

Martial Unity 31

Chapter 31: Overview

The scholarship-debt was repaid directly to the Martial Union. This made sense, since the Martial Academy was owned, staffed and even funded by the Martial Union. What interested Rui was how sophisticated the economic framework seemed to be. It wasn't something he would have expected, but it was remarkably realistic, grounded and pragmatic.

The functioning of the Union, the Academies and Martial Artists in relation to each other was quite rational, and not of the vague, ambiguous system one would normally encounter in fictional fantasy settings.

"What happens to these debt-contracts once it's been fully paid?" This was an important matter to Rui.

"The debt contracts include a condition and agreement of termination of the contract once the debt has been fully paid, of course. No need to worry about anything on that front."

"What is the typical time period needed for a Martial Squire to repay their incurred debt through these debt-contracts? The information booklet does not mention anything about the interest rate." Julian inquired.

It was quite possible that the debt incurred would be so high, and the interest would be so overwhelming that it would take Martial Squires half their life to pay back their debt. Signing an exploitative contract that would haunt you for decades was a truly horrific possibility that Julian was determined to not allow happen to Rui.

"The reason the information booklet does not mention an interest rate is because we do not charge an interest rate. The interest to be paid is the principle amount incurred as debt."

Rui narrowed his eyes. This meant that the scholarships weren't a system meant to farm larger amounts of money through snowballed debt of hapless victims. On first glance it seemed like plain philanthropy, but Rui was certain that this wasn't the case.

('It seems the Martial Union's interest in maintaining a constant fresh influx of new Martial Artists was stronger than I'd suspected.')

This was quite the sweet deal for students like himself, if true. The Martial Academy was basically willing to make losses in order to ensure a greater number of Martial Artists successfully graduate.

"As for the first question you asked me.." The man continued. "It generally takes graduates several years of work with the general debt contract to fully repay their debt and re-negotiate a standard contract with the Union. Though there are some who manage to repay it within six months while those who fail to repay it for one reason or the other. Typically, due to low rates of mission completion, crippling injuries or death. It all depends on what kind of occupation you take, and what kind of competences you possess."

"I also noticed that collaterals are not a necessary condition for being eligible to scholarship-debt." Julian pointed out.

"Indeed, the kind of students who usually need a scholarship never have any collateral in our experience." The man replied.

"So, the Academy just readily offers scholarships to all students who are unable to pay the fees?" Rui asked with a confused expression. This was honestly too good to be true.

"Yes, However you will need to provide a financial statement. We do not permit students who possess the financial security to pay the fees to enter based on a scholarship."

This was easy enough. Rui had already verified that there was absolutely no way in hell the Orphanage had the funds necessary to foot the bill of the fees.

"Then from what you have clarified as well as the information available in the guidebook, Rui here is fully eligible to apply for and receive a scholarship." Julian noted.

The support staff member nodded his head as he flipped through Rui's profile.

"There are no problems, as long as you have the documents at hand, you can submit an application for a scholarship for student Rui Quarrier."

While Julian began the process. Rui was left to his own thoughts.

('Part of the reason the Martial Entrance Exam was this difficult was probably because they wanted to a high degree of certainty that the students that end up passing and applying for a scholarship are worth the money invested.')

Rui suspected that part of the reason the Martial Union was so liberal with their scholarship policy is because the fact that the students applying managed to pass the exam meant there was already a somewhat high degree of confidence that a decently large enough proportion of students who passed the exam and applied for a scholarship would likely graduate.

Otherwise, such liberalism didn't make sense. Some financial losses were fine as long as the yield of Martial Artists were high enough. These were likely long-term investments into the growth and development of the Martial Union.

Thus it made sense that the Martial Exam was served as not just a test for whether people were worthy of becoming a Martial Artist, but also as a filter that weeded out as many incompetent applicants that would be no more than bad investments and money drains that would sap away the funds of the Martial Union.

('Especially the first round, people who lack the resolve and determination, the type of people who least deserve a scholarship, would have been filtered out.')

Regardless, Rui was grateful for the scholarship program. The odds of him successfully becoming a successful Martial Artist without scholarship was truly bleak. He'd have to engage in manual labour for extensive periods of time, decades probably, before he had enough money to pay the fees. By the time he was a full-fledged adult, it was probably far too late to begin his Martial Path. He suspected there was a real reason why the Entrance Exam capped off at the age of eighteen.

They wouldn't reduce the pool of potential Martial Artists pointlessly unless the detriments of doing so drastically outweighed the incentives. Unless he found himself a Master Martial Artist independently of

the Martial Academy, he had no hope. And the notion of Rui being accepted as a Martial Artist outside of the Martial Academy was absurdly ridiculous.

('I have a higher chance of becoming a Martial Artist by myself.')

Chapter 32: Foundation and Exploration

Rui yawned as he faced the azure sky.

"Tired?" Julian asked.

"Yeah... That took fucking hours." Rui replied.

"Indeed, still, it was interesting."

Rui couldn't argue with that, no, it was a severe understatement. After they'd applied for a scholarship, they'd gone onto clarify their doubts regarding the curriculum of the Academy.

The Academy first began with a more thorough and in-depth evaluation of the student's martial proficiency in various fields, much more so than even the Martial Entrance Exam, apparently

('Makes sense, given that the Entrance Exam did not specifically test for martial proficiency. It tested resolve in the first round and general physical capability in the next two rounds.')

The Evaluation Exam was different. It performed detailed measurements of a student's capabilities in various fields, and the results of the Evaluation Exam would decide the curriculum for each student. The student would then undergo that curriculum until they reach a satisfactory level of general combat proficiency. This was the first step needed to reach the Martial Apprentice Realm. This stage was also known as the Foundation stage, it was allegedly the most important stage without which the Martial Path could not be tread upon.

After the Foundation Stage, followed the Exploration Stage. According to the guidebook provided by the Academy as well as the support staff, the Exploration Stage was a less-controlled, self-paced stage of the curriculum. The Exploration Stage was the final stage necessary to reach the Apprentice Realm. From what Rui had learnt, this stage was a freely independent period where students could freely access the Academy's Martial Library, a library of Martial Art techniques, and learn and train any of those techniques that they wished to. However, there would be mandatory sparring days every nine days where students would spend the entire day engaging in spars with others.

This was to allow both; the Senior instructors and students to measure their progress at occasional intervals. It also gave a lot of students sparring experience that a large proportion lacked. It was not easy to get controlled and monitored sparring experience unless you were rich.

Unlike in the previous Stage, the Senior instructors would take less of a teacher role, and more of an aid/mentor role in the Exploration Stage. They were mandated to not be overbearing on students of this Stage, but rather encourage them to be open-minded and inquisitive. To help them explore the length and breadth of Martial Art, and help them take the very final step needed to become a Martial Apprentice; Discovering their Martial Path.

('Seems freedom is necessary for the Exploration Stage.') Rui mused.

The Exploration Stage required to students to freely explore a variety of techniques above the bare basics mastered in the Foundation Stage. The idea was that with enough exploration and introspection, the students would discover the direction they wanted to develop their Martial Path in: The Martial Path.

Once the Martial Path was discovered, the Exploration Stage would end. The Foundation and Exploration Stages were the two stages aimed at getting students to enter the Apprentice Realm.

Rui was equally for excited both stages. The Entrance Exam had exposed his glaring flaws and shortcomings. His Martial proficiency was subpar, he had a lot to learn; far too much. He barely managed to pass the Exam relying on tactics, but that was not a sustainable strategy. He needed to get strong if he wanted to become a legit Martial Artist. He wanted to become strong.

The Foundation and Exploration Stage sounded like absolutely perfect to Rui who looked forward to simply immersing himself in his love for Martial Art without any other considerations of any kind. He had been starving for exactly this for the past twelve years!

('It's a shame I wasn't able to learn what comes after.')

That was the extent to which support staff were willing to disclose. And any and all information regarding the Martial Union as a whole, higher realms of Martial Artist etc, merely earned him a courteous refusal. 'It isn't within the purview of our role in this ceremony.' they said.

('It's a bit strange they're being this secretive when I'm already guaranteed to be a student.')

The only answer was that they did not want to give out unnecessary information prematurely. Perhaps the answers to his questions were partially confidential, sensitive or dangerous to their interests. It wasn't implausible. Higher-realm Martial Artists were practically considered National treasures. It would make sense that the Union and Academy would take a hard stance on all information regarding these assets. Anything that could diminish their safety or contribute to their harm was strongly regulated by the Union by the looks of it.

('That's one hell of a VIP treatment they got going on there.')

This one of the secondary aspects of being a Martial Artist, particularly a high-realm one, that Rui was looking forward to one day. Who didn't like to be held in high esteem? In his previous life, he was just a researcher. And although his work did have an impact on an entire industry, ultimately, he himself was not that prominent outside of certain academic circles. In comparison, a high realm Martial Artist could impact an entire nation.

"The path to reaching a high realm as a Martial Artist is extremely difficult." Julian reminded. It took him only a glance at Rui's dreamy expression to more or less gauge his thoughts.

"Let a man dream." Rui shook his head.

"What 'man'?" Julian shrugged mirthfully. "I only see a child who needed an adult to accompany him on his first day to school."

It was a provocation.

And it worked.

The two bantered as they rode a rickshaw back home.

Chapter 33: Home

"So, what's the Martial Academy like?" A young girl asked with curiosity.

"How many times have you asked that question Rita?" Rui sighed helplessly

"Oh come on, just tell!" Rita insisted.

"After dinner. Focus on your food, I see you've barely eaten anything." Myra interjected.

"Awww..." Rita pouted.

All of them had gathered in the dining room. Lashara had made it a point to ensure everybody eats together. Every day, dinner would begin only after everybody was in the dining room, ready at their tables.

('Probably to strengthen the sense of kinship between us.') Rui mused.

And it worked. Blood-related or not, eating together always conveyed a sense of togetherness like no other group activity, it really hammered in the idea that they actually were family. This was one of the many reasons Rui had grown deeply fond of the Quarrier Orphanage.

Rui glanced around. In the past thirteen years the Quarrier Orphanage had grown tremendously. As many of the adolescents from thirteen-years ago had grown up and decided to remain with the Orphanage. Even those who had gotten married and shifted away from Orphanage among the second generation, still supported it when they could afford to.

Farion, Horatio and Mica were now full-fledged adults that had gotten into manual labour, while women like Nina worked in restaurants and bars. Together along with the first generation of adults of the Orphanage, Lashara was able to adopt and care for children with a much lesser burden.

One source of income that truly helped the Quarrier Orphanage was that of Julian's. Despite obtaining a prestigious position in the Kandrian Institute of Sciences as an apprentice scholar in the Research and Development department, he never forgot his roots. He still resided with the home he grew up with, and aided the family that had put a roof over his head, and food in his belly and given him love and care when he was alone in this world.

He had obtained a middle-class occupation, allowing him to pay back everything he believed he owed to the Orphanage.

Rui intended to do the same. He had no intention of living elsewhere. What was the point? He had a loving family, there was no need of going through the extra expenses of getting his own place, only to live a lonely life.

('Once I start working as a Martial Squire, I'll give all the income I don't need to the Quarrier Orphanage.')

Even on Earth, Rui had led a frugal life. He didn't even bother owning his own place, he lived in an apartment. He tossed all his income into the bank where it rotted for several decades until his health deteriorated drastically near the end.

Still, this life was different. He still hadn't learnt as much as he'd like about Martial Artist occupations. He wasn't sure how much of his income would be needed to for his occupation. Maybe Martial Artists used gear like armour, knives, swords?

Or maybe, they needed a large amount of funds for the learning and training resources needed to grow stronger. After all, he highly doubted that the Martial Union was unable to provide any aid to lower ranked Martial Artists. It's possible they even had a monopoly on the learning resources, and exchanged them for particular services, thus incentivizing Martial Artists to always remain loyal and associated with the Union.

('Well, all of this isn't relevant at the moment.')

He had to first become a Martial Squire and graduate from the Academy before he could even think about the details of working as a Martial Artist.

"You said the Academy would begin in thirty days right?" Nina inquired.

"Yeah."

"You'll be staying in the academy the entire time?"

Rui nodded.

"That's a shame." Nina shrugged.

"Don't worry." Rui reassured. "They have breaks in between. I'll definitely come back during the breaks."

"How often are they?" Lashara asked, hoping they as frequent as possible.

"Seasonally. The first break after the start of the academic year will be the Spring break, right around the Spring Festival, according to the information guidebook." Rui explained.

"I see." Lashara sighed. It wasn't as much as she'd hoped, but still better than the worst-case scenario.

"How long will the breaks be?"

"Around five days or so." He responded.

"That's it?" Horatio grumbled.

Rui shrugged. "That's it, yeah. Can't do anything about the rules."

The reason for the shorter break was due probably to ensure the students' discipline wasn't broken due to extensively long breaks.

"On the other hand, it's nice they're letting you out during the Spring Festival, meeting you after so long, and having you with us to celebrate it will make the festival even more special.

"That's true." Rui smiled melancholically.

Now that he had gotten his hands on the Academic Calendar, he knew that he would see his family much less frequently. A meagre four times his year.

('It's a shame I can't live here once the Academic year begins.') Rui sighed inwardly.

Ideally, he would have liked to stay at home and commute to school daily. This was a norm for students his age in most schooling systems on Earth. He wasn't fond of being ripped apart from his family. Though the significance of the Martial Academies was admittedly higher than schooling systems back on Earth.

"Still, you'll be leaving in a week." Alice muttered, on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry Alice, I'll always come back. You're my precious big sister after all." Rui assured, with a smile.

"Oh you...!" She rushed to hug him, overwhelmed with emotion. The gesture triggered yet another round of affection and fawning, which Rui duly received and reciprocated. As the sole cause for their emotion, he did not dare complain about this. It wasn't as though people hadn't left the orphanage before, but this was indeed the first time that someone as young as him was leaving the Orphanage for as long as he was. On one hand they were happy for him, on the other they would miss him dearly.

Chapter 34: Play

"Alright, I'm headed out." Rui said as he jogged out the main door of the Orphanage.

"Be careful, don't get lost!" Lashara warned.

Rui stuck a thumbs up even as he put distance between the himself and the Orphanage.

('I wonder what his place looks like.')

Kane had invited him over to his house, before they'd left the Academy in the Induction Ceremony. This was a new experience to Rui, even though he albeit knew that this was a regular phenomenon on Earth. His disease had prevented him from rendezvous in his previous life back on Earth. Severe chronic Asthma was a disease that made even simple relatively light tasks like travelling to a friend's house pretty difficult, not that he's had any friends back in his childhood anyway.

('It's probably an ostentatious mansion.')

 Rui speculated.

Kane's home was pretty much in the center of town of Hajin, the town of which the Quarrier Orphanage was more-or-less in the outskirts of. Rui planned to jog a portion of the way where he was supposed to rendezvous with a servant of the Arrancar family who would escort him to the Arrancar household.

As he travelled, his surroundings grew increasingly populated and developed. The Quarrier Orphanage was situated in a somewhat more remote location closer to the open fields where crops were grown, however as he travelled further into the town, the population density and infrastructure of the town grew immensely.

The presence of a Martial Academy was a blessing to the town. It drew in a lot of people from all over the Empire, specifically amongst the youth every year.

The Martial Academies were a boost to economic prosperity, after all. Each Academy needed a huge amount of labour and resources for maintenance alone. There was a large number of suppliers and manufacturers who had set shop in the town, who supplied the Academy with the needed goods and supplies. There were many people who migrated to the town and ended up being employed by the Academy, and many a youth who migrated to the town looking to attempt and hopefully pass the

annual Martial Entrance Exam, the Martial Entrance Exam was held during winter, during which travelling between states would be much harder, after all. Many non-native applicants would travel to the town much in advance.

In this way, the Martial Academy empowered both the supplier and consumer market. It was far from an exaggeration to that the economy of the town of Hajin would collapse overnight without the Academy. The disappearance of the Academy would mean a large portion of the demand for goods and supplies would decrease drastically, causing excess supply of goods in the local market, reducing the prices of goods significantly, smaller suppliers, business and retailers would be unable to stay afloat and would be forced to migrate to other parts of the Empire.

A large proportion of the locals who were employed by the Academy or aiming for it would also be instantly unemployed, and would likely migrate. After a brief period of chaotic flux, the GDP of the town would most be reduced by a significant portion, without a doubt.

('This must be one of the ways the Martial Union maintains political and economic power. Putting aside the direct authority and capital they possess, the sheer passive impact and necessity of the Academies aka The Union has on society is immense.') Rui mused as he reached his rendezvous point.

"Master Quarrier, I presume?" A voice behind him enquired.

Rui turned to meet the man. He wore simple but lavish clothing with a crest of the Arrancar Family embroidered over the left chest area.

"Yeah, Rui Quarrier." He responded in affirmation. "Are you here to pick me up?"

"Indeed, please come this way." He gestured to a horse-pulled carriage.

('A carriage, huh? My first time.')

It was indeed his first time, in either of his lives. He wasn't particularly excited though. As someone who'd spent a lifetime in a world of cars, bikes, subways, planes etc. A carriage wasn't that big a deal, it was, frankly, nothing note.

Still, Rui played the part of a poor orphan and got all excited at the prospect of the privilege of riding a horse carriage.

"Wooooow! A horse carriage!" He cooed as convincingly as he could, suppressing the embarrassment that arose within him.

"Please make yourself comfortable." He said, opening the door and gesturing inside at the posh, luxurious seats within.

"How long will it take us to get there?" Rui enquired.

"No more than twenty minutes." He replied.

('Longer than I expected.') Rui noted. ('Well, if it was any shorter than sending a carriage would be kinda pointless, although there is the matter of verification of my identity.')

Kane had explained that invited guests were usually provided with a letter of invitation to enter the premises, but he didn't have any at hand since Kane had invited him on the spot without any prior planning.

('Well, he didn't know whether I'd even passed or not. The invitation was quite spontaneous after all.') Rui mused as he felt a sense of anticipation.

Normal kids invited each other to play games.

Kane had invited Rui for sparring.

And Rui accepted in a heartbeat.

In fact, had Kane invited Rui over to play cards, Rui would definitely refuse the invitation with some excuse or the other. Travelling all this way and spending a whole day at someone's place for cards? Just

the mere thought of wasting time like that with only one month for the Academy to start made Rui laugh.

But sparring was a different thing. Rui had very little experience, at this stage, he was thirsty for experience. This was the one thing that he could not use his expertise in martial arts and combat sport training. Combat experience was irreplaceable, it was supreme. He looked forward to gaining as much as he could. Furthermore, from someone like Kane, who was a far superior fighter than Rui was.

('How exciting!')

Chapter 35: His home

"Rui, glad you're here." Kane waved as Rui took in the majesty of the Arrancar Household. Kane's home somewhat resembled a western palace of sorts from the Middle Ages. It was lavish and luxurious yet the décor and aesthetics were not ostentatious. It was as if the owner did not care for superficial beauty.

"Thanks for having me." Rui replied.

"Come on in." Kane told him.

Rui followed him as he took in the visage of the Mansion.

('Yeah, this kid is loaded.') Rui affirmed.

There were servants of all kinds scattered across the premises, all engaged in one task or another. Gardeners meticulously maintaining the beautiful garden, maids and butlers tending to one task or another.

('That's a huge door. What's the point of having a door this big?') Rui wondered. One could walk on stilts and still comfortably enter.

"You have a big place man." Rui told him.

"Yeah, too big if you ask me." Kane shrugged.

"Is your family around?" Rui asked.

"Some of my siblings, my mom, my step-moms."

"Your mom and your step-moms?" Rui tilted his head.

"My dad is polygamous." Kane briefly replied, it didn't seem like a pleasant topic for him.

"...I see." Rui dropped the topic. He regretted asking. But he was caught off-guard. He didn't know about other countries, but, at the very least, the Kandrian Empire had a culture of monogamy. Even on Earth, most nations and cultures were strongly monogamous, at least in the twenty-first century.

Kane had expressed hostility towards his father prior, maybe this had something to do with it.

"My father isn't around, that's why I invited you around this time." Kane told him. "Let's go. You don't mind starting immediately, right?"

"No problem." Rui smirked. It was a silly question. Rui would, in fact, mind had they sat around sipping tea making small talk.

"Alright, this way."

Just then;

"Kane." A mature female voice called out to him.

Kane paused, turning towards the direction of the voice reluctantly.

"Yes mother?"

"I was told you called over a peasant of a boy, it seems I was told correctly. Are you going to waste time playing around?" She reprimanded him sternly and coldly.

('...Did she just call me a plebeian to my face?') Rui mused. He was a little caught off-guard by the woman's unrepenting rudeness.

('Kane's life must suck with a mom like her. I'm starting to see why he doesn't seem to like this place.')

"He's a friend." Kane sternly told her off. "We're not playing around, we're going to be training."

"Train with the instructors your father has hired."

"I train with them every day, sparring with others will give me a wider range of experience, which will ultimately help me grow stronger in the long run." He retorted.

His mother begrudgingly accepted that explanation, after instructing Kane to work hard.

"Hey man." Kane turned to Rui, bowing his head in shame and guilt. "I'm sorry she insulted you."

"You don't need to apologize for other people's actions and words. I appreciate the sentiment, but it's not your fault."

"This is why I wanted to begin our sparring session with you as soon as you arrived." He muttered in frustration. "She never interrupts sparring and training sessions. This way I could have avoided running into her."

"Why not train and spar away from your house?"

Kane sighed as his expression soured.

"I'm not allowed to leave the household unless permitted." Kane told him.

Rui jerked his head back in a double-take as he glanced at Kane in shock.

"You can't leave the household for anything? Like, at all?"

Kane shook his head. "Nope, not at all."

"Playing?"

"Nope."

"Walks?"

"No way."

"Fresh air?"

"We have huge open training areas and tons of balconies and even a gigantic terrace."

Rui gazed at Kane with a visible discomfort.

"Damn..." he managed squeeze out.

"Yeah.." Kane sighed. "This is why I can't wait for the Academy to begin."

"I'm surprised your family allowed you to go in the first place."

"They didn't, it took me literal fucking years of lobbying to be allowed. Ultimately my dad, who was also an Academy graduate reluctantly relented."

"I see..."

"The Academy is something the Martial Union has invested heavily in a huge amount of resources and funds over a long period of time, making it an absolutely ideal and optimal place for nurturing Martial Squires. Even for a Martial Sage like my father, it's not easy to compensate for everything it provides by himself. This was the key point that convinced him. But he set a bunch of conditions."

"Conditions?"

"I had one chance, and that was when I turned thirteen. And I had to make it into the top five overall."

"I see..." Rui recalled Kane telling him the latter during the second-round of the Entrance Exam.

"We're here." Kane told him, opening a door to a gigantic facility.

Inside was one of the most aesthetically pleasing sights that a martial arts/combat sports junkie like Rui had seen in the entirety of his second life.

A huge wide area, divided into several sections. In one section, there were what appeared to be a vast variety of body-building and exercise equipment. Rui could see the equivalent of bench-presses, treadmills, a variety of weights like dumb-bells and plates, squat-racks, barbells, cables and pulleys, pull-up and callisthenic bars etc.

In another section was martial arts training equipment of a huge assortment; boards, a large amount of dummies for various striking maneuvers and combos as well as throws and holds. There were punching bags of various sizes each meant for different purposes. Further off there were many sections of area that seemed to be each dedicated to training specific attributes or skills; awareness, sensory capabilities, endurance, balance, dynamic flexibility. One that particularly caught his eyes was a circular section with a bunch of bags attached to ropes to the ceiling above, the bags themselves were attached to the

ceiling. From what Rui could tell, this was dynamic evasive maneuvering practice. One was supposed to stand in the center while dodging the released bags.

"That reminds an awful lot of the second round." Rui gestured towards that area.

Kane smirked. "That's my favourite training."

"No wonder you aced the second round." Rui laughed.

He looked forward to spending time here.

Chapter 36: Warm up

Kane shrugged. "It's really fun. I often get scolded because I ignore other forms of training in favour of doing this. Anyways, let's warm up."

"Start with cardio?"

"Sure." Kane nodded.

They head over to a set of machines that resembled treadmills.

"How does this work? Do we have to run on our own?" Rui inquired.

"The treadmill is powered by a slime." Kane explained.

"A slime?" Rui tilted his head in confusion.

"Yeah, within the cylindrical panel there is a species of slime that rotates when pressure is applied to it." Kane pointed. "You can adjust the pressure the slime experiences by adjusting this knob." He said, twisting a knob in front of him."

('I see, it's a dial that can control how much pressure is exerted on the slim.') Rui mused as he adjusted the speed to a comfortable jog.

This was yet another example of technology in this world mimicking that of the technology in the twenty-first century of Earth, not through excellent engineering, or highly sophisticated applications of science, but through the remarkable features exclusive to this reality.

The extraordinary inorganic resources that could be mined and extracted from the land, the variety of the supernatural flora and fauna and the esoteric phenomena they offered together allowed this world to achieve things that would otherwise be well beyond their capabilities.

Furthermore, in several areas, it even allowed them to surpass Earth.

The potions he had consumed in the Academy after the second round of the Entrance Exam healed his wounds completely while also restoring his stamina entirely in a short period of time. This was something no technology on Earth could replicate.

"This is pretty amazing." Rui said.

"It's pretty normal though." Kane threw him a confused look.

"Anyways, that's enough cardio, my muscles have warmed up. Let's stretch for a round before we begin."

It was a well-known fact, on Earth and on Gaea, that stretching before heavy exercise or any physically intensive activity was a must. There were several benefits it provided, and several detriments that were associated with not stretching.

The most basic benefit was, of course, maintaining and increasing range of motion. Muscles were bound together by web-like sticky tissue called fasciae, this connective tissue bound muscles and restricted their elasticity. Regular stretching was needed to prevent them from building up.

Range of motion was not the only benefit, of course. Flexibility was highly relevant to multiple physical attributes; power and speed.

The amount of kinetic energy the body could generate depended on the physical acceleration due to muscular power, and the distance over which that acceleration could be maintained. Low flexibility inevitably meant the effective distance over which muscles could accelerate was limited, because low flexibility meant muscles could not stretch. If they could not stretch, then the net energy they generate was very limited.

Stretching exercise also prevented loss of muscular tissue, during exercise. Muscular tissue collapsed at much lower rates when stretched before being put through intensive workouts. It also increased blood circulation which ultimately increased the net output of the human body. Reducing fatigue, stress, tension and risk of injury were also some of the more prominent benefits among others.

('Furthermore, static flexibility exercises are not energy intensive. You can obtain a lot of benefits with very little physical effort.')

So much so that even an asthmatic patient like himself could manage to stretch daily as long as it was slowly paced. Flexibility exercises were an absolute must in the field of martial arts and combat sports, Rui himself had published several papers demonstrating the correlation between the probability of a KO victory and flexibility.

"Alright, that should be enough." Kane said.

Rui nodded in affirmation as he lifted himself from a split. Splits were the pinnacle of flexibility when it came to combat sports. They were at the perfect level where flexibility was optimal, not too little to smother and suppress one's own power and acceleration, but not too little to prevent dislocation of joints.

It had taken Rui two years to achieve a split after he began a tad earnest rigorous exercise at the age of five. Normally splits could be achieved earlier, but given the delicate and fragile bones and muscles his

body had at the time, stressing them too much for an earlier result, would be more detrimental in the long run.

"We can spar there." Kane pointed to a matted section. "No leaving the area. We can start slow and light rolling, after moving onto light half-contact sparring. Once we've gotten comfortable, we can move onto full-contact geared sparring and maybe some conditional or free form sparring. Whatever works for you. Ah, let me know if you don't entirely know the differences between some of them." Kane explain patiently.

Rolling was the primary form of wrestling practice and sparring in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, it was a good of breaking the ice in regards to jiu-jitsu maneuvers and honing them. Back on Earth, half-contact and full-contact sparring were two popular and distinct types of sparring introduced by the ITF, the International Federation of Taekwondo. Concepts such as conditional sparring and free-form sparring were well-established forms of sparring used in all MMA gyms in the twenty-first century of Earth. He was not just familiar with them but an irrevocable expert. Rui was glad some of the more colloquial knowledge he possessed was of use on Gaea.

"We can start with some light rolling sure, but I'd rather move onto some heavy positional-grappling, if you don't mind. My experience in full-contact grappling is paltry compared to my striking practice. It's a lot harder to practice grappling by yourself than striking. After that I don't mind half-contact and full-contact sparring either, though free-form is my preference you see."

"..." Kane stared at him.

"Hm?" Rui tilted his head under his stare.

"Uh nothing. I'm just surprised because you seem to be extremely familiar with different sparring forms and their purposes."

('Familiar? I probably know more about them than you ever will.') Rui mused. This was not an exaggeration.

"Ahhh, well I read about them in a book about Martial Art when I was a kid."

"I see. Well, that's all the more better."

Kane took his position on the mat.

"Let's begin."

Rui crouched a little, aligning his right foot behind his left foot. He brought balled his fists and brought them up in a guard.

"Yeah." He grinned. "Let's get this show on the road!"

Chapter 37: Spar

The two shifted around the mat, maintaining distance. This was a common practice even on Earth, by constantly shifting your balance and weight across both your legs, it became more difficult to predict your opponent's movements. It was a simple but an extremely practical tactic.

('He's not coming...') Rui noted. ('...Well, his Martial Art is centered around evasive maneuvering.')

Rui thought for a moment before making up his mind.

('If he's not coming, I'll go for him!')

He dashed towards Kane, throwing light jabs at him. The strikes had very little torque and weight behind them, making it easier to launch more of them in rapid succession.

Kane grinned, swerving and bobbing his head to avoid the higher strikes. For him, avoiding strikes to the head was more practical, the neck was a flexible juncture and evasiveness was his forte.

('How about a body strike, then?')

Rui shot a mid-range straight right punch at Kane's abdomen.

BAM

Kane had blocked it with a solid guard.

The two put some distance between each other.

"Thought your Martial Art was centered around evasiveness." Rui huffed.

"It's not practical to dodge every single attack, in some cases, blocking is just irrefutably the only correct choice." Kane shrugged.

That made sense. One could not win a fight purely through evasiveness.

This time, Rui closed the distance slowly. They both shifted around, feeling each other out, testing and gauging each other's reactions.

Once Rui reached kicking range, he threw a light roundhouse kick at Kane's abdomen, only to cleanly miss as Kane effortlessly dodged the attack.

('Figured, roundhouse kicks take too much time to land, it's easy for someone with his mobility to avoid them.') Rui mused as he threw a few light jabs, most of which were dodged.

He attempted to throw a straight kick to Kane's chin, only for Kane to dodge while simultaneously closing the distance;

BAM

Kane landed a jab to Rui's abdomen.

"Tsk." Rui grimaced.

It was very difficult for Rui to land a clean strike on him, Kane was not only extremely slippery, but was very good at exploiting slim openings to squiggle his way in and land some strikes.

('He's strong.') Rui huffed. But he wasn't done yet. He closed the gap between him and Kane, but this time he didn't bother trying to land a strike at the earliest opportunity. Instead, he kept his left arm up as a guard while preparing his right arm for a strong jab.

Kane, thus far, hadn't aggressed a single attack of his own volition, his only strike was a counter.

('His plan is to let me initiate an offense and land attacks while or after evading my own.')

This was Kane's element. He dodged attacks while simultaneously setting up counters. But it was not without flaws.

('Such a strategy requires a lot of space.')

Evasive maneuvering, in general, required space. Much more so than most other fields of Martial Art. The lesser the space, the lesser the evasion.

('Thankfully, leaving the ring is not allowed.')

Rui planned to exploit this. By cornering Kane, while simultaneously reaching extremely close-range, His odds of landing a strike were much higher. The reasons were simple; Reaching the edge would mean Kane wouldn't be able to evade strikes easily due to the lack of space, and the closer Rui was to him, the harder it was to avoid a strike. Avoiding a fast super-close-range strike with very little space seemed to be difficult even for Kane, he could have no choice but to launch a strike in order to avoid this.

Kane glanced backward as he realized the boundary was at his heel. Rui had been making a few sweeping attacks launched in such a way that the ideal way to avoid them was simply to step back, but in a closed area, there was a limit to the number of times this could be performed before reaching the boundary.

Rui rushed forward swinging his fist abruptly, prompting Kane bent backwards while launching a sharp straight high kick, in the heat of the moment.

WHOOSH.

Where Rui's head should have been, there was naught but nothing.

Kane's eyes widened in surprise.

('I've seen that before, Kane.') Rui grinned cleanly avoiding that strike, a simple push was all it took to throw Kane out of the ring. In that bent position with a kick mid-air and the boundary but an inch away, not even Kane could seem to muster the power or the balance to avoid a ring-out.

"First round goes to me." Rui grinned smugly, offering Kane a hand.

Kane smiled wryly. "Sure, but that's the only round you're winning today."

"Ha!" Rui laughed. "You... weren't using a single technique, were you?"

"Heh. So, you noticed."

"Of course, you were moving like a freaking viper in the Exam, I had trouble keeping my eyes on you. In comparison, you were moving like a lazy cat just now." Rui retorted.

Kane threw a competitive smile at Rui in response. They quickly took their positions, shuffling and shifting. Rui was more than happy to rehash the same tactic again.

('If it ain't broke, don't fix it.') Rui chanted.

Just as he cornered Kane and launched a strike... Kane vanished!

('???') Just as Rui gathered his bearings;

BAM

A brutal impact landed on the back of his head, pushing him past the boundary that he had cornered Kane with prior.

"Fuck!" Rui grimaced in pain, turning around in confusion. What he saw shocked him. Kane upside-down on a handstand, and had launched a kick down on Rui's head with his leg.

Kane flipped back over to his feet with a smug grin.

"Did you really think I would fall for the same tactic again? Evasion isn't limited to two-dimensional maneuvering you know."

Rui grinned in awe. ('Did he really flip into a handstand to avoid my strike while simultaneously launching a kick to the back of my head to push me over the boundary I had cornered him into?')

Rui had underestimated him. Kane was far nimbler and more mobile than he had imagined. Such acrobatic maneuvering made his evasion that much more formidable.

"You're really something else, y'know?" Rui complimented, getting back into the ring.

"Hehehe, you haven't seen anything just yet, I was barely using half my full power." Kane cracked his knuckles, boasting a smiling with a hint of sadism in it.

Chapter 38: Apprentice level

The third bout began, and this time, Kane made the first move.

('He's coming.') Rui tensed in alertness.

Kane exhaled and suddenly, taking his first step, he blurred. In an instant he accelerated to top speed, moving so fast that he crossed the distance in a moment.

BAM.

Rui barely managed to intercept Kane's punch with hastily cobbled guard.

('Fast! His speed before was basically child's play!')

Rui haphazardly threw a punch at him, hoping to catch him off-guard, but Kane attacked in such a way that the strike would naturally be avoided by the attacking motion. Attacking in a manner that naturally avoids the attack of your opponent, this was Kane was doing.

BAM

Kane managed to slip an attack through Rui's guard.

('Damn, this is different from before. Before he was evading first while countering a slip second later. But right now, he's perfectly choosing an attack such that the attacking motion naturally avoided Rui's attack.') Rui realized.

For example, a jump kick naturally avoided a leg sweep. A leg sweep naturally dodged a jump kick. Kicks possessed greater range than punches thus, if well timed, they could be used to avoid punches by hitting the opponent first.

"Hehe, dealing with Anti-Cadence is difficult, isn't it? Especially considering you're a newbie."

Rui got up, taking up another stance. "You haven't mastered it yet, right?" He could feel Kane's choices weren't entirely optimal.

Kane shrugged. "I learnt it a few months ago. It's also one of those foundational techniques in counter-offensive maneuvering that doesn't have an upper limit, you just get better and better at it with experience."

That made sense to Rui. Anti-Cadence was a technique that relied on judgement, which grew with experience. Analysis and judgement were Rui's strong suits. Among all the techniques he had seen, he was most interested in Anti-Cadence. It had a lot of synergy with Rui's affinities and interests.

"How'd you cross the distance between us so quickly?" Kane was moving at a speed that should be way above what someone of his physical stature should be capable of moving like.

"Oh, that's another Apprentice level maneuvering technique called Parallel Walk."

"Parallel Walk?"

"Yeah, normally people walk and run by twisting their upper body and swinging their arms in the opposite direction to the legs, right?"

This was true, at a young age, humans naturally developed the habit of walking with their arms swinging opposite to that of their legs. This was because it was the most natural way to maintain balance by countering the torque generated by the legs.

"Parallel Walk is a technique where you run with your arms and upper body swinging in-line with and parallel to your legs. It's a technique that allows you to run faster."

Rui's eyes widened. This made sense, twisting your upper body and swinging your arms required a lot of energy, all of that energy was being wasted in maintaining balance. Parallel Walk seemed to be a technique where one moved with their arms moving in the same direction as their legs. This avoided the immense waste of energy that occurred with the twisting of the upper half of the body. All the energy

that would otherwise be wasted with twisting the upper half would now be directed into the legs and be converted into speed, thus allowing the user to run at significantly higher speeds.

"It feels really weird when you learn it, balance is maintained in a totally different way after all, so it takes a while to get used to it. But once you do get used to it, you move at wayyy faster speeds way easier. I'm telling you, it was a blessing to my Martial Art." Kane explained.

Rui nodded, it made sense. In truth, this wasn't the first he'd heard of this concept. Back on Earth there was a Japanese form of walking and running known as Namba Aruki or Namba Walking. Namba Walking was the running style of the express runners, during the Edo Period, whose job it was to run messages quickly and efficiently between Edo and the other provinces. Usually they would travel in pairs, one having a pole with a box or package on the end, and another that had a pole with a lantern on it inscribed with the characters official business.

Needless to say, communication was key to an effective government, so these express runners had to be very, well, express. They would regularly run from Edo to Kyoto in six-eight days, a distance of approximately 480 kilometers on foot. They were highly efficient and wasted lesser energy that could otherwise be used for more speed or stamina, thanks to this form of maneuvering.

('I just didn't think it was legit. But it seems that, at the very least, it's legit in this world.')

"Can you teach it to me?" Rui asked.

"I'm not qualified to. The training process isn't as straightforward as it seems. I had a Martial Senior monitoring my training, and he put me through a ton of training that I didn't really understand. Half-assed erroneous training is worse than no training, trust me." Kane replied, earning a downcast expression from Rui.

"Don't worry though." He consoled. "I told you this is an Apprentice level technique for maneuvering, right? That means you absolutely can learn this in the Academy as long as you reach Apprentice level."

Rui's expression lit up. Yet another reason to look forward to the Academy. He strongly looked forward to the day he learnt this technique in the academy.

"How many Apprentice maneuvering techniques are there?"

"Oh, there are tons of Apprentice level techniques. That being said, each field has a set of basic Apprentice level techniques, these are the easiest techniques to learn that help a brand-new Martial Apprentice grow accustomed to Apprentice level techniques. After all, the transition from Foundational techniques to Apprentice level techniques can be tough, it took me a whole month before I could even get used to it." Kane sighed, recalling a painful memory.

"To, answer your question though, as far as pure maneuvering goes, there's four. Parallel Walk is one of them, meant for physical travel, there's one for combat speed, combat agility, travel agility etc." Kane explained.

Chapter 39: Shackle

"Are each of the Apprentice level techniques as effective and as powerful as the techniques you showed me?" Rui asked.

"Just around, yeah." Kane replied.

"Alright then." Rui stood up, taking a position within the ring. "Can you show me the rest?"

"Sure thing." Kane grinned, taking up a stance.

They clashed with each other for a few hours after, round after round. Kane demonstrated the prowess of a Martial Apprentice, mopping the floor with Rui over and over. Not only did he overwhelmingly pummel Rui, but he also defeated Rui in many different ways.

('So, this what happens when he uses his Foundational and Apprentice level skill, huh? It's overwhelming.') Rui thought as Kane floored him yet another time. Kane had beaten him many a time by now, but Rui only grew more and more ecstatic, much to Kane's confusion.

"Let's stop here for today." Kane told Rui, earning a nod of affirmation in response.

"Yeah, no need to push ourselves too far in a single session." They were both extraordinarily exhausted.

"You know, you seem like you enjoy losing." Kane told him.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, I beat you a lot, yet if anybody were to look at us, they'd assume you were the winner given how much more satisfied you seem."

"That's because I am satisfied. I learnt and experienced a ton of new things. The losses are trivial in comparison." Rui explained.

"Hmmm... I felt this before, but your passion for Martial Art is... How do I say it? Pure?"

"Pure?" Rui echoed.

"Yeah, of all the Martial Artists I've known, all of them had one reason or the other to become a Martial Artist. Power, glory, prestige, status, money and stuff like that, you know? But your joy for Martial Art feels... clean."

"..." He seemed to have trouble articulating his impression, but Rui didn't press him despite that. Ultimately, he was merely a thirteen-year-old child, accurately and precisely enunciating his feelings was not something Rui expected of him.

"You really enjoy Martial Art, don't you?" Kane asked.

"Yes." Rui replied unhesitatingly.

"That sounds amazing. I've never enjoyed Martial Art. It's always been... How do I say it? A shackle...? But it's also my only tool to break through that shackle... I don't know if that makes sense." Kane explained uncomfortably, Rui could tell he was being candid.

"I think it does." He replied. From what little Rui had seen of Kane's life, it seemed as though Martial Art shackled Kane, but was indeed also his only hope breaking through those shackles. Being born as the son of a Martial Sage, as well gifted with prodigious talent for Martial Art probably put a huge burden on him. From what Rui had seen of Kane's mother, it was likely that the entirety of Kane's family had massive expectations of him.

These expectations seemed to be a shackle, his family probably put him through rigorous Martial Art training from a young age, so much so that he reached the Martial Apprentice Realm even before entering the Academy, they didn't allow him to even leave his damn house of his own free will. His life was basically a prison. Freedom must be something of his wildest dreams.

"Hm... But you know..." Kane turned to Rui with a mirthful grin. "When I'm with you, Martial Art doesn't seem all that bad."

Rui smirked. "Well, then why don't I come hang out more often if that's ok with you?"

"That sounds great! Maybe we can spar and train every day."

That sounded perfect to Rui. He desperately wanted some real combat practice and training, so far training with Kane was probably the most fruitful thing he had done in his second life.

"Sure, sounds great." Rui replied.

"Though some days it's best if you don't."

"Oh? Why so?" Rui enquired.

"Because my father will be around." Kane explained. "You saw how my mother was, my father is far more overbearing and unpleasant."

"I see... You sure have it rough man."

Kane sighed.

"You must be excited for the Martial Academy eh?"

"Oh man, you have no idea. I can't wait to live in a different place. How excited are you.?"

"Extremely, I've been waiting nearly twelve years for this."

Kane threw him an odd look.

"What?" Rui responded to his reaction.

"You're the same age as me right?"

"Yeah."

"Then how have you been waiting for twelve years?"

"Uhhh..." Rui scratched his head awkwardly. "I probably miscounted, haha."

"Hmm.."

"Anyways, I should probably head home. I'm fucking exhausted and bruised up." Rui changed the topic.

"Wait, have some potions before you go." Kane offered.

"Oh yeah, it makes sense you have them, but no thanks." Rui declined.

"Wait why not?" Kane furrowed his brows in confusion.

"Potions are valuable one-time products man, they're not cups of tea that you offer to guests." Rui laughed. "They're far too expensive for me to accept them."

"Don't worry about stuff like that. We have more potions than we know what to do with."

"Seriously I'm good."

"No you have to!" Kane insisted.

Rui threw him a helpless glance.

"...Fine."

Kane rattled off some instructions to a servant as they exited a facility.

"You wanna take a shower?" Kane offered.

('They have showers here?') Rui pondered.

"Nah, I'm good. If I leave any later, I'll worry the folks back home."

They bantered until a servant returned with four vials. Two of them were red, while the other two were blue.

"A healing potion for your bruises, and an energy potion for your stamina." Kane offered.

Rui grasped them, taking a closer look at them.

"it's always boggled me how amazing potions are. To think they can heal and rejuvenate you in such a short period of time, truly amazing."

"That's pretty average for potions, you know?" Kane told him.

"Average?" Rui asked, perplexed.

"Yeah, these potions aren't even the best of their types. These are just standard post-training potions around here. Though they are far better than what you had at the Academy."

"Damn, so there's even better stuff huh."

"Yeah, I don't know the details but I heard the highest -grade healing potions can heal extremely lethal injuries, even if the patient is on the verge of death."

"On the verge of death?? That's insane!"

"That's not all they can do though.. There are potions that can give permanent enhancements to your body significantly in many ways, albeit rare. There also potions that can significantly increase your lifespan!"

"What??"

Chapter 40: Potions

Potions that could bring you back from the brink of death, enhance your abilities permanently, increase your lifespan. These were all truly unfathomable phenomena to Rui. It really broadened his perspective on the limits of the esoteric materialistic nature of this world that seemed to have no limits whatsoever!

"None of those are common though. They are extremely rare, so much so that they would be considered National Treasures. My father said that even life-prolonging potions were extremely difficult to obtain even for him, apparently." Kane told him.

('No, regardless of rarity. A potion that can prolong life should be impossible. Aging is an inevitable process that occurs due to processes occurring on a molecular level within our body.')

Aging was primarily caused by the faulty DNA replication during cellular division and replacement. Every time a new cell in the body is born, the DNA it inherited from its parent cell contained tiny new flaws and new gaps, this happened every time cells divided and were replicated. Over a lifetime, these flaws and gaps accumulate in the DNA across the body before one thing or the other eventually leads to a fatal cause of death.

('The fact that a potion can stall this inevitable process means that some esoteric compound within the potion is influencing our body universally on a molecular level!')

He had to once again re-evaluate the esoteric technology of this world. Basic healing and stamina recovery were one thing. Healing from the brink of death, augmentation and longevity were whole other ball-games. He still found Kane's words incredibly difficult to process.

"That isn't it, potions are used a lot in medicine too you know..." Kane added, oblivious of the fact that the impact of such an unremarkable statement was rather paltry in comparison to the thundering revelations he had unleashed upon Rui prior.

"...Are the permanent body augmenting potions you mentioned prior, available on the market?"

"Probably not? Otherwise, I would have definitely gotten my hands on them. But I haven't unfortunately, only temporary-enhancement ones exist. Don't quote me on that though, I just know general stuff." Kane replied.

"I see, that's a shame." Rui could gain a huge boost if he had one of those.

"Well, potions can help you grow stronger otherwise too, you know?"

"Oh yeah? How so?" Rui asked curiously.

"Well, just the rejuvenation potion and healing potions alone increase your ability to train like crazy, honestly I can't imagine training without them, I wouldn't be as strong as I am today." Kane explained.

"True, you could train for far longer, far more intensively with these potions than without."

"Yeah, you can be damn well sure a major proportion of the freshmen in our batch also relied on them for training, so that they could grow much stronger and more skilled than if they didn't."

"No wonder I felt outpowered among them." Rui mused.

"It's also why your performance was quite impressive, when you told me you've never consumed one, I was genuinely surprised. You must have done an absurd amount of training from an extremely young age."

('I can't tell him I've basically been training my entire life.') Rui mused. Every physically intensive activity translated into training as long as it was measured, structured and disciplined. Even though he began actually training exercises at the age of five, he still carefully exercised his body in various physical and performative attributes, he went from barely average in terms of physical talent to well above average in regards to physical attributes such as strength, speed and agility, durability, flexibility etc.

The biggest problem was his performative attributes such as balance and body-eye coordination. The mismatch between the muscle memory of his previous life and his new body significantly hindered him. Overwriting fifty-nine years of muscle memory took him an immense amount of time, until he had finally reached an average standard.

"It's probably also why Fae was particularly impressed and interested in you, you managed to accomplish a lot despite possessing none of the learning, training and growing resources that almost all other freshmen had, at the age of thirteen no less.

"I wonder how strong I would be if I had access to rejuvenation and recovery potions my entire life." Rui sighed. He wasn't one to grow overtly jealous and envious. As severely diseased person in his previous life, he had long learnt that it was toxic and unproductive, but even he had to sigh when he realized what he had missed out on.

"You'd be a monster. Honestly, it's pretty impressive you are where you are, your body is honed incredibly well all things considered. Your performative attributes are pretty meh though. I'd suggest ramping up on training them. We have tons of training equipment meant specifically for those so feel free to use them."

It was a truly tempting offer, as resourceful Rui was, actual targeted-training equipment was far more effective and efficient.

"Thanks, I'll consider that. Will we have access to these potions in the Academy?"

"Yep, you get a supply of them during your stay at the Academy."

"Sweet, I was worried I'd be missing out then."

"Don't underestimate the Academies, they have huge funding, a lot of that goes into training resources which inevitably include potions. Of course, they won't be as good as the ones we have here."

"True... Glad to hear that."

Rui looked forward to begin training with the resources of the Academy even more. He could scarcely imagine how much his rate of growth would skyrocket once he began training with these resources. He anticipated within a year his physical body would be honed and refined unlike anything else. He was just entering puberty too; his body would also be naturally growing to an incredibly high degree, thanks to testosterone. Muscle mass and bone density specifically.

"You also get potions that rejuvenate your mind like a good night's sleep, that's one of the things I regularly use in my training regime." Kane casually dropped yet another bombshell

"You...! How many hours have you trained daily across your entire life?"