked very hard and fast to ensure balance was always maintained at all times. In reality, everyone's balance was always one step away from being lost.

Hafbor's redirection was centered around that fact.

Rather than pushing Havier's strikes out of the way like normal parries worked. He was pushing Havier's body just enough off balance in just the correct way that the strike would inevitably go off-trajectory due to the body's imbalance.

So how did the mind handle that?

It countered the imbalance he caused by shifting and moving the body in the right way to restore balance. And that was what Hafbor used.

The strike's trajectory would be ruined because the sub-conscious mind was altering the trajectory in the correct way to restore the balance that Hafbor had ruined.

Thus, he purposefully shifted all of Havier's strikes off-trajectory by imbalancing his flow of power precisely such that the strikes would need to go off-trajectory for balance to be restored.

The imbalancing wasn't the impressive part, what Rui found impressive was that Hafbor knew exactly how, where and when to imbalance the body and the flow of power such that the strikes would inevitably miss him.

Furthermore, he did this in extremely brief periods of time. Javier was very fast and Hafborn only had a short window before he could do this.

('What a powerful dynamic defense.') Rui couldn't help but praise him. This defense allowed Hafborn to parry powerful and lethal attacks for very little cost. Imbalancing the body and the delicate and fragile flow of power did not require a large amount of energy or power. Even ordinary humans were more than capable of doing that.

What was superhuman was Hafbor's understanding of balance and the flow of power. His intuitive understanding of it surpassed even Rui's who had studied the subjects for decades. Rui's understanding of it was scientific and technical, although the VOID algorithm did employ the science to a certain extent.

In comparison, Hafbor's understanding was purely intuitive, drawn from heightened observation and a large wealth of experience. The understanding was embedded in his bones, in his eyes. He could almost see the flow of power every time he saw someone move at all.

THUD

Havier landed flat on the ground as he completely lost his balance entirely, completely wide open and vulnerable.

Hafbor did not let the opening go to waste.

BOOM!

He mercilessly dropped a powerful drop-kick on Javier's face.

CRACK

Havier's nose broke as it began bleeding profusely.

THWACK

A soccer kick to the jaw sealed the deal.

"And the winner is; defending champion Apprentice Frillix Hafbor." The butler announced.

Medics lifted Havier off the ground as they carted him away for immediate medical treatment.

Nartha turned towards Rui. "What do you think?"

Rui paused for a moment as he considered the question.

"He's incredibly strong." Rui nodded as he thought back to the entire fight. Hafbor's defense was remarkable. His invulnerable passive defense from conditioning that allowed him to endure a lethal attack with very little to no damage, and his active defense from his surgical redirection that allowed him to crush all initiatives. Anybody who could even hurt him had every right to be proud of themselves.

He was the bane of head-on offense.

"He's your opponent for today." Nartha smirked. "How do you feel? Scared?"

"Not particularly." Rui replied.

"Are you confident?"

"..." Rui shook his head. "Not confident, no. Not against someone of his calibre."

"What do you think the probability of victory is?" She asked.

"Fifty-fifty." Rui replied curtly.

He was a specialist, which meant the VOID algorithm was comfortable forming the optimal adapted style to take him down with the techniques Rui had. However, even then it would not be easy. From the way he withstood a lethal piercing attack from Havier, Rui doubted the Stinger could do much to him. Bone was stronger than nail, however nails were sharper, which of the two performed better would depend on the specific circumstances.

However, Rui more or less assumed the Stinger wouldn't be able to pierce his flesh significantly. He suspected the only two place the Stinger would be able to hurt Hafbor meaningfully were his eyes and his balls. Rui estimated that only if he managed to land a solid strike to either of these organs, could he possibly manage to win. He had set that as his win condition and, using the VOID algorithm, had already begun to create an adapted fighting style meant to accomplish that win condition.

Thankfully, Rui got access to lots of data. The coming fighters were diverse and reasonably strong. However, Hafbor endured everything they dished out with his incredibly passive and active defense before exploiting a gaps and holes in their defense.

Although he wasn't an offensive Martial Artist, his offense wasn't necessarily weak either. He was quite remarkable in that regard, as his conditioning often benefitted both offense and defense. Strong bones and flesh did indeed allow him to endure, however it also allowed him to hit harder. Each of his strikes were heavy and hard, albeit slow.

He was a solid threat. Rui estimated he would have done very well in the Martial Contest. He would have made it to the semi-finals, Rui suspected.

Seeing yet another of Martial Artist of that caliber humbled Rui to a certain extent. Although he was the Martial Contest finalist, and arguably the second-best Martial Artist of his generation. That was limited to his generation and age group. There were Martial Artists from previous generation who were at a similar as him, and above as well.