

## **Martial Unity 41**

### Chapter 41: Rejuvenation

Rui wanted to smack Kane over the head, abstaining only because Kane would probably dodge. Such a shame.

"On average I train for seventeen hours a day." Kan replied.

"You... what??" Rui questioned him with palpable disbelief.

"I mean it's not that hard with the three potions I mentioned earlier; healing, physical rejuvenation and mental rejuvenation."

"Physical and mental-rejuvenation potions?"

"Yeah, physical rejuvenation invigorates the body, mental rejuvenation invigorates the brain so that you don't need sleep. These are the two types of rejuvenation potions."

"Does that mean if you had limitless mental rejuvenation, you would never need to sleep?" Rui asked with wonder.

"Yeah right." Kane scoffed. "The potion's effectivity drops with each consecutive usage. Its effectivity returns to one-hundred percent once I sleep naturally."

"I see, that's still extremely useful though. It's like buying more time!"

"True."

"How many potions do you take before the potion's effectivity reduces to zero?"

"Usually, I can go about three to four days before I need to sleep naturally."

That was lower than Rui hoped.

"Don't get carried away, there's known risks to consuming mental rejuvenation potions on a regular basis."

"Oh?"

"It rejuvenates the brain. But psychologically, staying awake for much longer periods is detrimental to the mind. Your mind is not designed nor used to receiving such large amounts of information for so long continuously without a break. Your brain maybe fine, but your psyche will be strained. There runs the risk of losing your sanity if you push it, atleast that's what my supervisors told me." Kane shrugged.

"Damn..." That makes sense. Just like every other part of the body, the mind had also evolved through natural selection in a particular way. In order for it to maintain its optimal state, it needed to be carefully subjected to only what it was evolved to handle, and not beyond that.

"Do you monitor yourself with the mental-rejuvenation potions?"

"Heck no." Kane grumbled. "My training-supervisors carefully regulate my mental-rejuvenation potion intake. They do some check-ups before giving me the potions I'm allowing to consume while also giving me a schedule for their consumption."

"Huh, sounds like it may be dangerous to do that stuff by yourself."

"I dunno, but probably yeah. Don't worry though, the Academy also has a capable and established medical department that handles this kind of stuff. There are supervisors there that ensure students don't push themselves beyond their limits. This also comes from the funding I mentioned before."

"I see. You sure know a lot about the Academy huh?"

"Of course, I do!" Kane replied emphatically. "I've been eying the Academy for almost five years now. You have no idea how badly I'm looking forward to it. I've done a fuck ton of research on it."

Rui chuckled in response. He could sense Kane's enthusiasm was just as strong as his, though their motivations differed immensely. He was glad they shared a strong interest.

"I'm looking forward to training with you in the Academy."

"Same but we probably won't be able to hang out as much initially." Kane sighed melancholically.

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm already a Martial Apprentice. I'll be directly heading into the training stages they have planned out for Martial Apprentices to help them reach Martial Squire. I haven't even been told the criteria needed to become a Martial Squire. Even Father said it was far too early for that, apparently."

"I see, well, we can hang out in our free times and breaks then." Rui consoled.

"Sigh, we'll have to stick to that, I guess."

"By the way, the fact that you're a Martial Apprentice Stage means you've already completed the Foundation and Exploration Stages right?"

"Yeah."

"What's the name of the Stage after one becomes a Martial Apprentice?" Rui asked out of curiosity.

"It's called the Expansion Stage."

"Hmmm... I see, that's a cool name. What exactly do you do in this stage?"

"Well, once you discover your Martial Path, the only thing left to do is tread down it. You have to begin expanding your Martial Art, or so I was told."

"Expanding? As in adding more techniques and skills to your Martial Art?"

"Yeah, you gain access to Apprentice-level techniques, from where you can explore, learn and add those techniques to your Martial Art repository."

"Hmm... Interesting. So, this when the actual construction of your Martial Art begins, huh? That sounds incredibly fun."

Rui was dying to be able to get his hands on the Apprentice-level techniques that Kane mentioned. Techniques like Outer Convergence, Parallel Step, Anti-Cadence were all extremely exciting techniques that were incredibly effective. It would be a while before he could learn them though, unfortunately.

"How long did it take for you to complete the Foundation Stage?" Rui asked, out curiosity.

"Half a year, or so." Kane replied.

"How does that compare to the average?" Rui asked, scratching his head. He figured it was likely well below average, considering Kane was a genius.

"...I dunno."

"..."

"Hey don't look at me like that!" He reprimanded embarrassedly, as Rui gave him a blank stare. One moment he sounded extremely knowledgeable, the next he sounded clueless.

"Is the Foundation Stage difficult?"

"Well, I had to train a fuck ton, it was quite tiring. The foundational techniques I learnt in the Foundation and Exploration Stage were really easy though."

"Hmm..." Rui pondered. Were the Foundational techniques actually easy or was Kane just being too much of a genius here? He wasn't sure. They chatted for a while after consuming their potions, before Rui decided to take his leave.

"You sure you don't want to have you dropped off?" Kane asked once more.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm full of energy anyway, I don't mind getting back home on foot." Rui reassured. He didn't want to indulge in Kane's hospitality anymore, although he was growing to really liking the kid, they had only met thrice. Rui wasn't comfortable feeling so indebted to someone he had met recently, and only a handful of times.

Rui fell into a deep thought walking back, having bade Kane goodbye. He had a lot to think about, having learnt and experienced many things. The Martial Academy, the prowess of potions and most importantly; the prowess of Apprentice level Martial Art techniques.

"Such a fruitful visit, perhaps I should hang around him more..."

## Chapter 42: Final Supper

Rui folded the last of his clothes into a large cloth bag. He had checked and re-checked making sure he had all the sets of clothes he needed. Five sets of undergarments, as well as general purpose clothes. He packed in all of his necessities and belongings carefully, ensuring they would all fit in once he folded and tied the cloth down. This world did have the equivalent of suit-cases, but they were a bit on the expensive side.

Rui had declined the offer of being bought one by the Orphanage, he wasn't profligate by any stretch, what was the point of wasting precious money when there was a perfectly apt and cheap alternative? Thankfully, for the same reason, he had few belongings. His luggage ended up being conveniently light and small.

"The day has finally come..." Rui mused to himself.

Nearly a month had passed since the Induction Ceremony, the long-awaited and sought start of the Rui's first Academic year was the very next day. Tomorrow, Rui would leave the Quarrier Orphanage and head to the Mantian branch of the Kandrian Martial Academy where he would stay until he became a Martial Squire, or, God forbid, was expelled. Not that Rui had any intention of getting expelled. In the past month, he had memorized the rules of the Academy quite well, he was determined to not give them even the tiniest hole that could be conceived as a violation of the rules.

"Rui, it's dinner time!" Myra called out.

"Yeah, I'll be there in a second." He replied, having tied up his make-shift cloth bag and put it on his bed. He sauntered into the dining room pausing, everyone had already gathered at the tables, even the utensils and food was in place, yet they all waited for Rui to take his place. There were eighteen children and fourteen adults, far more than usual.

Many former members of the Orphanage during Rui's time, who had moved out and started their own family, were also present. These were people who had formed strong bonds with Rui as he'd grown up, having known Rui practically his entire life. They'd taken time away from their families to be present to send Rui off.

The sight evoked emotion. It made his inevitable departure much more painful.

"Oh? Looks like the star of tonight's celebration is here." Nina smirked, offering him the seat at the head of the table.

"He sure kept us waiting." Farion grumbled, putting on a grumpy façade.

"Now now, he has a big day tomorrow with plenty of preparation, cut him some slack, will you?" Alice chided.

"Come on Rui." Julian smiled, coaxing Rui. "Let's eat."

The entire room conveyed their love for him in their own way, welcoming him. He smiled and took his seat without a word; he was choked with emotion. He didn't trust himself to not burst down sobbing if he opened his mouth. He didn't want to ruin the mood with sorrow.

The adults began serving, which in itself took a while. Myra had planned a feast for this day; the last day Rui would live with them for quite a while.

He indulged himself with food and love as dinner proceeded with boisterous energy. There was many a reunion, the mood was extremely high.

Watching everyone hit him hard. This was what he was forgoing. Was it really worth it? It wasn't as if he hadn't thought about this before. The answer was always the same too. Yet, today, of all days, he found it hard to reaffirm it.

"Don't look so sad Rui." Julian consoled with a serene smile. "I know exactly how you feel. After all, I felt the same way when I left for the Kandrian Institute of Sciences."

Julian had spent two years in the Kandrian Institute of Sciences for a higher education at the age of sixteen, before graduating and being accepted as an apprentice scholar.

"It's painful to be separated from your family. But your life is your life, Rui. You need to live it, you owe that to yourself."

"Yeah..."

"Don't worry, we'll be seeing you during the season breaks, and to congratulate when you graduate successfully graduate as a Martial Artist." Julian consoled.

"Yeah..."

"Cheer up Rui, don't look so down!" Alice refilled his plate with another large serving.

He obliged, as much as he could. Alice really did serve him far too much. He looked down at the large pile of meat and rice that occupied his plate, sighing in resignation.

('I hope eating this much won't make me ill on the first day of the Academy.')

He hoped the Academy had some potions that could instantly fix indigestion. It wasn't too much to ask considering the miracles that potions were capable of.

Still, he appreciated it, even if it were ill-advised on the stomach. The food was truly extravagant. The Orphanage had pulled all stops for this celebration and farewell party of his. He ate his food as he engaged with various people who came to speak with him. As the star of the dinner and the focus of the night, many people, children and adult alike were interested in conversing with him.

After a while he excused himself for some fresh air, heading out into the balcony. He wasn't accustomed to dealing with this much food or people, certainly not simultaneously.

('It's like they're trying to cram all the home-cooked food and family I'll be missing in my time in the Academy in one night.') He mused, burping a bit to free up some space in his bloated belly.

('We haven't even gotten to desert yet...') Thankfully, Rui believed in the saying that desert went to the heart. He rarely had multiple course meals. It was something that Orphanage could not afford to do, at least, on even an occasional basis.

('Well, all said and done, I ought to enjoy it while it lasts.') Rui relented. He returned to the dining room.

## Chapter 43: Freshman

"Alright mom... I think it's time to let me go, or I'll be late." Rui advised.

Lashara ignored him, hugging him tightly, swaying him in her arms. Rui had an awkward expression on his face, unsure of when he would be released from her smothering bear hug of motherly love.

She released him before patting his head, apparently satisfied, yet melancholic.

"Don't push yourself too hard, okay? Make sure you get as much sleep and food needed to be healthy." She advised. Rui nodded in response, her bidding was different from the others, who told him they were proud of him, and told him to work hard. Although Lashara was most certainly proud of him, at this moment her overprotectiveness was much more dominant. In her eyes, although Rui was very intelligent, he was still a tender thirteen-year-old with no experience, living by himself for the first time, being separated from his family.

"Don't worry mom, I'll be fine." He reassured. He glanced at all the people behind her, the adults and children of the Orphanage, bidding all of them goodbye, before heading towards the town of Hajin.

His nerves were angsty and on-edge. This was much more nerve-racking than the Martial Entrance Exam. He inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly in order to calm his prickly racing heart.

The Orphanage was far from the core of the town, it was quite far away from the establishment and population of the town. Thus, the journey to the Martial Academy was close to two hours away, on foot.

Considering he was carrying luggage, travelling there on foot was not something he wanted to do. He instead opted to walk to the closest district while catching a rickshaw there to the Martial Academy. Although rickshaws were not unheard of in the region of the Orphanage, they were exceedingly rare. What was the point of offering transportation to people in a place with very few people? No rickshaw-puller was stupid enough to bother going away from the town's heartland.

"Ah there we are." Rui spotted the district. Even as he entered it, he already spotted a few rickshaws. He quickly boarded one, after haggling a price. It wasn't cheap considering the distance, so he ended up shortening the trip a bit, resolving to walk the remaining distance.

Having boarded the rickshaw, he immersed himself in his thoughts, thinking about his course of action.

The information guide he received when at the Investiture Ceremony had already laid out instructions for freshmen in the Academy. Once he reached the Academy, he was to join the other freshmen in a designated hall. Once all the freshmen had gathered, the Academy would conduct the Evaluation Exam. Which would then serve as the basis upon which the individualized curriculum of the Foundation Stage.

Once that was concluded, the freshmen would be given the rest of the day off. They would be shown to their dorm rooms where they could spend the rest of the day as they wished. They could relax and recuperate or mingle with the other freshmen, they could even train, or visit the Academy Library. There was even a tour offered by the Academy that day for students who wanted to explore the Academy.

All in all, it was an extremely exciting day for Rui. Time passed as he grew absorbed in his day-dreams about what the Academy would be like, until the rickshaw finally stopped, having reached the destination. Rui broke out of his stupor, glancing around, realizing where he was.

"We've finally reached huh?" Rui asked, reaching for his coin pouch. He got off after paying the rickshaw-puller the agreed sum of ten copper coins. Before heading towards the Martial Academy. He glanced at his timepiece, thankfully, he wouldn't be late. He would actually be quite early. He had left well before the Academic day began out of paranoia of being late.

This was the central district of the town of Hajin, it was also adjacent to the Martial Academy, which was its own huge district, basically. The Martial Academy was enormous, even its fort walls could be seen from kilometers away. All Rui had to do was walk in its direction.

The town of Hajin was far busier than any other. The reason, of course, was without a doubt the opening of the Martial Academy and the commencement of a new academic year.

This was a national phenomenon annually. The Martial Academies were one of a kind. There were only sixteen of them, and all of them were owned by the Martial Union. It was simply impossible for any other private organization to set up even semi-decent learning institute of its own. The Martial Academies were bastions of the knowledge inherited from countless Martial Artists of the past and the present. How could anybody rival that?

The only entity that could perhaps rival that was Royal Family. As the rulers of the nation, they had access to wealth and resources surpassing even the mighty Martial Union. Yet there were no such Royal institutes, for reasons Rui was completely unaware of. Maybe creating an Academy was detrimental to their interests?

Rui shook his head, casting away pointless thoughts. He often would find himself drifting away into all of the supernatural things related to this world, especially things related to Martial Art. Just as he centered and focused himself, the gates of the Martial Academy had come into view.

The crowd and traffic in the vicinity of the Martial Academy was extremely dense and chaotic. This was not unexpected; the huge influx of applicants and their family/guardians would inevitably escalate the already densely populated area and district as a whole.

Rui pushed through the crowd reaching for the gates. The security seemed to be beefed up, with several more guards on patrol. He quickly procured his student ID provided to him in the Investiture Ceremony, he would not be able to enter the Academy without it. When the guards halted him as he approached them;

"Rui Quarrier." He identified himself, holding his ID Card. "I'm a student of the Martial Academy."

#### Chapter 44: Evaluation

He stuffed his ID card back into his pouch walking past the gates. If it weren't for the signs placed at the side of the path, guiding freshmen to the hall, he wouldn't know where to go. He glanced around looking at his fellow freshmen. Most of them were carrying rolling suitcases that resembled the kind that were predominantly used on Earth.

('Rich kids.') Rui mused. There was very few who carried around a simple cloth makeshift carrybag like he did.

('This must have something to do with the fact that the richer you are, the more training and growth resources you have access to.') Back on Earth, your talent and work ethic mattered more than how much money you had when it came to the combat sports industry. Although funds and resources were no doubt relevant, above a certain point, they began mattering less and less. As long as one had good trainers and even a basic gym, there really wasn't too much money could do beyond that without an exorbitant amount. Your drive and hard work paid off much more than fancy equipment.

But that wasn't the case in this world, as Kane had enlightened him.

He soon arrived at the designated waiting hall, where other freshmen had gathered. It took him a less than a minute to find Kane.

"Hey man." Kane greeted.

"Sup." Rui nodded.

In the past month Rui had spent nearly every day hanging out with Kane. They had quickly grown closer to each other.

Rui glanced around as they noticed a ton of eyes on them. The freshmen around them were clearly wary and conscious of the two of them. It wasn't until Rui caught one of them stealing a glance at the Arrancar emblem on Kane's clothes that Rui understood.

('The Arrancar household holds a lot of weight for sure.')

"Ignore em, it's pretty normal." Kane blankly said.

"It is?"

"Yeah, once they realize where I'm from, they either stay away from me or start kissing my ass." Kane helplessly replied.

"Sounds rough."

"It is. You're one of the few people I've met who didn't care. I appreciate that."

Rui shrugged. "I appreciate you not caring about my eyes and hair." He replied as he caught someone eying his hair. This was another thing they had in common. They didn't have to worry about such nonsense when they hung out with each other.

As they waited, for whatever it is that was supposed to happen after everyone arrived. Rui took a closer at his surroundings. Firstly, he noticed that most of the freshmen seemed to be around sixteen to eighteen-years-old. In fact, as far as he could see, there wasn't a single freshman as young as them. This was probably another reason for the attention they were drawing.

There were a few guards situated along the perimeter of the hall, likely to prevent any conflicts that could possibly arise between the freshmen.

"Well hello you two, we meet again." A feminine voice called out to them.

Rui didn't even need to turn around to know who it was.

"Fae." He looked at her with a complicated expression. He wasn't a vindictive person. He part-took in the second-round knowing full well that there was a great chance he might have gotten hurt and knocked out, he was young and he was an attractive, yet weak target. He still took part in the second-round despite all these risks, he consented to all of this, naturally he would not lose his mind in resentment and anger if he lost.

What fool participates in a fighting competition fully aware of the risks only to grow extremely resentful and angry when those risks occur? She did not violate the rules, furthermore she attacked countless other applicants too, Rui wasn't unique.

Furthermore, she had revealed that she attacked him knowing he would likely pass because of how well he did, even if he got knocked out, she wasn't trying to ruin his chances, or so she claimed.

However, he wasn't fond of her personality. From what little he interacted with her, she seemed like an unpleasant person. She seemed like a fickle shit-stirrer whose words and earnestness he couldn't trust, talking to her was a tiring exercise and he'd rather just avoid it all together.

"Tsk. Go away. Who asked you to go out of your way to bother us?" Kane had much fewer compunctions with rudeness than Rui did. His background probably had something to do with that. While Rui was still wary of people with a lot of power, Kane had just as much as she did.

Rui noticed that they had thoroughly become the center of attention.

"Can I not just greet my fellow freshmen? We're part of the same batch, are we not? Besides, I didn't necessarily come to speak with you, Kane." She smiled innocently. "I came despite you, if it weren't for Rui here, who would bother talking to you? Ah were you hoping I came here for you? You must be at that age, after all."

Kane gritted his teeth. "You-"

"Alright let's chill guys." Rui interrupted with exasperation. If he did not stop it here, it would probably be too late. He glared at Fae, he didn't like her temperament. Just he was about retort, a voice interrupted them.

"Do you enjoy picking on a bunch of brats so much, Fae?" A monotonous voice called out to her.

A girl called out. She had short blue hair and red eyes, and an expression that lacked energy.

"My, I'm not picking on-Wah!" The blue hair girl grabbed her by the collar and pulled her away, interrupting what she knew would be a tiring word salad of an excuse.

"Sorry for the disturbance." She called out, meeting Rui's eyes for a split second.

"..." Rui vaguely recognized her. She ranked five in the second round, right after Kane.

"Good riddance." Kane spat.

"She's annoying, but your dislike for her seems to go beyond irritation." Rui replied, remembering the investiture ceremony.

"My mother loves her, she's constantly comparing me to her and rubbing everything she does in my face for literally years now." Kane's eyebrows knitted in anger. " 'Oh look how dedicated to her family's prestige Fae is' or 'Oh look how responsible and proactive she is to the family, you should be more like her' and shit like that."

"...I see." That explained it.

Just as Kane recounted his grievances, the doors on the other end of the room opened and a Martial Senior walked through. Rui could instantly tell what realm he was in through the weight of his presence.

"Freshmen, I welcome you to the Martial Academy. I am a Martial Senior Tarrokov, and I will be conducting your evaluation exam. Please leave your belongings with the support staff, with a name tag that we'll be providing to you and follow me to the evaluation exam hall."

The students immediately took of their belongings while receiving name tags.

"It's a bit weird that they're doing the evaluation exam as the first thing on the first day of the Academy." Rui murmured with a confused expression.

"There's a reason for it." Kane replied back with a soft voice.

"Oh? Do tell."

"It's related to our dormitory segregation."

Rui threw him a curious look.

"The Academy has different dormitory sections across the campus." Kane explained. "We're not all going to be put in the same dormitory just because we're in the same academic batch. One dormitory section is near the Apprentice training section of facilities and Apprentice Martial libraries."

"I see." Rui understood. "So those of us at the Martial Apprentice level will be put in the Apprentice dormitories while those below, like me, will be put together elsewhere." He said glumly.

They quickly tagged their belongings and handed it over to the support staff, who duly put them in trolley carriers. Before shifting them away.

"Hm." Senior Tarrokov nodded. "Now that you're ready, follow me to the evaluation exam center."

He led them through a series of corridors until they reached a giant open facility. The facility was riddled with familiar looking training equipment, this was a sight that Rui found comforting.

('Right, this is how a physical evaluation exam should be. The Martial Entrance Exam was obtuse.') He coaxed himself.

"The evaluation exam has two stages; physical evaluation and performative evaluation." The Senior informed. "The first stage will begin now. This exam will impact your curriculum as well as the rest of your time in the Academy." He stated with a stern voice. "Give it your absolute best."

Rui grinned. He was ready!

## Chapter 45: Monster

The physical evaluation began shortly. Senior Tarrokov began with basic stamina evaluation. Stamina was not only the foundation of Martial Art but all physically intensive activities. He gathered up all the freshmen and assigned them to a treadmill and had them all begin simultaneously at an identical speed. The freshmen were even provided with potions at the start to eliminate the variable of fatigue from travel and other preparation for the Martial Academy's first day.

Rui tried minimize his movements and energy expenditure while inhaling and exhaling at measure intervals, maintaining a constant but low consumption of energy allowed one to last longer than a higher consumption of energy, this also minimized the build-up and accumulation of lactic acid in the muscles which was the cause of muscle pain and soreness that one experienced from over-stressing.

Behind each freshman was an evaluator that made notes, carefully observing and scrutinizing the freshmen they were assigned to. The data they provided would impact the freshmen significantly so they were very careful about their documentation.

In ninety minutes, most of the freshmen had stepped off due to overwhelming exhaustion. The pace of the treadmill was not low, it was set at a medium jogging pace. Soon enough Rui followed suit, laying flat on the ground, drenched in sweat. Kane followed as well, thirteen minutes later.

It couldn't be helped. They were thirteen. The biggest difference between eighteen and thirteen-year-olds was stamina. Kane compensated for it with training and growth resources, while Rui had compensated for it with for a lifetime of training with cutting-edge research on stamina-building. Rui's

performative attributes were hindered initially because of mismatched muscle memories which took him a long time to overcome, his physical attributes were well above average.

"Huff... huff..." They panted as they were provided with stamina potions, which they immediately inhaled.

"Phew..." Rui stretched his invigorated limbs. "It never fails to amaze me how useful this is both to us and the evaluators, now we can move on to the performative stage immediately."

Kane nodded, before shrugging. "Well, not immediately. There's still those four."

It had been a while since both of them dropped off, many had followed suit after them. But there were still four students who were going.

"Nel and Fae are too be expected..." Kane continued. "Milliana is also pretty unsurprising." He said, pointing at the blue-haired girl they'd met earlier.

Rui had recognized her from the second round of the Entrance Exam, but he'd forgotten her name.

"You know her?" He asked Kane.

"Sure, she's the daughter of a Martial Master. She's pretty good." Kane replied.

"Hmmm..."

"Dalen is pretty good too." He gestured towards the fourth freshman, another top-ten ranker that Rui vaguely recognized.

Rui turned to Kane with a hint of dismay.

"...What?" Kane retorted.

"How do you know all of the top rankers from the Exam personally?"

"Through our parents. We generally accompany our parents who are part of this community-ish group. Occasionally we spar. I don't know those two as well as I do Fae, though. Sage Dullahan and my father are extremely close."

"I see..." Rui sighed helplessly. This was the power of connections. Just being the child of a Martial Sage meant Rui would regularly run into bigshots and titans of the Martial World.

('Then again, his dad is among the biggest of bigshots, maybe Kane even views them as bootlickers." Rui mused.

Just then, he'd noticed both Fae and Dalen had gotten off too.

"Damn, Fae actually didn't last as long as Nel and Milliana, huh?"

Kane nodded. "It makes sense. Her Martial Art focuses on relentless powerful offense, designed to pummel her opponent down as quickly as possible. It's not a Martial Art that is conducive to stamina..."

"She's probably not as accustomed to maintaining a low output of energy over longer periods of time due to that." Rui agreed.

"Yeah, on the other hand, Milliana's also a Martial Apprentice. But her Martial Art is stamina oriented. She drags and prolongs the battle immensely. Her stamina is incredible, the longer the battle goes, the more her opponent is at a disadvantage." Kane explained.

"Interesting..." Rui's eyes glinted with curiosity and excitement. "I wonder how she'll do against Fae in the next stage."

"Who knows." Kane shrugged.

"It's a matter of compatibility. She did better than Fae here because this test is centered around evaluation. She'll most certainly do worse than Fae when we reach the performative stage based on their performances, and what you told me." Rui analyzed engrossed in the matter. His background helped him in this matter. He continued.

"Based on this, it can be hypothesized that Milliana has a low quick-twitch to slow-twitch muscle fiber ratio whereas Fae likely has a high quick-twitch to slow-twitch muscle fiber ratio, that would certainly explain the differences in their metabolisms which would-"

"Dude." Kane stared at him with confused expression. "What are you even talking about?"

That broke Rui out of his reverie. "Ahhh, well, you see, it's just some some random thoughts that hit me." He fumbled, scratching his head.

('Damn I lost awareness of my surroundings thinking about this.') He had a hard time controlling his curiosity and attention. They were fueled by his immense love and passion for Martial Art, and the flames just grew stronger feeding on any topic they could find, this topic was one such thing.

"You really are a weirdo." Kane commented, before turning back to them.

"Haha..." Rui laughed awkwardly.

Time went on as they bantered and chit-chatted for quite some time after. Until finally, one of the two remaining freshmen jumped off, collapsing to her knees.

"Huff... Huff..." Milliana turned back, looking at Nel. She couldn't see even a hint of exhaustion on his face. Here she was, a specialist dedicated to stamina, exhausted to the point of visual disorientation, and this boy was running like it was nothing.

Unfathomable!

"You monster...!" A hint of shock coloured her otherwise impassive expression and reserved demeanor.

## Chapter 46: Shocking performances

Fae rushed over to Milliana, with a potion already prepared.

"You okay?" She asked, with a rarely visible hint of concern for her friend.

"...Yes." She squeezed out amidst her panting. "Just exhausted."

Fae turned to Nel who was still jogging, she could see palpable boredom in his demeanor. He hadn't broken the slightest bit of a sweat. It's clear this was nowhere near his limit.

('Just how many hours has it been?') Fae wondered. She wasn't surprised that Nel bested her in stamina, it was not her forte, but she didn't think the difference would be so drastic. Neither the second nor the third round hadn't been enough to push either of them to the limits of their stamina, so it hadn't struck her tenacious he was.

Rui and Kane were quite shocked at both their performances, but especially Nel's.

"Is such a thing even possible? Has he consumed an enhancing potion?" Rui pondered. He turned to Kane;

"Do you know him? Is he part of a Martial Family?" He asked, looking for a possible explanation.

Kane shook his head. "Never seen him before the Entrance Exam. He doesn't seem to be a Martial Apprentice with a stamina-oriented Martial Art either."

Rui nodded. Although he wasn't familiar with Apprentice-level techniques yet, it didn't seem like Nel was using some advanced technique that minimized consumption of energy like Milliana seemed to be, his running form was lazy and sloppy. This really seemed to be a matter of raw stamina.

"He's probably either consumed an enhancement potion like you suggest or..." Kane murmured.

"Or he was born with a body that surpasses human limits."

Rui's eyes widened. "Is that even possible."

Kane nodded. "I've heard of it, that's all."

Rui turned back to Nel, who had now been coaxed by Senior Tarrokov to get off the treadmill. It seems Nel's tenacity had surpassed the Martial Senior's patience. Not that it was a big deal, with the absurd stamina he showed.

Rui observed the Senior's reaction to Nel's performance. He seemed more exasperated than surprised or shocked.

('Guess even this ridiculous performance isn't a big deal to Martial Seniors.')

There was a small break once the stamina evaluation test ended. Rui and Kane chit-chatted and bantered while the contestants who passed after them recuperated with stamina potions. Once all the freshmen gathered having fully recovered. Senior Tarrokov spoke to them about the upcoming tests.

"The next part of the physical evaluation will be centered around muscular power. You'll have your weight measured before you perform a series of muscle-intensive activities with the training equipment in this facility." He explained. "Your performance will be weighted in regards to your weight, age and sex for the actual evaluation."

Rui nodded. It made sense to evaluate physical strength in regards to weight, age and sex, rather than measure muscular power in a vacuum. The former was a more reliable onlook into whether their muscular power was optimal or not. The latter was just worthless. In fact, on Earth the norm for empirical data included far more variables and parameters than just those three.

Hormonal levels, muscle mass to body mass ratio, bone density and other metabolic variables were accounted for when gathering data. Weight, age and sex were just the bare minimum.

The following tests went quickly and smoothly. The students were put through rigorous weight lifting exercises, with and without weights giving the evaluators a diverse dataset. The following tests of the Physical evaluation tested a variety of physical parameters and attributes like speed, agility, reaction time and reflexes, as well as flexibility and durability.

Within an hour, the physical evaluation ended.

"The next stage as mentioned prior, is the performative evaluation." Senior Tarrokov explained. "This stage has multiple tests entered around body-eye coordination, a relatively large attribute with many sub-attributes as well as other parameters like balance, spatial awareness, analysis and judgement etc."

Rui performed worse off in this stage than he did in the prior, relatively speaking. It couldn't be helped. He started out with a huge handicap of mismatched muscle-memory, which took many years to correct. If not for that he would probably have performed as good as Kane did.

('Maybe even better.') He sighed inwardly. All in all, his performance in the performative evaluation was unremarkable, his designated evaluator concluded.

That was, until they reached the analysis and judgement test.

...

"He's not even an Apprentice..." Senior Tarrokov murmured to himself with a surprised expression. He looked at Rui with a scrutinizing gaze.

"Uhm... This is the correct way to do it right?" Rui asked awkwardly.

The test multi-staged test that began with an IQ test, before moving onto more applied deduction evaluations. The freshmen were put in tests with certain conditions to be fulfilled in order to pass. However, the conditions were such that they could not be accomplished by physical or Martial Prowess. Be it capturing species of bats that were too agile to be captured unless the limitations and weaknesses of echo-location were appropriately exploited, using the behavioural tendencies of creatures to manipulate them in specified ways to fulfill the conditions, or deducing the location of required items from the surroundings.

All of these tests evaluated different aspects of analysis and judgement. This was a broad performative attribute could not be evaluated with a single test, after all.

However, Rui aced them all. He even passed the final stage, the only one that did. The final stage was an almost impossible test meant to ascertain the limits of even extremely intelligent students who passed all prior tests. The freshmen were each tossed into a stuffy room with booby traps that would launch projectiles on you, furthermore, the triggers for the trap was everything, every step you took triggered the projectiles. That alone was hellishly difficult, but the actual condition for victory was to kill bouncing slimes.

It was practically impossible.

"How did you...?" Kane asked, after he witnessed Rui's performance.

Rui glanced at him and shrugged. "I ignored the slime and tanked its damage initially, it was too difficult to try and brute-force, I instead paid attention to the booby traps. The projectiles of the trap weren't impossibly fast, I could probably take a step out of the way narrowly before they hit me. Yet I was unable to dodge them initially, they hit me even after I moved, almost as if they knew the direction I was moving in. The question was, how?" Rui asked them. Before explaining

"The possibility of a separate sensory and targeting system could be excluded, the traps were unable to account for three-dimensional motion, the success of ducking and jumping was oddly high, albeit not enough. This strongly denied the presence of a separate targeting system, it was much more likely that the targeting system was connected to the triggers." Rui deduced.

"Occam's Razor dictates that the simplest possibility was the likeliest, it was quite likely that the system extrapolated the direction of evasion through the direction made by connecting my steps on the ground with a line. Once I verified this, it was easier to avoid the traps, I could simply walk in a direction perpendicular to the direction drawn out by my steps. Once I grew comfortable with it, it was time to kill the slime. Using a combination of my own attack as well as manipulating the traps by stepping in a certain way together, I was able to hit the slime with the instated booby traps, took me a while though." Rui shrugged, ending his explanation.

Kane and others who were listening to his explanation stared at him with open jaws.

Kane turned to another student who was close to them with a confused expression.

"Did you understand?"

The poor boy shook his head.

#### Chapter 47: Interesting developments

It took a while for the people around him to overcome their incredulity. Most of them had felt hopeless in the face of the final test. Not only were the bouncing slimes of a much higher grade than those of the Entrance Exam because the average freshman was far more capable than the average applicant, but the traps in combination were too overwhelming to be overcome with speed and power, or even technique. It was a test only those at the pinnacle of the Martial Apprentice Realm could overcome, or those with high enough analysis and judgement to deduce the only possible strategy that could help them overcome the test.

The tactical intelligence test was the final test in the performative evaluation stage. With it, the Evaluation Exam had ended. What surprised Rui was how quickly the results came and their dormitories were set. The freshmen all received a key and directions to their dorm rooms.

('Room number 256 huh? And I have a roommate.') This wasn't surprise as this was covered by the information booklet. He looked at the name.

('Cara Mullion.')

He was surprised that the Academy put male and female students together in the same room. Were they not afraid of putting a bunch of hormonal teenagers in the same room as the opposite sex?

('No, if something that simple can distract them, they probably would not have passed the first stage. And if it does, then what chance do they have to become a Martial Squire?')

He even suspected the Academy used this to evaluate the work ethic and motivation of students.

Once he reached his room, he immediately dropped his bag and dived into a bed. The room was decently spacious. Its lavishness and extravagance were purposely reduced significantly. The Martial Academy was not a vacation at a paradise. The rooms were designed modestly to prevent students from developing the wrong mindset.

Still, the rooms were spacious enough for a decent living standard. Each room was divided into two sections by a wall connected by a spacious opening, each side had a decently big bed, a table with two chairs, a shelf, a cupboard with drawers, and enough windows for healthy air circulation and sunlight. The décor was, once again, sparse.

Just as he scrutinized the room. A girl with short brown hair walked in, dropping a suitcase on her side as she made eye-contact with Rui.

"You must be Cara." Rui smiled warmly, trying to start off on a good note for his roommate. "I'm Rui Quarrier, nice to meet you."

She glanced at him, curtly nodding before going about her business.

('...Not one of many words I see.') He noted, before minding his own business, if she didn't want to build a relationship, he was perfectly fine with that. He laid his belongings in the room before heading to the toilet to take a bath and freshen up. Potions could restore stamina, but they did not get rid of sweat and dust.

Later that day, he decided to meet up with Kane to explore the Academy, he didn't bother going with a guide, he'd memorized the general layout and he was sure Kane remembered every detail. It was much more without a stranger butting in.

('I believe it was just around the corner here...') as he peeked into a corridor, looking for the Apprentice dormitory. When suddenly;

"What the FUCK did you say?"

Rui jerked around towards the source of the commotion.

He saw a tall burly boy holding, to his surprise, Nel by the collar. The boy was about to throw a punch at Nel when a heavy presence suddenly put pressure on them.

"Aggressing violence is against the rules." An even bigger man caught the punch with two fingers.

('A Martial Squire.') Rui's eyes twinkled. This presence wasn't as heavy as Senior Tarrokov's, but the Squire expressed cold disregard for the boy. It was more distressing than senior Tarrokov's who limited his impact on the students to not affect their performance.

"He insulted my mother!" The boy complained despite his fear.

"Speech is not regulated by the rules. You can say anything to each other, however you may not escalate conflicts to violence." the Squire insisted, putting even more pressure on the hapless boy.

Nel on the other hand disregarded the pressure as his entire face warped into a provocative contemptuous sneer at the boy, enraging him even further

('Jesus that expression is so nasty, no wonder that boy couldn't resist the urge to punch him') Rui mused, laughing inwardly. Nel was over the top but Rui found his antics incredibly amusing.

('He's an even bigger shit-stirrer than Fae is. Good lord I hope those two don't run into each other. That's chaos that this world is not ready to withstand.')

He could tell Nel had provoked that boy on purpose. Judging from what that boy said, it was likely that Nel said something incredibly nasty about his mother, provoking him to grab him by the collar and launch an attack so that the Martial Squire who was on patrol duty would intervene and reprimand him.

('So he isn't just an idiot. He clearly knows what he's doing and he's good at it. That's scary.') Rui shook his head helplessly, resolving to stay away from the kid, leaving to look for the Apprentice dormitory.

"You wanna fight?" Nel asked after the Squire had left, throwing a wide grin at the furious boy. "Then challenge me officially if you have the balls. We can settle whether your cow of a mother should have aborted you or not." He shrugged exaggeratedly.

Rui stopped as his ears pricked, turning around to look at the scene.

The Martial Academy penalized violence, but did have a system where students could challenge each other and fight in a more controlled setting. The Martial Academy wasn't stupid. Gathering students who were resolved to walk the Martial Path in one place and telling them not to fight was unrealistic. These kids no doubt had strong personalities and egos, it was just unhealthy and uncondusive to their interests to repress physical conflicts completely, so they left means by which it could be monitored and controlled so that it didn't escalate.

"DEAL." The boy screeched, he was so angry he couldn't even articulate anything else.

('This is interesting...') Rui grinned.

#### Chapter 48: Tour

"So you're telling me Nel provoked a guy into challenging him?" Kane asked curiously.

"Yeah, I was looking for the Apprentice dormitory and coincidentally ran into them." Rui explained.

Soon after the commotion Nel caused, Rui had managed to find Kane in the Apprentice dormitory. He told Kane about duel he'd heard issued on his way.

"Do you know who the other guy was? What about the details?" Kane asked.

"Nah." Rui shook his head. "They left before I could learn any of that."

"Hm, well we can find out anyway."

"How so?" Rui asked curiously.

"Official duels need to be registered at least one day prior. If they've already registered it, it will be added to the time table of the Apprentice sparring facility." Kane explained.

"That's convenient." Rui nodded. As expected of the Academy expert. "Let's look at it while we visit the sparring facility in our tour."

"Sure thing."

They bantered a bit, before setting out.

The Academy was truly vast. It was comparable to a small town. Rui and Kane could spend the whole day and would still not be able to tour it in its entirety. Still, they intended to cover as much ground as they could.

They set out with the information guidebooks the Academy had provided them in the investiture ceremony, mapping out a quick touring route.

The Academy grouped its facilities and other infrastructure in regards to their utility to the students. The outermost layer was dedicated to students in the Foundational and Exploration Stages of the academic curriculum. The inner layer was dedicated to Martial Apprentices.

Unfortunately, Rui discovered that students like him, colloquially referred to as novices were not allowed into a majority of the facilities of the inner section.

"They sure are harsh." Rui sighed as a guard denied him access into a training facility in the inner section. Kane hadn't been aware of this since the information wasn't covered in the guidebook for some reason.

"They have a strong lockdown on information that doesn't need to be disclosed." Kane said. "I'm already a Martial Apprentice and I still don't know the conditions needed to become a Martial Squire."

"Shame. Well, let's stick to exploring the outer section." Rui resigned.

The outer section was much bigger than the inner section. After all, there a lot of novices like Ves, far more so than the number of Martial Apprentices. Thus, the resources and space dedicated to nurturing them was far greater than the those dedicated to Martial Apprentices.

Rui and Kane first ran into a physical training wing of the outer section. The physical training wing had a huge number of facilities dedicated to Martial body-building. The sheer variety in the training equipment, regimes and exercises was truly amazing. It surpassed even what Kane had access to when he was in the Foundational Stage.

"Woah..." Kane murmured as they inspected the area. "As expected of the Academy."

Rui nodded. He wouldn't be surprised if he was told that the facility was had targeted training for every single muscle and bone in the human body. In fact, that probably was the case.

The wing was partially populated with students working out. What Rui noticed quickly however, was that these students weren't part of the freshmen batch that he was part of. They were their seniors who had joined at least a year prior, if not more.

They were engaged in various training regimes or exercises in various small groups. Furthermore, each group was monitored by a supervisor.

"They're not Martial Artists though." Kane noted, there presence was that of ordinary humans.

"The Academy would not bother wasting the time of Martial Squires on novices who haven't even crossed the foundational stage." Rui shook his head. It didn't take a genius to figure that out. Martial Squires made the bulk of the Martial force of any nation. They were too precious to be wasted supervising a bunch of brats who hadn't even mastered the basics of basics. Ultimately, this was a low-skilled, low-output occupation that was better done by less important personnel

"It's quite likely the Apprentice training facilities will be overseen by Martial Squires and Martial Seniors." Rui mused, a hint of envy colouring his tone.

Kane shrugged. He merely pointed a curiosity. He had been mentored by a retired Martial Master. Being mentored by Squires or Seniors wasn't exciting.

On extremely rare occasions, his father had personally overlooked his training. But that wasn't a pleasant memory for him, instead it was even the driving force for his desire to escape his home and join the Academy.

They shrugged and moved on to the performative training wing. Which was much bigger in comparison to the facility prior. It was also much more interesting to Rui. There were numerous sections dedicated to different performative attributes. A lot of them resembled things he'd see in Chinese martial arts movies.

"Interesting stuff." Rui murmured as they took in a balance training facility. Even performative attributes like balance didn't seem to have a single facility dedicated to it. Instead, there were multiple facilities dedicated to different aspects of balance.

"This one should be related to kinetic balance." Rui mused to himself. There was a difference between maintaining balance during motion, and maintaining balance while still. Although correlated, these two were not the same. It was possible to have good static balance, while having bad dynamic and kinetic balance, and vice versa. Thus, it became necessary to treat balance as a multi-varied equation rather than a singular attribute where training and improvement was concerned.

Body-eye coordination training was even vaster than balance, though this was within Rui's expectations. At least balance could be cleanly divided into only a handful different types. Body-eye coordination, however was much more complicated. In theory, every muscle's coordination with the brain could be treated separately, creating a huge number of different subdivisions within body-eye coordination. This reflected in the sheer variety of training regimes and exercises that students were put through!

"Amazing!" Rui couldn't contain his excitement. This was what he wanted! This was what he longed for! The sheer amount of resources and funds that the Academy would be investing in Rui far surpassed what he could do by himself. This was why he had joined the Academy.

"I can't wait to begin training!" He exclaimed.

## Chapter 49: Core building

Kane wasn't nearly as enthusiastic as Rui was about the training facilities. Although his father couldn't singlehandedly match the Academy, the economic and political capital of a Martial Sage could not be underestimated. Although the scale of the infrastructure and facilities of the Martial Academy was much bigger than what he was accustomed to, the quality of the training was not inferior.

Instead, what truly excited Kane was the very prospect of living independently from his family. Not being under the shadow of his father, not being under the pressuring gaze of his mother, the hateful envious eyes of his siblings, step-siblings and step-parents was far more invigorating and delightful than he had ever imagined. He was finally free!

This was in sharp contrast to Rui, who still felt a tinge of sadness leaving his family. Furthermore, Rui himself was not that excited living with a roommate, this was an all-too-common phenomenon in his previous life.

"Who's your roommate?" Rui asked as they returned from their tour.

"Martial Apprentices have their own lodgings." Kane replied. "So I live alone. Not that I'm complaining. Being truly alone feels better than I ever imagined."

Rui smiled as he listened to Kane extoll the greatness of the Apprentice dormitories.

Before long, they bid each other good evening and went their separate ways. The day was long but Rui was truly tired mentally, even if not physically. He bade Cara goodnight only to, once again, receive a curt nod in response, before decking himself into his bed and falling asleep.

The next day was an exciting one. He excitedly wore the Academy uniform provided to novices like him before heading to the general assembly hall. There were several important things due to happen today. The first was the personalized and customized training curriculum due to be handed out to all novices. This was the main purpose of the Evaluation Exam. To detect the strengths and weaknesses of freshmen and to create a training program for each one of them designed to eliminate their weaknesses and secondarily to bolster their strengths, to create a strong foundation for their Martial Path.

Rui quickly head to the assembly hall and took his place among the gathered students, organized in multiple lines. Once the supervisors confirmed that all the students had gathered, they began calling out

names of the students gathered one by one, before handing out small booklets to each student. These booklets contained all the details relevant to their training curriculum. Rui gazed at this little book with intense reverence.

"These will dictate your training regimes of the Foundational Stage of your curriculum. These booklets contain the training regimes you will be subjected to as well as the location and time period for each regime. Coordinate with Academy information guidebook all of you possess and ensure you're never late. Tardiness will not be tolerated and will be punished. Furthermore..." The supervisor continued rattling out instructions and guidelines before dismissing the students.

"...The Foundational Stage is the most important part of your Martial Paths. It serves as the foundation upon which everything else is built. I hope each and every one of you will sincerely dedicate yourselves to it. With that said, you're dismissed." He nodded before leaving the facility.

Rui quickly went through his training regime. As much as he wanted to sit down and pour through every detail of his training curriculum guide, he noticed that he had a training session immediately.

"Core building huh?" Rui nodded. "An important aspect of Martial Art, indeed."

He quickly scurried over to the physical training section.

Inside, many freshmen had gathered already. And the chief supervisor was keeping a close eye on the wall clock.

"Alright, it's time. Form lines and stand in attention." He instructed.

They quickly adhered to his instructions as he continued.

"Core building is an important part of Martial Art. For those who aren't aware, the 'core' refers to the set of muscles in you mid and lower abdomen." He explained, patting his gut and lower back. "There isn't a single Martial Art in existence that can function without the core, it is absolutely vital. Thus, core building is considered to be one of the most important aspects of physical training."

He provided all the students with small pamphlets that provided more detailed information on the core muscles. Of course, Rui didn't bother delving much into it. With his background and work, he probably knew more about the core muscles of the human body than anybody else in the entirety of the whole planet.

"And with that said, we'll begin right away. We'll start with more elementary and static exercises such as plank and bridge variations before moving onto simpler dynamic exercises like deadbugs and sit-ups. Once that's done, we'll begin with exercises that require equipment. Pallof Presses, landmine rotations, Renegade Rows, pikes and ab-rollouts, also..." He rattled out more exercises and details of the sets, durations and methodology.

Rui immediately began following his instructions diligently. Though inwardly, he had some gripes about the training regime.

('This isn't the most optimal means of training, though it's not bad.') Back on Earth, research had already shown that the relentless 'no pain no gain' training regimes were not the most optimal and efficient means making gains, it was a somewhat outdated albeit popular means of training. At the very least, serious athletes would never train such a haphazard way. It was much more efficient to first take detailed data of the subject's metabolic parameters before carefully designing a training regime that would yield the maximum number of gains for a certain amount of effort.

He put aside those thoughts while he began his planks. These, like most exercises, needed focus and concentration. It was inefficient to let your mind wander while exercising and training, not to mention dangerous. Furthermore, thinking about whether it was optimal or not was useless. After all, he couldn't change his training regime. He was merely a novice in the Foundational Stage, he was expected to adhere to all instructions provided by the Academy.

## Chapter 50: Unfathomable

The next several hours were filled with grueling effort. With only thirty-second break between exercises, Rui was truly pushed to his limits. Core building required strong perseverance, there was no other field of training that targeted as many muscles simultaneously as core building did.

Furthermore, the supervisors were unforgivingly relentless and brutal in their pushing, the presence of healing and energy potions destroyed all excuses that students attempted to hide behind. It was hellish.

Yet, among all of them, only one of them had a slight tinge of ecstasy on his face.

('This is great. Although I compensated as much as I could with resourcefulness and clever tricks, you can't really beat the real deal. The potions alone make me vastly more productive than I could have been by myself.')

He enthusiastically engaged in the exercises prescribed by the supervisors. His schedule was packed with exercises, he had only a bit of free time for meals, and a few hours to himself by the end of the day.

He only got to take a good look at his curriculum and evaluation during lunch, he was too busy prior.

('As expected, a significant majority of my training is centered around my physical performative attributes.')

He mused to himself.

His physical attributes were rather impressive, well above average for his age. He was quite close to Kane as far as raw statistics were concerned. Although Kane had far superior training and growing resources. Rui largely compensated for that with a lifetime of training, and much better training methodology.

His physical performative attributes like balance, body-eye coordination and spatial awareness weren't as good, if it weren't for his mismatched muscle memory he might have been as good as Kane even in that regard, but alas. He couldn't have his cake and eat it.

However, his mental performative attributes like analysis, judgement and tactical ingenuity were absurd by the Martial Academy standards. Unbeknownst to him, his performance in this attribute was the single greatest performance in the century long history of the Martial Academy. His IQ score was the highest ever recorded in their database, and he was the only one to have ever passed the final test of the intelligence evaluation test. Furthermore, he completed ridiculously quickly than the Academy thought possible for a thirteen-year-old novice.

Geniuses like Nel born with a godly body were truly rare, but not unheard of. Every decade tended to have someone with Nel's physical prowess. The Academy was quite impressed, but it still fell within their predictions. However, Rui broke their model for the limits of the human mind

In their eyes, his mind was unfathomable. And it had reflected in his curriculum. He was the only student in the history of the Academy to not be given even the slightest bit of mental performative training. He only had a monthly evaluation of his intelligence, and even this was a bit outside of their general policy. The Academy wanted to gather more data on this unheard-of phenomenon. It had generated a lot of interest and excitement within many wings of the Academy.

Rui, however, was blissfully unaware of the shock his performance had generated. He lacked context and vital information. Furthermore, he lacked an outsider perspective on himself. He was no doubt aware of his performance being high, even highest among the freshmen who had participated. However, that was as far he thought it went. He thought he was just another yearly topper of the mental performative attribute evaluation, every year had one, so not too shocking.

('The rest of my day is centered around performative training.') Rui nodded. He was not dismayed by this. He needed physical performative training badly. Unlike physical training, it was much more difficult to train physical performative attributes without training resources. The training for these parameters were much more complicated and nuanced.

He could finally erase his greatest weakness.

"Hey man." Kane interrupted his reverie. "Sorry for being late."

"No problem." Rui responded. "Got caught up in exploring the Martial Apprentice library?"

Unlike him, Kane was not mandated to engage in training. He spent his days browsing the Martial Academy's techniques looking for techniques study, and potentially add to his Martial Art.

Kane nodded. "The library of techniques is far, far larger than what my household provided to me when I became a Martial Apprentice. There tons of amazing techniques."

"That sounds incredible." Rui replied with a hint of envy. He couldn't wait to become a Martial Apprentice. The more Kane extolled his experience, the stronger Rui's hunger to experience it himself grew.

"As much as I'd tell you all about the techniques I came across in detail, I can't." Kane told him with an apologetic demeanor. "I had to sign an oath that I wouldn't disclose this knowledge to anybody else during my stay in the Academy."

Rui sighed; he had anticipated this would be the case after having witnessed the Academy's propensity to control information. He would never learn anything the Academy deemed unnecessary for him to know.

"The only way to learn more, is to grow stronger, huh?" Rui murmured to himself.

"Hm?"

"Ah, nothing, just thinking about what you told me."

"Hm, by the way, are you ready for today?" Kane grinned.

"Today?"

"Yeah, Nel's duel with Felix is today."

Rui had almost forgotten about the duel, he had been so caught up in his own matters, he'd filtered out of everything external away. They had discovered the time and location of the duel during their tour the day before. The boy who'd challenged Nel was Felix Harakel, someone Kane recognized. His mother was a retired Martial Master.

Learning that had provided more context to the conflict he'd come across yesterday. His mother was likely a source of pride to him, whereas her retirement might have been a touchy subject to him. Nel had viciously attacked Felix on his possible insecurities with nasty, but successfully provocative insults, resulting in that violent backlash of a reaction.

"Yeah, I'm definitely looking forward to it." Rui couldn't wait to see Nel in action.