

## Martial Unity 51

### Chapter 51: Rational or not

"Fuuuu...." Rui exhaled as he raised his hands and crouched his body, bending his knees. At a distance there were numerous cylindrical tubes stacked parallelly pointed at him. This was part of the hand-eye coordination training he was subject to.

BANG BANG BANG

The machine shot three balls at Rui. He swiftly launched his hands reaching for the balls, hoping to catch some of them.

"You missed! Repeat!" His supervisor instructed sternly. Rui crouched into a ready position once again. Heightening his senses and putting his body on edge.

BANG BANG BANG

He'd already given up on trying to catch all three of them, it was clearly too much for him. For now, he tried catching just one of them. It was only after diverting his attention on one of the balls, that he finally succeeded in catching it, much to his delight.

"Better." His instructor nodded. "Focus on what you can do, with enough practice and hardwork, you'll grow to be able to do more."

"Yes sir." Rui nodded.

He found the body-eye coordination training the hardest. He was undoubtedly the worst among all the novices. The combination of him being the youngest and the most challenged in this regard made his performance in contrast to his peers.

If it had been any other student his age with his performance, this most certainly would have affected them negatively, but Rui took it in stride. He could feel as though he'd grown stronger, this feeling triggered euphoria, which only pushed him to be train even more intensely.

Of course, this was merely a sensation, not real. It was impossible for a novice to grow that fast. Rui estimated in ninety days' time, he would be able to observe significant improvements.

"Once again." His instructor instructed. Rui nodded, getting into his stance, he was determined to perform just a bit better than before, slow and steady won the race.

The rest of the day was a series of training sessions one after another, Rui jumped around different types body-eye coordination training sessions, until he received a break at the end of the day.

"Phew" Rui sighed as he refreshed himself with a bath washing away the sweat and dirt that a whole day worth of training had accumulated. He quickly dried himself up before putting on some casual clothing. He intended to hang out with Kane and watch the duel between Nel and Felix.

('Hm?') Rui's eyes spotted Cara fiddling with what looked like an insignia, as he headed to the door, which she promptly hid, with a sharp look directed at Rui.

Rui ignored her gaze with a mild sigh.

('As reserved as ever, I see.') He shrugged inwardly. He would not bother interacting with someone who clearly had a problem with social interaction.

He quickly headed to the Apprentice dormitory, and tagged Kane along to the Apprentice sparring center.

"I'm fortunate to be able to witness this match at all." Rui shook his head.

"True." Kane nodded. "If both of them were Martial Apprentices, you would likely have not been here for this."

Martial Apprentices had a lot of freedom in the Academy, meaning they could register duel for any time of the day they wanted. Rui only had a small window of freedom every day where he could travel to the

Apprentice sparring facility to witness duels, he would miss all duels that didn't happen during his break period.

The reason he was able to catch the duel between Nel and Felix wasn't because of luck. But because one of the two of them was the same as him; a novice student.

This wasn't unusual. What surprised Rui was that that student was not Felix, the novice student was Nel!

"I was really surprised to learn that Nel wasn't a Martial Apprentice." Rui murmured.

"Yeah, but the condition to become a Martial Apprentice isn't related to combat prowess. It's related to your Martial foundation and your Martial Path." Kane explained. "Nel is extremely formidable, but not because of his Martial Prowess; his skill and technique. Rather, his power comes from his ridiculous physical prowess."

Rui nodded, he'd seen Nel in several performative training sessions, much to his and everyone else's shock.

"If he's this strong without even being a Martial Apprentice..." Rui pondered.

"Then he'll probably be the strongest Martial Apprentice when he does become one." Kane completed.

"We'll be able to learn more about his combat prowess in this duel." Rui noted. "Do you know how strong Felix is?"

"Yeah, I didn't know he'd become a Martial Apprentice, to be honest." Kane admitted. "We'd met six months ago, back when I'd just turned into a Martial Apprentice, and he was still in the Exploration Stage back then."

"So, he must have turned into an Apprentice somewhat recently." Rui concluded. "Furthermore, if you only knew him in his Exploration Stage, then he hadn't discovered his Martial Path back then, correct?"

Kane nodded. "Yeah, I'm rather curious about what his Martial Art is about."

They made their way to the Apprentice sparring center bantering lightly.

They immediately noticed a huge crowd once they reached the facility.

Kane whistled "That's a lot of people."

"It is the first duel of our batch, after all. Also, it's a duel with the novice topper, and a Martial Apprentice. It would be weird if it didn't gather this kind of interest."

Kane nodded with an intrigued expression. He was quite curious about the fight himself. Just then;

"My, the two of you are here as well." A voice said to them

Kane's enthuse immediately fell, recognizing that voice instantly. Rui sighed as well.

"Yeah." He responded lightly.

"Any thoughts on who's going to win?" Fae asked them both, particularly Kane, since they both were acquaintances of Felix.

Kane shrugged, resigned that she wasn't going anywhere soon. "Unless Felix experienced a massive growth spike, he probably can't win."

Fae nodded. "But he challenged Nel despite observing his performance in the Entrance Exam and Evaluation Exam, that likely means he's confident to some degree."

"It all depends on how rational he was when he challenged Nel." Rui shook his head in response. "I was there when it happened, trust me, the guy looked like he was about burst a vein."

"Hmm..." Fae turned to the sparring ring. "Then we'll just have to see how much of his decision was rational and how much was emotional, I guess."

## Chapter 52: Conflict

"Heh, you didn't chicken out." Nel grinned.

"I'm going to beat you to a pulp." Felix retorted with suppressed anger.

"Put your money where your mouth is, motherfucker." Nel emphasized the barb.

Felix gritted his teeth, choosing to remain silent.

A referee soon had both fighters take their positions, bow and take their stance.

"Interesting..." Rui murmured as he saw Felix's stance. Felix had brought his left leg forward and raised hands to shoulder height, squatting low until his head dipped to chest level.

"He's a wrestler." Rui immediately concluded. This was a very common wrestling stance, for good reason too. This stance allowed wrestlers to launch takedowns and shoots to close the distance and turn it into a full-contact grappling match. The squat allowed them to rush at their opponent's lower abdomen, this was known as a shoot, and the arms were positioned to be able to grab their opponents to prevent them from opening up distance or maintain their balance.

Fae nodded. "If he succeeds in turning the fight into a full contact fight, then he might win."

Nel's stance was a bit strange, he squatted just a bit and left his arms loose, dangling above the ground. His demeanor was relaxed, he had an expression of lazy confidence.

"Ready... And start!" The referee began the match.

Immediately Felix leapt at Nel, with his arms open; a common shoot maneuver. Just as Felix was about to grab the stationary Nel, he jumped and landed on Felix's head, balancing on one foot nonchalantly, hands in his pocket.

Felix immediately lashed at Nel's legs, hoping to throw him down, but not before Nel effortlessly summersaulted off landing behind him. The force of that maneuver had pushed Felix to his knees, while Nel glanced at him with lazy boredom.

"Is that the best you could do?" He yawned.

Felix snarled in rage throwing all his momentum into a fast, powerful lunge. To his surprise, he actually caught Nel with ease, the latter had not moved. Merely staring him in the eye with boredom.

('Letting me get a hold on you? I'll make you regret your arrogance.')

Felix vowed, humiliated. He had decided to go all-out. He'd decided to use the strongest Apprentice level finisher move he'd learnt thus far.

The Reverse Whip.

He grabbed Nel from the back, lifted his body and swung him all the way behind his back, landing Nel on his head.

BOOM

A huge noise was born from the impact, there was even a gust of wind with the sheer amount of power Felix had generated.

('That was clean! I got him!') Felix was ecstatic.

The Reverse Whip was a German Suplex, however its power was greatly amplified. The technique directed, accumulated and converged power from every muscle in the body. It was quite similar to Outer Convergence; the technique that Fae had used against Rui. The same principle, different application.

Felix got up with an elated expression, he had defended his mother's honour!

"Not bad... That hurt way more than I expected, you know." Felix froze as a voice behind said.

('There's no way...') He turned around with fear in his eyes.

Nel cracked his neck, getting up.

"Yeah..." He continued. "You're way fucking better than I thought you'd be, not gonna lie."

He got back into his loose squat stance. "Since you showed me that awesome move, it's only fair that I return that favour" He grinned, growing more excited. "Wouldn't you agree.?"

Felix stared at him with a horrified expression. "You-!"

BAM

One moment Nel was three meters away from Felix. The next moment his arm had already burrowed itself in Felix's abdomen, contorting his guts.

"Fast!" Kane exclaimed. He could achieve that speed himself, but only after combining Parallel Walk and a few other Apprentice level techniques. Nel on the other hand just ran to Felix without using any techniques.

Felix crumbled like a broken puppet, unable to breathe. Nel had struck his diaphragm, momentarily incapacitating him. He gasped for air like a fish out of water, a trail of blood trickling out of his mouth amidst the saliva.

Nel sighed, his demeanor grew lethargic and he lost all his excitement at the sight. "We were having so much fun. You just had to go and cut it short, oh well."

He shrugged, before throwing a glance at the dumbstruck referee, who immediately ended the match upon the prompt.

Nel walked out of the ring, ignoring the crowd that split to make way for him, heading to the door.

"Ah... You." He recognized Fae. "You're the one from the Entrance Exam, you were awesome." His eyes lit up through his long messy silvery hair. "You wanna continue what we couldn't back then?"

"My, enthusiastic aren't you?" Fae giggled. "I was free back then. I don't have the time to play around with yet another cocky brat." she said, playfully rubbing Kane's green hair, which Kane promptly swatted off, glaring at her.

Nel stared at her listlessly, meeting Kane's and Rui's eyes before retorting. "Hmph, you scared bitch?"

"Bold words from a boy who hasn't even reached Martial Apprentice." She returned his hostility. "You're not worth my time anymore, I'm the heir of the Dullahan Family, my time is more important than you realize." Her eyes and smile turned icier by the second.

The tension was high.

"If you're that busy, then stop harassing us every time you see us!" Kane grumbled, causing Fae to burst into laughter

Nel watched the two bickering expressionlessly, before leaving wordlessly. "You and I will fight, whether you like it or not." Before leaving the facility

Rui had been silent the entire time, staring off into space with an intense expression.

"He's a jerk, isn't he?" Kane poked at him.

Rui didn't respond.

"...You good bro?" Kane jabbed him in the ribs.

"Ow! What is your problem dude?" Rui jerked out of his reverie, glaring at Kane.

"Are you thinking about what Nel said?" He asked, probing Rui.

"What did Nel say?"

"..." Kane stared at him.

"Wait a second." Rui turned towards the ring in confusion. "Felix and Nel were just on the ring a moment ago! Where did they go?"

"..."

"Was that also an Apprentice level technique? The fight was amazing, but this is even moreso!" Rui's expression intensified.

"Were you zoned out this whole time thinking about the fight?" Fae asked hesitatingly.

"Forget about him, he's a weirdo." Kane shook his head.

"Hey, that's mean." Rui protested. "I was just thinking about it for half a second!"

Kane facepalmed himself while Fae burst out laughing.

"What just happened?" Rui murmured at that scene, scratching his head.

### Chapter 53: Potion Prodigy

"Hm...?" The medical supervisor squinted her eyes as she glanced at the medical report in front of her.

"Uh... Is there a problem doctor?" Rui asked with a hint of anxiety, seated on the other side of the table. The doctor's expression was not reassuring.

It had been three days since the duel between Nel and Felix. Life had gone about as one were to expect since then. As soon as the duel ended, Rui returned to training neglecting sleep thanks to the effects of the mental rejuvenation potions; potions that rejuvenated the psyche the way eight hours of sleep did.

The administration of the potion as well as the monitoring of the student's condition was an extremely important duty that came along with it, and it was a duty that the medical department fulfilled.

Overdosing on rejuvenation potions could lead to brain damage and induced mental disorders, it could potentially be fatal, and the Academy had set up an extremely strict protocol system to ensure that it did not inadvertently cripple their students, that would be a catastrophe.

The medical department was to conduct medical tests to decide whether students were fit to consume rejuvenation potions, as well as the quantity and potency.

Rui had just completed one of the daily routine of tests and was currently present before a designated doctor who was evaluating them.

She ignored Rui's question and flipped back and forth between the pages in confusion, before finally looking up to Rui.

"You have consumed three rejuvenation potions, one per day, continuously, correct?"

"Yes"

She glanced back at the data with even greater confusion, before shaking her head. "I'm afraid there's an error in the tests. You'll have to redo the medical tests immediately."

Rui's apprehension increased upon hearing that, he asked cautiously. "Is there an issue with my health, doctor?"

"No not an issue with you, it's just that the data suggests that you're fit to consume more potions successively. However, it is a well-established medical fact that thirteen-year-olds cannot consume three potions to skip sleep three times without detrimental and severe symptoms. The purpose of these daily tests is to verify the limits of each student based on their individual medical results, so that we can ensure they don't go over these limits."

She explained as she wrote up the test prescriptions on her prescription bills.

Rui nodded before repeating himself. "So does it say I'm fine, or not fine?"

"The results indicate that you can go on without sleep for a few more days with a few more rejuvenation potions, however, this is a medical impossibility." She shook her head. "It's quite likely that a human error was made somewhere in the medical or documentation process or just a false positive. It would be dangerous to prescribe another rejuvenation potion to you, since this data is clearly false. A thirteen-year-old's subconscious mind is too underdeveloped and immature to possibly withstand more without severe backlash."

Rui's eyes widened as a realization dawned him. Under normal circumstances, this was a very reasonable analysis on her part. Mistakes and errors were not uncommon when it came to medical tests even on Earth, it was medical practice to re-prescribe tests when an unlikely and improbable result occurred, just to be safe.

However, he had another explanation.

('What if... The reason I can consume more potions than normal thirteen-year-olds is because my subconscious mind is not that of a thirteen-year-old, but that of a seventy-two-year-old?') He pondered in wonder.

The implications were massive. It meant that he could train for far longer than his peers. He would have no need for sleep, and could spend most of his life in the Academy training.

His rate of growth would skyrocket compared to his peers!

He could train day and night for many times longer than they could!

Rui grew incredibly excited at that thought, but this was just speculation, he had no proof, he didn't want to get too ahead of yourself.

He enthusiastically urged the doctor to schedule the test to occur as soon as possible, much to her surprise. Thankfully the Academy was quick and efficient, within an hour, the doctor had the results of the new tests in her hands.

"What..." She ran her eyes over the report, flummoxed, glancing up at Rui once in a while.

"Are you feeling okay after three days of rejuvenating potions?" She asked him after a while of silence.

"I'm feeling fine doctor."

She sighed, putting the documents on her table.

"Alright then, as per protocol, you'll be assigned the required amount of dosage."

"So that means I'm truly able to go on for longer than other my age?"

She nodded reluctantly.

"I don't really understand how, but aberrations are not unheard of though this is new, it seems your subconscious mind is strong beyond its age. Quite odd." She looked at him curiously.

"Haha, I wonder why."

Inwardly Rui was joyful beyond words. The greater the number of mental rejuvenation potions he could take implied the greater the number of hours he could train every week. He was almost seven times as old as a thirteen-year-old, if the time period was linearly dependent on mental age, then his night-time training could also be almost seven times as much! He intended to go all-out with training with the help of these potions.

"Just how much faster am I going to stronger?" He wondered with giddy ecstasy. In the short term, it would not be too impactful, after a longer amount of time, the accumulated extra time would be substantial!

Rui's heart began pumping madly as he thought of catching up to Kane sooner than he had initially hoped to. Maybe even before they graduate the Academy! The head start Kane had on him would naturally grow less and less meaningful and impactful over time. But with the help of the potions, he could accelerate the process.

His heart began pumping wildly as he felt the urge to dedicate every ounce of his time awake to training and growing stronger.

('Just you wait...I'm going to grow stronger unlike anything you guys have ever seen!') He inwardly declared.

#### Chapter 54: Be water

Three months had passed since the duel between Nel and Felix. Rui had already mostly transitioned into basic Martial Art practice from physical and performative training. The Martial Path could be likened to building a big tower. A tall tower required extremely strong foundations, otherwise it would crumble. In this case, the tower had not one, but two layers of foundations. The first was the physical foundation, this was honing and tempering the body so that it became fit to perform Martial Art optimally. This was the training that Rui had undergone since the Academy began.

The second was the Martial Foundation, every Martial Artist had to learn the basics of all fields. Even a pure striker Martial Artist had to learn the basics of grappling and wrestling, even a pure wrestler had to learn striking. This was to give them basic experience in all forms of conventional combat. After all, you never get to choose your opponent when you're in the field completing a Martial mission. The Martial Foundation allowed Martial Artists to gain bare basic proficiency in all fields.

Only after mastering these two fields could the process of constructing and building one's own Martial Art begin.

Normally, reaching this stage would take years, just the physical training alone would take a year. But recently, rumors and tales of a boy who was already into the Martial Foundation stage had spread through the Academy. It was said that the boy was a demon. He would train for many, many days continuously with only shortest of mandatory breaks halting his training.

This absurd training schedule allowed him to soar through what would otherwise be a long arduous process. Allowing him to accomplish progress at close to record-breaking speeds.

The reasons for Rui completing the physical training stage were numerous, but the two largest contributing factors was the foundation he had already built. He had begun honing his body from an extremely young age although with severely lowered intensity. He had already formed a lot of the physical foundation needed, furthermore his growth speed spiked astronomically thanks to rejuvenation and healing potions, putting his productivity at levels he never even imagined possible.

He had also decided to take the leeway in training in the most efficient way possible in his extra time as much as he could.

Rui breathed in deeply, taking a stance. He nodded at his opponent, a student he was paired up against. Sparring sessions were a regular for students who had reached the Martial Foundation stage. It was the best way to hone what they had learnt, and know how to apply it. The sparring training system was rather simple, half of the students in the sparring training would enter a ring and would be challenged be assigned to fight other students, they would remain on the mat and constantly fight until they lost, when they would then be replayed by the student who just defeated them.

The boy took a simple guarded stance, shifting about before launching himself at Rui, before throwing a kick from mid-range. The kick was rather quick and sharp, which made it harder to exploit. However, to his surprise; Rui closed the distance, and caught his thigh in an arm lock, before driving forward and pushing the boy off-balance, throwing him off his one leg.

BAM

Rui mercilessly threw a full-powered kick to the boy's chin while he was down, knocking him out.

In his previous life, this would be dangerous and unacceptable for a spar. However, his instructors encouraged them to go all-out; the presence of healing potions eliminated all risks. The Martial Academy wanted its students to experience real, full-on unrestricted combat. Not some highly safe and restricted exchange. The Martial Academy was grooming its students to one day fight with their lives on the line, with a real possibility of death, when they became Martial Squires. In order to shape up, competent Martial Artists, they would need to get used to the feeling of pain, battering, exhaustion. Only after experiencing things like these that they would regularly experience in the field, would they not falter in the field due to inexperience.

Rui exhaled as the paramedics of a medical team quickly moved the unconscious boy off the platform, preparing himself for the next match.

The girl who succeeded him, kept her distance from him warily. Rui had already defeated several students quickly.

('Not coming? Well, something needs to happen.') He mused as he started shifting, slowly closing the distance.

When he reached CQC range; close-quarters-combat range. She threw a jab at his face, it was quick but light. She was hoping to startle him before launching a full-powered punch. But Rui had ducked even as she began the jab, throwing a straight punch to her abdomen, impacting her diaphragm.

She hunched down, gasping for air, but Rui had already launched his knee to her face.

BAM

She fell back flat on the ground, rolling as she cradled her bleeding nose. The supervisor signalled the end of the match.

Rui closed his eyes focusing on his breathing, ignoring the attention of his peers.

Rui had only recently joined the Martial Foundation Stage, how could he be so good.

The key was in applying some of the research in his past.

In the later half of his life, Rui had already begun dedicating himself into creating the most optimal fighting style possible. Although many of the popular styles were all tried and tested, things that had withstood competition and proved they were viable, Rui was a bit of an idealist at heart.

"Be Water, My Friend.

Empty your mind.

Be formless, shapeless, like water.

You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup.

You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle.

You put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot.

Now water can flow or it can crash.

Be water, my friend."

These words he'd heard in his childhood from his greatest idol, Bruce Lee, were once merely awe-inspiring words, yet feeding upon years of successful research, they had grown and molded into his life's ambition. Was it possible to develop a viable fighting style that could adapt to all fighting styles? Was it possible to train someone to use this style? And most importantly, even if creating such a fictitious hypothetical martial art was possible, would it, in practice, in the cold real world, succeed? Would it surpass the existing mixed martial arts foundation?

('I have to try, I want to.') John Falken had thought to himself. He had already begun the process of gathering a research team and acquiring research funds. He was going to go all-out. It would take a long time to develop such a fighting style.

But alas, come age fifty-seven, his asthma had escalated, he was forced into permanent medical supervision and near bed-ridden restrictions. He could not push his lungs any further. He didn't give up. In the age of 2022, communication technology made it possible for him to engage in research by coordinating with his staff from afar. He pushed himself as much as he could, but that only hastened the inevitable.

At age fifty-nine he passed away, failing to fulfill his ambition, he was close, there was only one final hurdle left, but fate would not allow it.

Rui exhaled solemnly as he tapped off, walking out of the arena in exhaustion.

The final obstacle he had left in his previous life was making the Martial Art viable and practical in real life. Developing a training program that allowed human beings to learn this incredibly difficult fighting style.

Rui had only applied a handful of principles of the fighting style he'd developed. He had only applied the very foundations of it.

It was possible to predict what a person would do based on evaluating several parameters, the earliest prototype algorithm he had developed involved reading an opponent's center of gravity and range to predict what they would do.

There were several rules that constrained human fighting;

Firstly, humans subconsciously maintained balance at all time. Their weight had to be equally divided otherwise they would fall. It was like removing a card from the bottom of a house of cards, the entire thing would crumble due to unsupported and unbalanced weight.

Secondly, for an attack to land, it had to be within range. No one ever launched an attack out of range, this was common sense, thus range could be used to judge their intentions.

This, in combination with the fact that humans had four limbs meant it was possible to predict what they would probably do to some degree.

Against his earlier opponent; the boy that Rui had knocked out, the boy had rushed in immediately, he had paused at kicking range from Rui. This already told Rui that he was not going to punch, punches were too short to hit him from kicking distance, that left a kick from one of the legs. Secondly, the boy had shifted his weight onto his left leg before the attack. Meaning that leg could not be moved because otherwise balance would blatantly be destroyed and he would fall, violating the first rule.

This implied he was going to launch a kick with his right leg. Of course, Rui didn't know whether the kick would be high, mid, low. Or whether it would be a roundhouse or a straight. But that didn't matter all too much. Knowing that the boy would be launching a right kick was enough. He immediately close the distance as the kick was being launched.

Kicks were only dangerous past the knee, they grew much weaker above the knee. Once Rui reached the thigh, the match was already over.

Against the girl whose nose he'd broken, Rui had noticed that her weight was evenly distributed as he approached her, meaning the likelihood of a kick was low, she would lose balance. Thus that only left her arms. In this regard, she could only really throw a straight punch with her right fist, which was behind or with her left fist which was the closest. However, in order to throw a punch with her distant right fist she would need to close the distance, by shifting her weight, which she wasn't doing.

This left her left fist. But he had no idea what she would do with it. However, statistically, in his previous life, that fighter rarely threw an upper-cut with their guarding forearm, thus he immediately crouched to waist level and dashed while preparing a straight punch to her gut, which ended up allowing him to win easily after. Thus, by evaluating range and balance, he could act in a way that was remarkably optimal.

However, this was not a flawless method. In fact, it was quite flawed and limited. This model could not account for more complicated maneuvering, furthermore there were several ways to launch attacks with an unbalanced frame. The model had a hard time accounting for higher level fakes and feints. Ultimately it would fail in the long run. It was too flawed.

"But it did serve as a foundation for things that came after." Rui muttered after consuming a physical rejuvenation potion.

He didn't know what his Martial Art would end up looking like, but he intended to make use of every ounce of research he had engaged in, in his previous life. Using bits and pieces from his previous life gave him an advantage over other Martial Artists.

('I can't wait to discover my Martial Path.') He thought for the umpteenth time.

## Chapter 55: Squire

Master Aronian went flipped through a document with keen interest, as a retired veteran Martial Master, there was very little he hadn't seen. It wasn't easy to genuinely gather his interest these days. The freshmen every year often brought him a few intriguing cases, but ultimately it wasn't too new.

Recently though, he'd found something that genuinely elicited surprise from him. How was it possible for a freshman thirteen-year-old novice to consume many mental rejuvenation potions days on end without any adverse effects altogether? He carefully poured through the data on the documents. Rui's psychological constitution was unreal, he had simply never seen anything quite like it.

He was truly curious to see how Rui would grow in the future.

Three months had passed by since Rui and Kane had joined the Academy. Both of them had now turned fourteen-years-old. The former had only just completed the Foundation Stage in its entirety. Normally, it would take six months, but thanks to the lifelong targeted training he had engaged in, in combination with his exception tolerance of the mental rejuvenation potions, he was able to speed past his peers significantly.

Rui concentrated on the scene before him, seated in the Apprentice sparring center. There multiple students among the gathered on a ring, and at the center was an older woman who looked to be in her forties. Just gazing at her exerted a heavy presence on him.

He glanced around at those who had surrounded her. Among them were familiar faces; Kane, Fae, Milliana and Felix.

The Martial Apprentices were engaged in some training with a Martial Squire instructor. She had instructed all of them to attack simultaneously.

The air was tense, yet the woman was entirely calm and composed. The other students were stiff, in comparison.

"Come." She calmly instructed.

For a heavy moment nothing happened, yet the very next, the Apprentices lashed at her. Fae was the closest to her, she quickly closed the distance, before launching a barrage of palm attacks. Each palm was incredibly swift and heavy, such that blasts of air accompanied her every movement.

Rui gaped at the sight. Each attack reminded Rui of the wall breach explosives that SWAT teams used in his previous life to enter targeted building and facilities.

"She really was holding back immensely against me." Rui murmured. If she had used this against him in the third round, he would have long broken his arms before he ever had a chance to counter her.

Yet even before the explosive might of her barrage, the Martial Squire was wholly unperturbed. She raised her hands, and cleanly redirected and blocked all of Fae's attacks with an almost lethargic expression. Before Fae could even muster a reaction, the Martial Squire swiftly threw a light but incredibly fast leg sweep, which cleanly knocked Fae off her feet, and onto her knees.

Suddenly the Martial Squire was surrounded by three more Apprentices. One of them seemed to have a kicking Martial Art, while the other two seemed to be grapplers. The two grapplers, locked her limbs in order to allow the third one to launch his strongest attack onto her. But she merely lifted the two holding her and used them as a shield to block the kick, before swiftly kicking him in turn, sending him bouncing away like a beach ball.

Suddenly, a figure swiftly dashed towards her from her blind spot, hoping to slip past her awareness.

('Kane!') Rui observed.

Yet she turned to meet eyes with him just as he got within striking range, sending a shiver down his spine.

"Agile, aren't you?" She murmured, almost bored.

What happened next was so fast that even Kane was almost unable to process it. She grabbed him and flipped him over her shoulder so fast he saw nothing but the world blur, before hitting the ground.

This made Rui truly gasp.

('Kane got outsped? Kane of all people???)

She dealt with all their attacks individually and simultaneously with relative ease. An hour later every single Apprentice was flat on the ground. They were all exhausted and bruised. Yet the Martial Squire only looked like she had done some light exercise.

This sight made Rui feel small. Even a single one of those Martial Apprentices would be able to bully him with ease, yet so many of them together got bullied by a Martial Squire. He had begun to feel just a bit confident in the power that he had accrued, but that had already deflated entirely.

Rui sighed.

('How long will it take before I reach that level?') He wondered pensively.

He had taken the time to take a break to observe the group sparring session between the Apprentices and the Martial Squire that Kane told him was scheduled to take place. Normally, instructors would not permit novices to take unscheduled breaks, but every instructor knew that Rui was not a slacker. The absurd, hellish schedule that Rui put him through left even the strictest and harshest of instructors absolutely dumbfounded. When Rui told them the reason, they immediately permitted it. He had already earned the respect of his instructors; they were confident that someone of his work ethic would not slack off.

"Hey man, are you okay?" Rui asked Kane after the Squire left the facility, having finished instructing the students on their shortcomings and flaws.

Kane sighed, stretching his arms. "Yeah, I'm fine." It's not that he hadn't sparred with Martial Squire before. It's just that they were usually gentle and respectful out of consideration of his status as the son of a Martial Sage. The Squire instructors in the Academy didn't care, the Academy was extremely strict on no blatant partiality. The Martial Academies were not institutions that could be bullied by a Martial Sage, after all, they were extensions of the entire Martial Union, and the Grandmaster of all Martial Academies was a position that was currently occupied by a renowned Martial Sage.

"I'm not used to having the shit kicked out of me all that much, especially with my fellow peers." Kane muttered.

## Chapter 56: The Tale of Martial Art

Rui had now entered the Exploration Stage! The Foundation stage had honed his physical, performative and Martial prowess. His body was honed to an incredibly high degree, his muscles were powerful but still flexible and mobile, his bones were dense and hardened, his skin and flesh were tough and rigid. This was in sharp contrast to his leaner, softer and weaker physique prior to entering the Academy.

He had now obtained a body worthy of taking the first step towards discovering his Martial Path. His performative capabilities, which were previously average, had now reached a more than satisfactory stage. His Martial prowess was quite impressive for a fourteen-year-old who had just reached the Exploration Stage.

As an Explorer, the colloquial title used to refer to novices of the Exploration Stage, a lot of changes had occurred to his curriculum. His training schedule would no longer be mandated by the Academy. He was given access to the Exploration Martial library for free exploration of novice Martial Art techniques.

However, what surprised him was that, although physical training was not mandated, the Academy did mandate a handful of theoretical seminars. This was not mentioned in the guidebook, so he was caught off-guard. Apparently, the Academy deemed it necessary to inform and educate the students on various matters while they were still in the Exploration Stage; not yet having discovered their Martial Path.

He understood their intentions. It was best to have general cognizance and a basic awareness of the Martial Realm; the world and industry of Martial Art, before they chose to join it. This would likely allow them to make more informed decisions.

Rui skimmed through a textbook on the Martial Union, the information provided in it was more detailed and specific than the general, vague and unreliable rumours he was otherwise used to running into.

"...Interesting." He murmured as he digested the information.

The first section the textbook was the history of Martial Artists, as well as the Kandrian Martial Union all the way upto its current iteration and its socio-political and economical footing and role in the current state of affairs of the Kandrian Empire.

Martial Artists as a distinguishable class of warriors could be traced to nearly 500 years ago, as far as credible official records went. The current Martial Artist realm ranking system did not exist back then, but historians and anthropologists of the Martial Union estimate that the peak Martial Artists of that era were no more than Martial Apprentices, at the very most. Though, again, this wasn't entirely clear due to insufficient data.

What was clear was that the emergence of Martial Artists broke a dent in the long-established age-old mechanics of power dynamics of the human species. Prior to the emergence of Martial Artist, the Panama continent was riddled with strife and war. Large stable countries, as a concept, didn't exist. There were smaller settlements of humans, typically the size of the average modern town of the Kandrian Empire. These tiny kingdoms were in constant conflict to monopolize territory, resources, capital and manpower.

The rulers of these tiny sovereign states monopolized and maintained political power very differently than the models that existed back then. The state of technology more than 500 years ago was paltry and rudimentary compared to how far it had progressed today, Martial Artists did not exist back then, thus the power and significance of individual people was negligible.

Rulers maintained political power externally against their enemy sovereign states by capitalizing greater manpower and raising great armies of great numbers to deter war, and maintained political power inwardly through a combination of incentives and detriments.

"Much like Earth." Rui mused to himself. Back on Earth, the impact of a single person was extremely limited, individual power was inferior to the power of many, as long as the power of the majority was harnessed and capitalized by rulers, individuals did not matter. This had also been the case for most sovereign states prior to the Age of Martial Art.

However, that changed with the emergence of Martial Artists. At first, it wasn't overwhelming, it tilted the scales of power just a bit. Martial Apprentices were powerful, but not enough to take down an entire sovereign state by themselves.

They weren't entirely too much of a threat, thus it did not evoke extreme reactions from ruling parties. Instead, rulers grew greedy, and tried to monopolize and capitalize the emergent power of Martial Art.

Here was a new variable that could change the game and tilt the existing power dynamics in the favour of sovereign states that attempted to try to own Martial Artists, per se.

They used incentives and disincentives to manipulate Martial Artists who, as powerful as they were, in the front of social and economical benefits, were powerless individually.

Nearly a century had passed by as sovereign states perfected the art of handling powerful Martial Artists fully, exploiting and manipulating them.

The Martial Apprentices of this era were too strong to be ignored by rulers and ruling entities, yet too weak to resist them. They could not fully protect their families or even themselves from the full militaristic and economic might of an entire state, they were resigned to being no more than unofficial slaves of their respective states.

This remained to be the case for almost an entire century; until an incredibly historically significant event one day occurred.

The first Martial Squire was born.

Martial Squires broke the previously established common sense.

One-man armies, they were.

Although they couldn't literally annihilate a huge army all by themselves effortlessly, their destructive power was fearsome, and rulers could not carelessly earn their ire. Their power was a deterrence.

Perhaps in a vacuum, rulers could potentially muster every ounce of militaristic, economic and political power and use every dirty trick in the book to defeat the Martial Squires of their sovereign states, but then what?

If they did that, their country would be incredibly weakened due to the civil war. Civil wars drained massive funds, resources of all kinds, and worst of all; they weakened militaries.

The surrounding sovereign states would recognize the opportunity, and immediately declare war on the now weakened nation and completely annex and dominate it.

This was even worse!

It was an unacceptable outcome for most rulers, thus new socio-political systems had to come into existence, and did indeed do so, to account for the growing individual singular power of Martial Artists.

Of course, it wasn't as straightforward as this. The already chaotic warring era had turned into an even greater maelstrom as each of the countless nations tried all kinds of socio-cultural models and solutions to integrate, dominate or eradicate Martial Artists depending on the culture, the temperament of the ruling party and other circumstances.

Some succeeded in dominating Martial Artists, some failed and instead were usurped by Martial Artists. Yet most sought to aim for cooperation. Countless nations fell and were consumed by the victors of the Warring Era. This marked the end of the Warring Era, and gave birth to a new era, the Age of Martial Art.

This was the story of Martial Art.

## Chapter 57: Kandrian Power Dynamics

It was truly a fascinating tale to Rui. Just from this information alone, he realized how wise the Martial Union's decision to educate students on the context of the state of affairs was.

('The best way for history to repeat itself is to have those of the future forget about the past.') Rui mused. Although he suspected that the relationship between Martial Artists and the state was likely not pleasant, this made him realize how much he underestimated the issue.

('Ruling entities probably fear and disdain Martial Artists because of the tilt in the balance of power that Martial Artists cause, yet they not only cannot do anything to the Martial Artists because of foreign pressure, but actively need the power of Martial Artists to deter external enemies.') Rui realized.

('On the other hand, the Martial Artists resent sovereign states for their desire to suppress them, but need cooperate for the same reasons the ruling entities do; external pressure.') Rui realized.

Of course, Rui was cognizant that the reality of the matter was likely much more complicated. His understanding was likely an oversimplification of the issue. Furthermore, it was obvious that he had incomplete information. There was no way that the Martial Academy would reveal the true state of affairs and political machinations of the Union and Royal Family.

He would likely learn more about them if he grew stronger, and ascended to higher realms.

The next few portions and sections of his theoretical curriculum focused more on the Kandrian Empire and Kandrian Martial Union rather than delving deeper into the state of affairs of the Panama Continent.

The Martial Union was founded almost four hundred years ago, although it had a very different shape and form back then. The Kandrian Empire, like many surviving sovereign states of the Warring Era decided to opt for a state of co-existence and cooperation with the Martial Artists.

The Martial Union and the Royal Family forged and signed the Kandrian Martial Treaty, a declaration of peace, cooperation and an alliance. They also signed the Kandrian Martial Covenant; a contract that specified the terms and condition of cooperation.

The conditions and stipulations were explored in the textbook. The Covenant contained several clauses that meticulously established premises and context for the terms and conditions, before delving into them. This was to ensure there was no legal wiggle room or loopholes that either party could exploit to their advantage at the cost of the other.

The actual terms and conditions were remarkably similar. The first clause was about National defense. The Royal Family paid a huge sum of money as an annual commission to the Martial Union, in exchange for assistance with continuous and routine reinforcement, surveillance and patrolling of borders.

Another clause was related to the terms and conditions the Martial Union and the Royal Family agreed to in the event of a war or an invasion. Although there were actually a lot of conditions and premises, what it essentially boiled down to was that the Martial Union was willing to defend the Kandrian Empire for a vast amount of money and other resources, while still reserving the right to withdraw from the war, under certain conditions.

If the situation ever escalated to mass ruin, then the Martial Union did not want to be dragged down with the Kandrian Empire!

A sovereign state was nothing without a territory, but unions were much more flexible, if the worst were ever to come, moving house was not an impossibility.

There were several more clauses that all basically boiled down to the Martial Union aiding the country in matters of national interest, in exchange for money, resources and other exclusive privileges and benefits.

It was a very complex exchange dynamic.

This Covenant actually provided the Martial Union with a huge portion of its net revenue. The sheer wealth that the Royal Family was capable of splurging made even the mighty Martial Union look modest and humble.

Underneath all this convoluted and complex agreements was a sense of fragility, or at least so Rui thought. Just looking at the contract gave him the feeling that the two parties were unwilling and reluctant to cooperate, but forced to do so due to numerous circumstances.

Still, just because they did agree to cooperate, doesn't mean there was true peace between them, at the very least Rui was absolutely certain there was no way that this could be the case.

If there ever came a day where either the Royal Family or the Martial Union grew weak or fell for power, he was sure that both parties would have absolutely no problem exploiting and dominating the other for the maximum utility they possibly could.

Considering this, the existence of the Martial Academies made more sense. The most immediate threat to the Martial Union was all around them. Furthermore, the nature of the Martial Art was such that the Martial Union would inevitably grow weaker with time gradually. Many Martial Artists died every year in the field completing missions, meaning, unless the rate of emergence of new Martial Artists was equal to, or ideally, greater than the rate of death of Martial Artists and the rate of retirement of Martial Artists, then the Martial Union would eventually grow weaker and perhaps even be pushed back by the Kandrian Empire.

Although Martial Artists were strong, the biggest disadvantage was that they were difficult to produce. Producing even a Martial Squire was very difficult, only those with talent and drive had the potential to become Martial Squires, and even then, only a small fraction of these candidates would end up becoming martial Squires. Furthermore, this would only happen several years after the process had initially begun.

('The ranks above Martial Squire must be even more difficult and time consuming.') Rui realized.

In comparison to the Kandrian Empire whose military and technological might was something that could much easily be replenished and strengthened with funds and resources.

Facing such an uphill battle when it came to maintaining and sustaining power, it was no wonder the Martial Union went all out on the Martial Academies! These institutions were a lifeline that allowed the Martial Academy to be able to maintain high militaristic strength.

## Chapter 58: Additional nuances

The textbook soon began talking about more practical, down-to-earth matters. Specifically, the occupation of being a licensed Martial Artist. The Martial Union was basically a liaison between

customers who wanted to hire Martial Artists, and the Martial Artists themselves. However, not every Martial Artist could complete every mission.

Either they were too weak, or their Martial Art and skillset didn't match with the pre-requisites of the mission, etc.

Thus, the Martial Union divided missions by type and difficulty.

There were five ranks to difficulty, and each corresponded with the first five Realms of Martial Art; Apprentice, Squire, Senior, Master, Sage. Interestingly enough, the Martial Union didn't have Transcendent ranked missions, though the reason for this was not specified.

A ranked mission of a particular Realm was a mission whose difficulty was such that; one or multiple Martial Artists of that Realm could complete the mission. An Apprentice-ranked Mission was a mission that one or more Apprentices could complete.

This was to ensure that Martial Artists were assigned mission that was within their ability. It made no sense to assign a Martial Apprentice a Senior-ranked Mission, while giving a Senior an Apprentice-ranked mission.

('Makes sense.') Rui nodded.

Missions were also divided by their type because of this reason. The skillsets needed for different missions all required different skillsets and Martial Art.

Thus, the Martial Union divided missions into the following four classes;

Offense; These were missions that usually required launching an attack on a person, group of people or location with the goal of capturing, incapacitating or killing their opponents.

Defense; These were missions that required the protection of a person, group of people or location with the from harm.

Hunting; A large portion of the Kandrian Empire was uninhabited nature, furthermore a large portion of the Panama continent was uninhabited and unexplored. There large amounts of resources within the fauna, flora and the land of these uninhabited areas. Most mining and resource enterprises hired commissioned Martial Artists of the Martial Union in procuring high-value high-difficulty resources, before processing and reselling them to manufacturers who required said resources. Furthermore, the uninhabited lands of the Panama Continent contained powerful beast species that often hunted in human habitats. These were all mission classified within the Hunting class.

Covert operations; These missions included any missions that were highly clandestine and furtive in nature. Espionage, reconnaissance, infiltration, extraction, assassination, sabotage etc. were the most common kinds of missions within this class of missions.

Miscellaneous; These included somewhat niche missions, or missions with such low difficulty that any martial Artist could complete them. Things like tutelage, manual labour, demonstrations etc fell into them.

Generally, licensed Martial Artists stuck to usually one, maybe two, classes of missions. Martial Artists who mainly engaged in offense-class missions were called Assaulters, Martial Artists who mainly engaged in defense-class missions were called Defenders, Martial Artists who mainly completed Hunting missions were called Hunters and those who completed covert missions were called Shadows.

('Interesting...') Rui pondered about all this information.

This classification of missions was quite practical, it allowed for a smoother process of mission assignment/choosing for the Martial Union and Martial Artists.

Being made aware of all of this before discovering his Martial Path made a lot of sense in hindsight. He could train knowing what he was getting into. For one, the textbook mentioned the system of parties, which altered his image of how missions were completed.

The Martial Union graded difficulty of a mission even with the established ranks between low-grade, mid-grade and high-grade difficulty. Many missions had a high difficulty even within the realm they were assigned to, meaning it would be extremely difficult and risk for a single Martial Artist to complete them. Thus, licensed and registered Martial Artists could form officially form groups of usually three to five Martial Artists. All one had to is gather the numbers and sign some paperwork before being officially recognized as a Martial Party. This was quite a popular tendency among Martial Artists, as the burden and risk on individual was greatly minimized and divided between five people, allowing them to

complete high-grade missions with safety, as much safety as the Martial World would normally have, that is.

This meant that hyper-specializing in a certain field of Martial Art didn't necessarily mean he couldn't apply for different kinds of missions.

This was also another piece of information that was useful to Explorers like himself. There was room for all kinds of Martial Art, the Martial Union wanted Explorers to explore Martial Art knowing the kind of role that Martial Art played in the kinds of missions they would choose.

Rui suspected that he might be an all-rounder, in fact, he suspected he had already discovered a hint of his Martial Path during all the sparring sessions of the Martial Foundation Stage. Though he needed more time to discover and understand more.

Rui closed the textbook. A few hours had passed since he had absorbed himself into all the information he had learnt. His worldview had altered considerably. The new information at hand raised all kinds of new questions.

If Apprentice-level missions existed, and almost all Martial Apprentices were within the Academy, then how did these missions get completed? Were these missions completed by students? This was something that the textbook did not go into. He intended to ask Kane about it when he saw him the next day.

Martial Art could be applied to covert operations in this world? In his previous life, covert operations were performed by state and federal agents trained by the intelligence, law-enforcement and security agencies and bureaus of nations. Hand-to-hand combat was a must, but there were many, many other skillsets that these agents were required to master before they could be dispatched on these missions.

Yet it seemed in this world, there existed Martial Art that were singlehandedly suited and capable of performing covert operations.

Rui scratch his head in confusion, was it really possible for a Martial Artist to be a full-fledged Intelligence agent or a covert operative?

This was just one of the many things in this world that defied his expectations and sense of normalcy.

## Chapter 59: New techniques

"Yeah, we're scheduled to begin some Academy supervised Apprentice level missions in a few months." Kane confirmed the next day.

"What kind of missions?" Rui asked out curiosity.

Kane shrugged. "Dunno."

"So they haven't told you..." Rui muttered. "Though since it is the kind of missions that an Apprentice could complete, the scale of the missions will be low, I doubt you'd be forced to fight against other Martial Artists."

Kane nodded. "That stage of our Apprentice curriculum won't begin any time soon though. Maybe you can join me if you discover your Martial Path and become an apprentice before that."

Rui nodded in return, completing mission with Kane and the others sounded extremely fun.

They bantered a bit before heading down different paths. Rui soon entered the Explorer library. The Explorer library contained techniques in all fields and forms of combat that were far more advanced than the Foundation techniques.

The Foundation techniques were all techniques that Rui was familiar with, these were no different from the martial arts on Earth for the most part; things like kickboxing, wrestling, brazilian jiu-jitsu etc.

The Explorer Stage contained techniques that were more effective; things like special breathing techniques to increase the energy generated by your cells, special offensive, defensive and maneuvering techniques that generated far more force and speed than ordinary techniques.

The techniques and their details were recorded on scrolls. Each technique was described in a brief manner initially with more detailed explanations following, there were detailed depictions with various measurements and indications in these diagrams, as well as detailed explanations and diagrams on the training method for these techniques.

However, this alone was rather insufficient for mastering these techniques. Thus, Explorers like Rui could consult the many Apprentice instructors and guiders that existed in the Explorer training facilities for demonstrations and basic instructions as well as guidance upon mastering these techniques.

These Apprentice instructors would not enforce or mandate any training, of course. The Exploration Stage gave a lot of freedom to students.

The techniques in the library were broadly divided into five categories; offense, defense, supplementary, maneuvering and miscellaneous.

Rui had pick one technique from each section. The offensive technique he had decided to choose after careful consideration was called Collision Optimization-I

"Sounds like a course in an engineering degree, rather than the name of a Martial Art technique." Rui murmured.

In the movies, anime, novels he'd read. Martial Art techniques usually had flashy names. When he first initially visited the Explorer library, he'd expected flashy metaphorical flowery names like 'DiVinE gOdkilLer fiSt' or 'DeViL DeStrUctiOn AtTack', but instead he was greeted with very technical names that perfectly encapsulated exactly what the technique was comprised of.

On one hand, this was very down-to-earth and logical. This was a library meant to organize techniques in a convenient manner, thus such names helped Explorer students like himself sift through techniques with great ease.

On the other hand, the Martial fanboy in him felt a bit unsatisfied that the techniques did not have such flashy names.

As much as he would deny it to his colleagues back on Earth, these flashy names were the best part of Martial Art! He would love to launch a flash attack while shouting its flashy name!

Rui shook his head, putting aside such silly thoughts.

Collision-Optimization was a broad formless technique that taught him how to inflict greater damage with each strike by adjusting the precise location he lands his strikes on.

The human body was neither monolithic nor uniform. Some parts of the body were extremely durable and hard, while others were extremely vulnerable and weak.

It wasn't as simple as targeting the throat or the testicles, this technique illustrated which precisely portions of the body were most susceptible to pain and damage.

This was outside the standard MMA training that prevailed Earth. Mostly because fighters were too uneducated and incapable of learning the information needed to use this technique, they were also largely unwilling to engage in such training. It was impractical in many ways.

But not in this world!

But this world had potions, allowing students to learn what MMA fighters couldn't.

This applied even more so to Rui, because of his great tolerance of mental rejuvenation potions.

Furthermore, Rui had an extremely high affinity with this technique, which was one of the reasons he picked it. His scientific and academic background was extremely synergetic with this technique, in fact, with his knowledge, he suspected he might even be able to improve and optimize the technique to some degree!

Another reason he picked this technique was that it was very broad and diverse and could universally improve his striking, but the degree of improvement wasn't high.

He glanced at the remaining three techniques he'd picked.

The defensive technique was Damage Mitigation-I, it was basically an extremely sophisticated system of rolling and moving with strikes to reduce their impact. It was like baseballers catching baseballs, no sportsman caught a ball in one position, they always moved their hand along with the trajectory of the ball to reduce the impact.

This technique relied on the same principle.

The maneuvering technique he picked was called Balance Direction, it was a technique that allowed him to move faster by almost falling in the direction he wanted to move in, the unbalanced weight directed in the direction of motion rather than towards the ground allowed for greater speed.

The supplementary technique was called Harmonic Respiration, a form of breathing technique that strengthened metabolism in the middle of the fight to increase his output.

These were the four initial techniques he picked from the Explorer library after browsing through the available techniques with careful consideration.

These techniques matched his existing style and also had lower difficulty compared to the other techniques. He picked only four, one from each field so that he wouldn't overburden himself. There was no point biting off more than he could chew, he'd only end up choking. He intended to get a good measure of how many techniques he could simultaneously study so that he could pace himself appropriately, to maximize his productivity.

## Chapter 60: Bottleneck

Rui immersed himself into mastering these four techniques. He dedicated his time equally to all four techniques. Thanks to his tolerance of rejuvenation potions, he was able to dedicate a massive amount of time to mastering them.

Harmonic Respiration was a truly invigorating breathing technique. It flooded Rui's body with energy and eased his fatigue and stress to some degree.

Rui had already observed the technique while he performed it. Keenly observing it's form, mechanics and its effect on him physiologically.

('It increases the amount of oxygen being diffused into my blood by timing the respiration intervals with the heart rate at that moment.')

This allowed for a larger amount of blood to come into contact with the maximum amount of oxygen. Amidst combat, this was quite useful. This was the principle by which supplementary breathing techniques functioned. They aimed to augment metabolism by increasing the net amount of oxygen supplied to all the cells in the body through various means and phenomena. Harmonic Breathing was merely one of the foundational techniques.

It was also the easiest technique out of the four he had picked; he had already mastered it after two weeks of practice. Yet it was the weakest in terms of its impact in combat.

He hadn't yet mastered the remaining three techniques, yet even his partial mastery over them resulted in amazing boosts to his combat prowess.

Collision Optimization improved the impact of his strikes remarkable, allowing him to inflict much more pain and damage with each attack than he could without applying this technique.

This technique had a lot of synergy with his superhuman mind and scientific background, so his rate of mastery over it was the highest among the remaining three techniques he had chosen to master.

He had even begun experimenting with it and had managed to improve certain aspects of the comprehensive technique. Optimizing the angling of the strikes within the technique in certain parts of the body to inflict even more damage and pain.

He frequently tested his capabilities in sparring sessions with other explorers, or instructors, or Kane. Leaving each of them bewildered at his rate of growth.

"I recall telling you that you'd grow faster with potions, but I never expected it to be this quick!" Kane exclaimed with a hint of envy. "I can't believe you're learning Balance Direction this quickly!"

Rui shrugged, laughing.

He had consulted Kane a lot when it came to learning the maneuvering technique he had picked; Balance Direction, Kane was the best maneuvering expert who was willing to spend a lot of time with Rui. His rate of mastery had left Kane with mixed feelings. They would regularly spar using primarily Balance Direction with no other technique, this had allowed to Rui grow faster than he had expected. It was his next best technique after Collision Optimization.

The hardest technique to learn was Damage Mitigation. He found it really hard to move with the impacts, it required precise timing that he simply was unable to accomplish on a regular basis when he initially started out.

However, as his proficiency with the three techniques improved, so did his combat prowess. The Explorer techniques weren't as potent as the Apprentice level techniques that Kane had mastered, but they were still much better than barest of basics he had learnt during the Martial Foundation Stage.

What astonished him was the sheer variety of techniques. It was far more diverse than what he had known back on Earth.

Just the breathing techniques alone were vast, their purposes were varied too, not all of them were as straightforward as Harmonic Breathing was. Their purposes were also varied. He did not know breathing could actually be used as part of offense or defense!

There were several systems and principles that extended beyond just the MMA fighting style back on Earth. Centered around skin, flesh, joints, nails and even hair! Furthermore, they encompassed a variety of sub-categories within the four aspects of combat. Within offense laid different types offense such as incapacitation, killing, paralysis, destruction etc. These sub-categories were quite different from each other in so far as the goal that the techniques tried to achieve. Rui had to spend time understanding the general skeletal structure of the organization of techniques.

Of course, Rui did not have the time to look into each one of them in-depth. Each technique was extremely info dense and heavy. If he let himself get absorbed into reading all of them, he would have no time to train.

Dedicating an average of twenty-one hours a day to training, Rui made visible progress every day. With his work ethic and dedication, it took a little less than two months for him to have mastered the techniques. His combat prowess had fundamentally grown enormously. Having picked a technique in each field had made his fighting style quite balanced.

Collision Optimization, Damage Mitigation, Balance Direction and Harmonic Respiration each amplified the four fundamental aspects of a Martial Art and combat.

However even after he mastered them, he was still growing stronger. This was because his application of the four techniques was still suboptimal.

It couldn't be helped, Rui had very little experience in applying these techniques in combat. It helped that these were broad techniques meant to be continuously used, but he still needed a lot of raw experience before his application reached a satisfactory stage.

He had already begun picking a new set of techniques that he would dive right into soon.

Rui sighed. "Shame today's my rest day."

Even Rui had to sleep at least once in a while. His tolerance of the potions was not limitless.

('The techniques made me much stronger... But I don't feel any closer to discovering my Martial Path.')  
Rui anxiously thought to himself.

He knew he was being a bit impatient, but his instincts told him just plainly learning more techniques would not be conducive to his progress towards his Martial Path.

Something about them felt mundane. He was certain he was going to be an all-rounder at this stage. But that wasn't the same as discovering his Martial Path.

The instructors described it as a soul-shaking epiphany, that once you had it, you know for a fact that you had discovered your Martial Path.

They were also concerned that Rui did not feel anything special while exploring. Usually, Explorer students were guided by emotions when they chose the techniques they wanted to learn.

However, Rui didn't feel stirred at all. He had approached the process in a very rational and logical manner, trying to choose the optimal combination of techniques that would improve his combat prowess the most.

He instinctively felt repeating this would not yield him the desired outcome.

Just as he wanted to think more, he felt his eyelids growing heavy and his head strained. His body demanded sleep.

('Fuck it... let's think about this tomorrow.')