

## Martial Unity 551

### Chapter 551: Merger

This made more sense. It was a publicly known fact that the Martial Union and Royal Kandrian Family were not on the best of terms. Although Martial Artists rebelling against states and organizations of various kinds was a universal phenomenon that led to the birth of the Age of Martial Art, it still inevitably created some degree of friction in the Kandrian Empire between the Royal Family that directed the government and the Martial Union.

The Martial Union was a congregation of Martial Artists that was powerful enough to rival the Kandrian Empire through the power of Martial Art, exclusively. It was cautious and resentful of the Royal Family that once dominated Martial Artists before the breakthrough of Martial Squires, and no doubt would do so if it was viably possible. The Royal Family, on the other hand, no doubt disdained the Martial Union as it was an entity within the Kandrian Empire that it could not control, and that faintly had the potential to overthrow the Royal Family.

Of course, this was very ambiguous, however, it did create a sense of aversion and wariness within the Martial Artists of the Martial Union to the Royal Family and the Kandrian government. Rui wasn't sure he would have accepted the personal commission from the colonel had he known that he was the true client.

Of course, he could cancel choose to cancel it even now. It's just that this would penalize him since he did not have a just cause, and he wasn't so sure if it was warranted now that he had actually met the man.

"However, you don't seem to be the emotional type." He pointed. "I wouldn't have gone to such degrees if I could be sure that you would not refuse my commission, but alas, I can't be sure of that since we're not of the same faction."

The last sentence he uttered caused confusion in Rui.

"You and I? Part of the same faction?" Rui frowned.

"Did I stutter?" He asked, impassively.

"We're not even part of the same organization or movement or group of any kind." Rui threw a puzzled look at him. "How could we possibly be part of the same faction?"

"Your understanding of the political landscape of the Kandrian Empire is woefully inadequate." He shook his head. "The faction I am of in the Royal Army and the Kandrian government broadly shares the exact same goal and ideal as that of a political faction within the Martial Union. We cooperate distantly to try and achieve our common goal. We are effectively part of the same faction."

Rui's eyes rose a little, in interest. It was an intriguing concept and one that he hadn't considered prior. Of course, he didn't deny the colonel's statement about his political acumen, because it was indeed true. What little he knew were things he had heard, read, or inferred. He had not studied political history to any meaningful degree.

He simply didn't care to dive deep into the field, and intelligence alone wasn't enough to somehow make him not ignorant.

"What faction is this?" Rui asked out of curiosity.

"The Merger Faction." Senior Geringan replied.

Rui's eyes narrowed, he could instantly infer what the faction was about based on the name and what he had told Rui about his faction prior. A faction that extended across the government, army, and the Martial Union, known as the 'Merger' faction.

"Is the political objective of this faction the union of the Martial Union and the Kandrian Government?" Rui's narrowed.

This sounded like an absurd goal, it was absolutely impossible for the Martial Union and Kandrian governments to merge into one entity. The clash of interests between the entities was real, after all.

"Correct." The man nodded. "We strive every day to influence legislation that increasingly pushes us in this direction until we hope to unite the Kandrian government and the Martial Union with an equal division of power between the constituents of the groups within a new ruling power.."

"That seems unfeasible given the friction between the two entities." Rui voiced his thoughts as he considered the colonel's thoughts. "After all, the head of state and the head of government both are the Royal Emperor. In order to form a government where legislative, executive, and judicial power is equally divided between the two groups, the Royal Emperor would at the very least need to change, and a more neutral head representing the interests of the two former entities would need to come in place. Unless the Royal Emperor himself is part of the Merger Faction, there is no way he would concede his power for such an arrangement."

While Rui wasn't an expert, he knew that the Royal Emperor represented the legislative branch of the government singlehandedly, the rest of the government generally served as the executive of the legislation that he passed. Meaning he was the only one who possessed the authority to facilitate any fusion between the Kandrian Government and the Martial Union, which he would be disincentivized to do if it involved sharing his absolute legislative power with the Martial Council, the highest governing committee of the Martial Union in some form or the other.

"You have very correctly identified one of the biggest stumbling blocks on our way to accomplishing our objective." The colonel nodded, impressed. "It is one of the reasons our faction has existed for as long as it has without succeeding. It is highly disadvantageous to those in power to share one's own authority for the sake of the nation. However, the need of the nation is greater than one man's selfish desire, wouldn't you agree?"

"I would, but unfortunately, it's extremely unlikely to happen from what I understand," Rui replied sardonically. "Merging the Martial Union and the Kandrian Government would not just mean merging our forces, it would be changing the very identity of the nation. After all, Martial Artists possessing legislative power by virtue of being Martial Artists would turn the very nature of the Kandrian Empire as a sovereign state into a militaristic nation or a Martial state."

## Chapter 552: Compelling

"That is also true." The colonel nodded. "There is a great debate within our faction regarding the nature of the union, after all, we need a clear and precise objective. It would be foolish of us to chase after the ambiguous principle 'united we stand, divided we fall'. There are a lot of issues that need to be resolved and ironed out that we still aren't as united as we wished we were." He sighed. "Frankly, a lot of the more technical issues are beyond my understanding and area of expertise, I am a Martial Artist and a military man, after all. But the principle alone is strong enough that we are able to come under one banner, a banner I am willing to lend my power and influence to."

Rui was clearly unconvinced. There was an argument to be made that the checks and balances that the Martial Union and the Royal Family placed on each other kept the nation stable. Neither side could be domineering as it would inevitably clash against the interests of the other, which meant that the former would not be allowed to go too far before the latter began exercising its power to contain the former.

For instance, the Royal Emperor could not be as exploitative of Martial Artists as perhaps a ruler would like to have been due to the Martial Union's powerful presence. Going too far against the Martial Union was not good, for if it decided to employ its vast Martial might, resources, and intelligence, the Kandrian government would not be able to remain stable. It could not afford to push the Martial Union too far lest the latter decide enough was enough and threaten civil war.

Furthermore, the Martial Union could not be as overbearing in its influence over society as it may have liked to be due to the Kandrian Empire curbing its influence. It still had to abide by the laws of the nation that it wasn't specifically exempt from in the Kandrian Martial Covenant.

This impasse was much more trustworthy than unlimited and unchecked power poured into the hands of a single entity.

He turned towards Rui, noticing his reaction. "Perhaps it is because you're still a young Martial Squire and haven't obtained enough power and authority within the Martial Union yet, which is why you may find the principle and objective to be naïve, however, it is certainly the case that a merger would strengthen this nation tremendously."

Rui raised an eyebrow in doubt. "I don't think the difference would be that tremendous. The net resources haven't increased, after all."

The man shook his head. "The Kandrian government and Martial Union waste a tremendous amount of capital of various sorts due to each other. Although it may appear that the impasse between the Kandrian government and the Martial Union isn't, it truly is taxing on both entities."

"How so?" Rui's eyes furrowed.

"Although both sides know that the other side is quite unlikely to provoke a civil war, the possibility exists and thus both sides employ a lot of measures and countermeasures to account for the possibility of a civil war provoked by their enemy." The colonel explained. "If such an outcome occurs, the most

desirable wish in this scenario would be to know that it is coming. To know when it is coming, to know how it is coming. Both sides employ a large number of funds and resources in intelligence and information gathering. The Martial Union keeps a track of the movement of the military, it keeps track of existing siege weapons, their deployment, movements as well as the manufacturing of such siege weapons, it keeps track of the manufacturing and existing inventory of temporary augmentation potions, its most powerful Martial Artists, etc. The intelligence gathered from such activities allows them to evaluate whether the Kandrian Empire is gearing up for war or not."

Rui nodded. This was definitely a prudent measure and one that he approved of, it was important to be able to detect the earliest signs of civil war and prepare for it accordingly.

"The Kandrian Empire also does something very similar, obviously." The man explained. "It keeps track of the most powerful Martial assets of the Martial Union; its Martial Sages and Martial Masters as much as possible. There are entire departments within the Kandrian Intelligence Agency that are solely dedicated to keeping track of a single Martial Artist. If you become powerful enough, you can assume you'll have your own department as well. It also keeps track of the rate of acceptance of commissions of the Martial Union, the number of Martial Artists outside the country at any given moment, and the influx and outflux of Martial Artists through the borders as well as within the nation itself. All of these parameters allow the Kandrian Empire to evaluate whether the Martial Union is gearing up for war or not."

Rui nodded, this made a lot of sense. Just the sheer amount of funds and resources expended in the intelligence war that, no doubt, was constantly occurring between the Martial Union and the Kandrian Empire drained their capital a lot. Espionage, tapping, surveillance, tracking, infiltration, and other covert intelligence-gathering missions were no doubt quite expensive. Yet both sides could not afford to not engage in them.

Furthermore, if Rui wasn't wrong, there were probably other measures that both sides took that were taxing as well.

"It isn't limited to just intelligence gathering, either." He sighed. "Neither the Martial Union nor the Kandrian Empire can ever weaken their militaristic and Martial power within the Kandrian Empire beyond a certain degree because of the fear of inviting an attack from the other side. The martial Union cannot afford to allow its Martial Artists to accept more than a certain number of foreign commissions at any given point, because it cannot afford to have too many Martial Artists leave the Kandrian Empire, weakening their base power at any given time. The same also applies to the Kandrian Empire."

He sighed. "Don't you see? We are both holding each other back so much, the Kandrian Empire could be so much more if we truly made the best of every ounce of our power."

## Chapter 553: Crea

With the considerations in mind that the colonel had just laid out, Rui had to admit that perhaps the Merger Faction wasn't silly, it was true that the Kandrian Empire would become a greater force to be reckoned with if the power of the Martial Union merged with that of the Royal Family.

He shook his head, while that may be true, the likelihood of a union between the Kandrian Government and the Martial Union was too unlikely that it was not even worth pursuing in his opinion.

"This has been very interesting and illuminating," Rui interjected. "However, it isn't particularly relevant here at this moment."

"You're right." A small smile curled on his face. "The conversation just strangely went in this direction."

('Yeah right.') Rui snorted inwardly. He wasn't a naïve fool, it was clear that the colonel brought up his faction for a reason. ('He's probably trying to steer my perspective and impression of the Merger Faction in hopes that I'll join the faction.')

Of course, Rui had no interest in delving into politics, it wasn't particularly relevant to him. As long as he could peacefully train, complete missions and get stronger, he didn't care about the political scene of the Kandrian Empire.

"Anyways coming back to what's relevant at hand here..."

"Ah yes, the commission." The colonel nodded. "I had one of my friends high up in the Merger Faction, prevent your mission bill from divulging the truth about the true client of the commission. I apologize for the deception, truly. I really wanted to commission you, after all."

The man lowered his head slightly.

"To introduce me to your faction?" Rui asked plainly, not reacting outwardly to the man's admission.

"That was part of the reason." He nodded. "But I truly do want to commission your training capabilities as well. You are known for your ability to train."

"Oh?" Rui raised an eyebrow. "And who exactly have you commissioned my services for, colonel?"

"My daughter." He told her. "She's going to be attempting the Martial entrance exam this year."

Rui raised an eyebrow as many thoughts flew through his head, the child of a Martial colonel of the Royal Army joining the Martial Academy seemed odd, but not nearly as much when he put it into perspective with the Colonel's political beliefs. In fact, if she joined the Martial Union as a Martial Artist, it might even increase the political leverage of the Merger Faction.

Furthermore, he would be helping a competitor of Max and Mana train, he wasn't sure how he felt about that. At the very least, he ought to ensure that he trained them even better.

"I see." Rui nodded. "Alright, we can begin immediately."

The colonel nodded with a smile, before gesturing to one of his servants. "Bring my daughter here immediately."

Within a minute, the servant returned with a girl who looked to be around the same age as Max and Mana. She had a slender physique, with startling blue hair and pink eyes. Yet more than her aesthetics, what caught his eye was her demeanor.

She had a fierce look in her eye with a hint of pride, as well as a hint of admiration towards Rui.

"This is the Squire Rui Quarrier that I told you about, your new sparring trainer for the upcoming Martial Entrance Exam in a few months." The colonel told her with a smile. "He is extremely renowned for his incredible ability to train and facilitate the growth of his mentees. Introduce yourself to him."

"Yes, father." She respectfully replied before turning and bowing to Rui Quarrier. "I am Crea Jenken, I look forward to training under your guidance."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I look forward to facilitating your growth and your Martial Journey." Rui courteously replied, before turning towards the colonel. "We have whiled away enough time colonel, we ought to begin the training as soon as possible."

The colonel nodded. "Please do begin immediately, my daughter will guide you to her training grounds."

Rui got up nodding at the man. "It's been a good discussion, colonel."

"Indeed." He nodded. "I hope to continue it with you someday."

Rui nodded lightly before following Crea as he pondered his words. They made it clear that he was interested in pulling Rui into their circle.

He shook his head as he put the matter aside, as he focused on the girl as she led him to an open training hall. It was rather wide, with a large array of physical training equipment forming a gym in one section of the hall and sparring training equipment in another section of the room. There were several servants in the training hall, ready to cater to their needs.

"We're here." She turned around, facing him.

Rui nodded, as he looked around. "You have a good set-up here for you."

"I heard that you managed to crack the Martial Entrance exam on your first try at my age." She suddenly said as she looked at him with intense eyes.

"...That's right. It seems you've learned a little about me."

"How did you do it?" She asked.



Rui simply raised an eyebrow, before chuckling. "A combination of skill and tactics, I suppose. I was physically weaker than almost all of my competitors back then, I had to fight hard, but more importantly, I had to fight smart."

He turned, facing her. "As will you, if you intend on cracking it."

"I will join the Martial Academy!" She expressed with a vigorous tone.

Rui smiled a little at her determination, before asking her a question. "Why do you wish to join the Martial Academy?"

"To become a Martial Artist, obviously." Her eyebrows furrowed.

"It's not as though you have to go to the Martial Academy to become a Martial Artist," Rui told her, as he gestured to the training hall. "Look at this place, your father has arranged a wonderful place for you to train and grow stronger. He's able to hire Martial Squires like me to help you train. Why do you want to go to the Martial Academy when you have all of this?"

#### Chapter 554: Sparring

"It's not the same." She shook her head. "The Martial Academy has other strong students and Martial Apprentices from my generation, I want to test my strength against them, I also want to complete a lot of missions."

"Don't you want to enter the army and join your father?" Rui asked, curious.

She snorted at his words. "The army is boring. Also, I hate following a ton of orders."

Rui chuckled.

"Are we going to start training or what?" She folded her arms.

"I was just getting to know you better." Rui calmly replied. "But yes, we can train."

"Good, let's begin right away." She nodded. "What do we do first?"

"Well, for starters. Let us spar, I wish to experience your strength before we can begin training." Rui told her as he gestured to the sparring area.

She nodded as she followed him. "By the way, I had a question."

"Hm?"

"Why don't you feel like a Martial Artist?" She raised an eyebrow. "Martial Artists feel scary, but you feel like a normal person."

"Ah, that was for your sake." He replied.

"Hmph! I don't need your help."

"Alright then." Rui smiled as he took off the Mind Mask, and the passive aura of a Martial Squire washed over her.

She stiffened but didn't say a word. Rui nodded, if she couldn't even handle the passive fear he generated in normal humans, she had no chance of cracking the first phase of the Entrance Exam which filtered out most of the applicant population with the heavy bloodlust tests that were administered to applicants.

She managed to take it well enough, though he would need to verify the extent to which her mental fortitude had been trained, it was quite clear that this aspect wouldn't be neglected by the colonel.

"Come." Rui calmly stated.

She charged forward, launching a swift powerful kick to his face. Rui stepped back slightly, and the attack missed narrowly, a gust of wind ruffled his hair. He observed her form midair as she was almost a statue in his vision, as most humans were to him in combat.

('Her form is efficient.') Rui nodded inwardly. Just from that attack alone, Rui surmised that she was well past the Martial Foundation stage which corrected an error one had one's fundamentals.

"Tsk." She launched herself after him, throwing a flurry of shorter, lighter jabs that were quicker, in hopes of tagging him.

Rui calmly redirected them as he noted her rapid striking form ('Her balance is a little off, she's a bit too aggressive.')

POW

He deflected her strike and landed a palm into her little abdomen, pushing her away. At all times, he restricted himself to human parameters, barring his durability, which he could not change. He even delayed his reactions to match human parameters.

She landed on her feet a meter back, grimacing lightly.

"Is that all you've got?" Rui calmly taunted her. "I'm barely breaking a sweat here."

"Tsk." Her eyebrows furrowed in irritation as she launched herself against him.

An hour later, she was slammed into the ground with an over-shouldered Judo throw, exhausted.

"Let's take a break for now," Rui suggested as he sat beside her.

"How did I do?" She asked, in between her pants.

"Not bad. Not bad at all." Rui calmly replied.

Her eyebrows furrowed at his less-than-stellar evaluation of her capabilities. However, Rui simply ignored her reaction. While it was true that given her age, she was quite impressive, it was also true that given what she wanted to accomplish, she wasn't nearly as strong as she needed to be. If she gave the Martial entrance exam currently, she most likely would not be able to pass. At least Max and Mana had each other to rely on, she would be fighting alone.

"I'm going to be whipping you into shape in the upcoming months."

"I'm not out of shape, ok!" She insisted. "First of all, I-..."

Her voice faded in the background as he considered how he ought to go about training her. Just simply sparring and giving her combat training wasn't going to be particularly helpful, it was nothing that others couldn't give her.

Instead, he was going to leverage his specialty to help her grow stronger.

The VOID algorithm allowed him to create a fighting style that countered his opponents, he needed to create that style, but rather than just straightforwardly leveraging it against her, he ought to train her to become aware of her weaknesses, flaws, and shortcomings. He could help her gain a greater degree of self-awareness of her own fighting style in combat with the help of highly specialized training, he could even copy her style to a certain degree and use it against her, helping her get a third person perspective on it.

All of this would no doubt increase her rate of growth beyond what almost any other trainer in the Kandrian Empire could help her with. Shoring up her weaknesses would definitely do her good in the long run. He could also train her to develop a tactical mindset that would no doubt be just as important to her when she attempted to crack the Martial entrance exam, but also in the future beyond that when she sparred and fought against the other students of the martial Academy.

Of course, Rui wasn't sure how useful that would be to her if she didn't discover her Martial Path and break through to the Apprentice Realm, but it certainly wouldn't hurt. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything he could do to help her become a Martial Apprentice. The best he could possibly do was ensure that her development trajectory was constantly facing upward. It was also paramount to instill

into her an inquisitive mindset that would be useful when she enters the explorative phase in the hopes of discovering her Martial Path.

"Hey! Are you listening?" She folded her arms as she peered at Rui suspiciously.

"Of course, I am," Rui replied calmly.

"Then what did I just say?"

"..."

#### Chapter 555: Difficulty

Rui headed back home once the training session with Crea ended. Today was the first session between them, thus he didn't engage in any deeper training. He simply sparred with her to get a preliminary evaluation of her prowess, he spent the rest of his time getting to know her.

Her desire to become a Martial Artist was strong, however, it was different from the determination he saw in Max and Mana. The two of them were truly fascinated by Martial Art and thus chased after it. They enjoyed training and especially sparring as well, he could see that their motivation was true.

With Crea, it wasn't quite as simple. She yearned to become a Martial Artist, even more so than Max and Mana, but she didn't enjoy sparring or fighting, even if she was quite fierce during training. Rui could sense that she had a deep sense of reverence and admiration for her father, as a Martial Artist. She even displayed that towards Rui to a lesser degree, though less so because Rui hit his presence unless he needed not to. That along with his informal interactions with her had caused her to become a lot more informal and casual with him.

From what he could tell, her desire to become a Martial Artist wasn't a calculated objective or goal. He could sense it was a deep desire of hers. It seemed that simply becoming a Martial Artist, in and of itself was probably something she desired extremely. Not for the things that Martial Art seemed to bring, she didn't display much of a desire to make money, to obtain tremendous power, or prestige and social status. It didn't seem it be any of those, or perhaps it was all of those.

It was as though she simply couldn't stand not being a Martial Artist, more than anything.

Even if he didn't expect to figure her out on the first day he met her, it was clear that she was inscrutable and complex.

Still, that didn't particularly matter. Her motivation and determination were real, and that was all that mattered to him as a trainer. Everything else came after.

Once he reached home, he put the matters regarding her aside. He had plenty of work to do. His schedule was jam-packed. He had two techniques to learn for Project Sniper in the Martial Union that ate away at a significant chunk of his time, he also had to work on building up Project Bounce from scratch and all from the ground up, which was no doubt a daunting task that also ate away at his funds, that were needed to hire his sparring partner.

He also needed to continue with relatively regular training of Crea to earn the money needed to fund the training required for Project Bounce. Furthermore, he also felt the need to train with Max and Mana more extensively out of guilt of spending that much time training Crea, their competitor.

He truly had no breathing space at all, and every second mattered.

"I'm going to be busy as all hell for the next few months." Rui sighed.

And he was right.

For the next three months, Rui slogged away.

He painstakingly made progress with Project Bounce, one small step at a time. He had been increasing the distance over which he was propelled by a straight right punch from a Martial Squire significantly, which was good progress to be made. However, it was far from enough.

A straight right punch was just one of many strikes that one could launch, if Rui wanted Project Bounce to succeed, he would need to ensure that he could harmlessly convert all attacks into kinetic energy that would launch him flying rather than hurt him, for all strikes.

This was truly one of the most difficult and frustrating parts of Project Bounce. It was the sheer number of types of attacks that he needed to learn to elastically defend against to ensure they harmlessly launched him in an elastic collision, that was too many. Countless different kinds of punches, jabs, kicks, swings, and other striking attack variations, and he needed to train his elastic collision against each and every single one of them the hard way.

That alone raised the difficulty to ridiculous degrees, however, it wasn't the only difficult part. Part of the problem was that he had discovered that it wasn't so simple to apply what he had been training in real-life combat.

Part of the reason that he was able to elastically defend against the straight right punch was that he knew ahead of time that a straight right punch was coming. He was able to defend against it because he knew that that attack specifically was coming, and he was prepared for it. This was something that did not normally happen in real-life combat.

Normally, that was.

Rui was different, with the VOID algorithm, Rui would be able to predict whenever his opponent was coming, allowing him to overcome the impediment. This was the difference between Project Bounce and Project Severer. The former was a project that was to yield great power by overcoming barriers by synergizing extremely with Rui's Martial Art, and strengths. Employing and leveraging the predictive prowess of the pattern recognition system of the VOID algorithm gave Rui active defensive prowess that he would not have been able from the technique normally.

This meant that only Rui could use this technique, this was the peak of synergy.

In comparison, Project Severer was just a hotchpotch of elements thrown into one technique with the hopes that they would work together to form a lethal attack, it did not make use of Rui's strengths to reach even greater heights, nor could the Flowing Void style make use of its strength in a special manner. It was a highly impersonal and distant technique in hindsight.

While he did feel sorrow for having to abandon a project that he was initially passionate and excited about, the lessons he extracted from this failure benefited him even more.

## Chapter 556: Progress

Squire Casen wound her arm back all the way behind her, before swinging with a tremendous amount of power, her fist generated shockwaves every inch as it coursed through the atmosphere.

POW!

It collided against Rui's hand, yet his hand rapidly drew back along with the strike, increasing resistance against her fist the closer it got to Rui, pushing him away from the strike harmlessly.

WHOOSH

Rui was consequently launched a great distance away, out of a normal field of vision.

THUD!

He landed with a significant impact on the ground, maintaining his balance, before grinning excitedly.

"That's my best one yet! That's got to be like more than seventy percent conversion efficiency, surely." Rui guesstimated.

This was the first time he had managed to harmlessly convert such a high proportion of an incoming attack into pure kinetic energy of his body. Kinetic energy was the energy of motion, to possess kinetic energy meant that one was in motion. That was why when Rui elastically converted his opponent's attack's power into kinetic energy through spring mechanics, his body would inevitably be sent flying through the power of the strike.

The fact that he was launched a great distance away meant that he managed to absorb most of the power of the strike of his opponent. He was quite satisfied that he had made so much progress. Of course, he was most familiar with applying this principle to a straight right punch, which is why he was further accomplished with dealing with that attack more than any other striking attack.



This was the progress that he had made in three months. He was well beyond halfway through the first phase of two phases of Project Bounce. Considering that this was a Project that he was developing entirely from the ground up that was completely natural, it was incredible to have gotten this far in just three months.

He had been worried that the progress would stall, but now he was reasonably certain that phase one of Project Bounce would be over within a month or two. In totality, that would mean half of Project Bounce would end in five months tops. Although this may seem like a long time for half of a project in a vacuum, considering the sheer number of matters he was juggling, it was even more impressive with that in context.

"This is especially the case considering I'm far more than halfway done with mastering the Tempestuous Feel and Sonic Bullet techniques," Rui muttered.

He had gone all out with dedicating himself to those two techniques, especially since they were truly contributing to his expenses. Between the monthly expenses of the training resources of the Martial Union, the cost of hiring an Apprentice trainer for Max and Mana when he wasn't training them himself, the cost of hiring Squire Casen to help him with the development of Project Bounce, the expenses of Squire-grade rejuvenation potions and the financial aid he gave to the Orphanage, Rui's income was considerably taxed.

If not for the fact that Martial Colonel Geringan had truly given him an extravagant remuneration for his services, he highly doubted that he would be able to sustain his expenses.

"Well, that is the furthest you've been launched." Squire Casen commented as she sky-walked to him.

She had been quite stumped three months ago at Rui's bizarre training but had gotten over it since then. She had no idea why he was putting himself through something like that, but she generally understood that Rui was trying to get launched as far away by her strikes as possible.

Rui, of course, had never disclosed the details of Project Bounce, he treated it like unpatented research that was dangerous to disclose before it was published under his name or patented in his name, as was the norm in the community of research and development back on Earth.

"Yeah, it's great!" Rui nodded.

He continued the rest of the training session with heightened vigor, and it yielded heightened results, even if barely.

"My average is up by five percent compared to yesterday." He was quite pleased, a five percent jump in a single day was an incredible jump. He just needed to take some time to process his gains and made sure he retained that progress.

"Well, that brings us to an end to this session." Squire Casen noted as she looked at her pocket watch.

"Shame." He sighed. "Well, see you next time."

He bade her goodbye, before taking off after consuming a rejuvenation potion, feeling physically and mentally invigorated.

However, the direction he had taken off wasn't the Orphanage or even the Martial Union. He immediately headed off to the Jenken residence. It was just about time for his training sessions with Crea.

In the past three months, the growth that she had made was truly impressive, earning Colonel Geringan's respect and approval. She had very subtle yet core shortcomings that maybe only the most extreme and thorough data analysis from Martial Art researchers would have revealed.

Or, Rui.

With the predictive model that Rui had created and refined, he was able to identify core patterns in her style that were problematic. Not all patterns were bad, of course. The patterns in one's movements were a product of the experiences and fundamental nature of a person, in a way. Changing them would require suppressing the very identity of the person in question. Someone who was naturally aggressive would have aggressive attack patterns, while this could be forcibly changed with extremely oppressive training, it would no longer be a reflection of one's true self, and thus would be sub-optimal in performance. What Rui did was aid in optimizing her patterns to get rid of ineffective inefficiencies and help them truly reflect her core self.

In the past three months, he had exposed her patterns to herself, by mimicking them in front of her and also countering themselves before her. The combination of those two had not only allowed Crea to get rid of shortcomings in her patterns that she was able and willing to optimize, but they also gave her an increasingly deeper amount of self-awareness about her fighting style.

Self-awareness that one could not normally obtain prior to the discovery of the Martial Path.

## Chapter 557: Preparation

"You're late!" Crea huffed

"I'm actually exactly on time." Rui retorted.

"If you arrive just on time, then training begins late, so you're late!"

"Training begins after I arrive and I arrived on time, thus training begins on time as well."

"The entrance exam is in a week. We don't have time for delays!"

"Well, you're the one delaying it now with your little tantrum, you know."

Rui chuckled as she glared at him, doing her best to intimidate him, in vain of course.

"Colonel Jenken." Rui bowed lightly, happening to run into the man on the way to the training grounds.

"Squire Quarrier, I'm glad to see you've arrived on time." He nodded stiffly, ignoring his daughter's reaction to his words. "The entrance exam is just around the corner, and we're in the final stretch for preparation. She's made incredible improvements at your hand, validating my decision to commission you. Good job and good luck."

He turned towards his daughter, bending to her as his military posture relaxed a little as he smiled. "You've already made me proud. Do your best. I love you."

She nodded, a little embarrassed.

He got up, turning back to Rui. "Alright then, I've got to head to work, as you can see."

He gestured to his military garb and adornments. It was an ostentatious uniform with badged, medals, and several stars. None of which were adornments that would decorate the uniform of an ordinary Martial colonel, Rui was sure.

Rui and Crea quickly reached the training grounds after bidding him goodbye.

"Alright, let's begin!"

Rui smiled, nodding, as he walked back and forth. "We've already reached the climax of your training under me. There is no time to start anything new, the only thing we can do is polish what has already been built, and more importantly..."

He turned towards her. "... Condition your mind and body to be at their absolute peak. Understand?"

She nodded.

"All the training you've done in the past few months, and perhaps even the past few years will be utterly meaningless if you do not take appropriate care of your mind and body for when the time comes," Rui warned her. "In fact, an intense workout will coincide the day before the exam where you will be denied rejuvenation potions so that you can get a real organic night of sleep to time it right so that you will wake up completely refreshed for the exam, and your tolerance for rejuvenation potions will be refreshed."

"Ok Ok." She impatiently nodded. "Let's begin training."

"Alright, as usual, let us begin with mental fortitude training." Rui nodded.

Her eyes narrowed as she exhaled.

Rui wordlessly exerted a little bit of pressure on her as he removed his mind mask slightly. Currently, he was exerting just a little above what he had experienced from the Martial Apprentices in the first round of the exam. This was the only round of the entrance exam that didn't change because of how important and useful it was. Thus, Rui paid an immense amount of attention to it.

She handled it well, of course. Otherwise, Rui would be very pessimistic about her chances of cracking the entrance exam.

She gritted her teeth as she stared him dead in the eye. She had a brave face on, but Rui could tell she was under significant pressure.

Ten seconds later, he eased up. "Well done."

She exhaled deeply, massaging her sweaty forehead.

"This is another reason why you should ensure you're at your mental peak," Rui advised. "It takes the entirety of your focus to muster up the mental fortitude needed to resist the pressure you will experience in round one, if your emotional state or concentration is sub-optimal, you will fail."

"I know that." She grumbled. "I did just fine this time and many other times, didn't I?"

"No harm in reminders." Rui smiled.

He hadn't informed her that he was actually exerting more pressure on her than what she would be subjected to in the entrance exam. This was to increase her chances of nothing going wrong in the entrance exam. He didn't want to tell her this for fear of her letting her guard down and making a blunder causing her to fail the round.

An hour of continuous mental resistance training later, she was quite exhausted.

"You're doing good." Rui lightly complimented her. "Here."

He handed her a mental rejuvenation potion.

Half a minute later, she was on her feet, ready for more.

"Let's go for some dynamic omnidirectional sparring, as usual." Rui casually said. Yet she stiffened at those words.

"What's with that face? This is quite important, you know."

She took a light stance with arms close to her body.

Rui smiled as he walked towards her.

POW!

He threw a quick, by human standards, a jab at her. She blocked, yet Rui had already disappeared. Her eyes widened as she sensed him behind her.

POW!

She just barely managed to block yet another attack from him with an incomplete turn.

POW!

This time, Rui had appeared on her left, throwing a straight kick at her.

POW!

POW!

POW!

Rui continuously appeared and disappeared around her, launching attacks from all directions. Crea gritted her teeth as she struggled to keep up, barely blocking or evading his attacks. She didn't even know how Rui was teleporting around, was teleportation an ability that all Martial Squires had?

In reality, Rui was just moving very fast. Even with a tiny portion of his speed, he could easily surpass her vision, becoming invisible to her every time he shifted, creating the illusion that he had teleported. However, Rui was quite careful to ensure that his attacks didn't exceed her limits. Even though he shifted very quickly, he made sure to wait around two hundred milliseconds which was just around human reaction time, before initiating a human-level attack. This gave her the chance to react and defend against each attack.

He made sure that she was pushed to her limits constantly, allowing her to exercise herself to the peak.

## Chapter 558: Ponder

The point of this training was to maximize her ability to cope with omnidirectional attacks from multiple opponents around her. He knew from experience that the Martial entrance exam did not necessarily have its students fight one on one in fair bouts. Rui recalled how much of a target he had been in the third round of the Martial entrance exam from multiple opponents that he struggled to keep at bay.

Coping was an important skill for all applicants of the Martial entrance exam. Crea didn't need to decisively win, she needed to decisively not lose. She needed to hang on till the very end and only then was there a chance that she would be selected as a student of the Martial Academy.

And one important avenue to know how to cope with was learning to deal with attacks that could come from anywhere. In the past three months, this form of combat training was one that Rui had grounded her

through. She had been quite miserable at coping with Rui's attacks, but in the span of three months, she had developed a truly respectable amount of cope.

She would most likely not go down easily even against multiple opponents who were most likely older.

One thing Rui respected about the girl was her tenacity. He truly hoped that she would somehow make it through, even if her odds were quite low.

A few hours later, the training session came to an end.

"Alright, that's all for today." Rui nodded.

"Wait, that's it?" She frowned. "Mental fortitude training and omnidirectional defense training? No standard sparring, no maneuvering training? No offensive training?"

Rui shook his head. "Those are nowhere near as important as your mental fortitude and your cope. At this point, I'm merely polishing your most important assets. Unfortunately, I cannot train what I would consider the single most important asset that all Martial Artists ought to have like I train other things."

"And what is that?" She asked.

"I've told you, haven't I?" Rui shook his head. "It's your mind."

"I'm already training my mind." She huffed.

"I'm not talking about your fortitude." He sighed. "I'm talking about your intellect. The decisions you make are going to affect your attempt to the entrance exam more than any other parameter."

"Martial Art isn't like studies, being smart is not more important than being strong." She furrowed her eyebrows.



Rui snorted, resigned to shaking his head. "Being smart is part of being strong. And isn't intelligence that is the most important parameter, but your rationality."

He crouched down to her. "An intelligent irrational person will always lose to a dumb rational person. You don't have to be smart, you just have to use the smarts you have up here..." He tapped her temple. "...to their absolute most. This is relevant not just to the entrance exam, but also to your Martial Path."

"It is?" She grew confused.

"Martial Art, in a way, teaches you how to walk," Rui told her. "But what is just as important as knowing how to walk is knowing which direction to walk in."

"Ah, that makes sense." She nodded. "Does this direction have something to do with the Martial Path?"

"Er, in a way?" Rui scratched his head. This was where his analogy started becoming strange, but it was more or less on track.

"Anyways, I have delayed my leave enough. This will be our last class before the entrance exam. You've worked hard, you've put in almost every conceivable effort to maximize your chances in the entrance exam. Now you just have to go all out and not worry about the outcome." Rui calmly encouraged her. "I believe in you."

Well, that last part wasn't strictly true. He did believe she would do her best and perform excellently, but statistically, she was too unlikely to crack the exam. Of course, nothing was impossible. But Rui only believed in science and himself.

"I'll make you proud, teacher!" She bowed deeply. "Thank you for all your guidance."

"Good luck, and goodbye." He smiled at her as he sky-walked away, sighing inwardly.

He had mixed feelings because as much as he had come to care about the little shrimp, he cared for Max and Mana even more. The two had followed and admired him for a long time and had even made great

progress in Martial Art over the many years through his guidance. And they would be competitors with Crea unless she applied to a different branch for some strange reason.

Though, as much as he didn't want to admit it, he had to. She was stronger than Max or Mana individually. She had much richer foundations than the two. While the two had only truly taken their training seriously after Rui got into the Martial Academy, that was only five years of meaningful training. He had taught them basic mixed martial art while letting them personalize their comforts and strengths in a very natural and organic way.

However, Crea had clearly been training longer than them, even if not Martial Art, she had access to vastly better training and growth resources that the siblings most certainly didn't have access to. In fact, they had only recently gotten access to what Crea had her entire life. While Crea did turn out to be more of a spoiled brat than those two, she had also tempered herself with extreme determination.

('If those two run into her in the Martial entrance exam, it would be interesting to see the outcome, at least.') Rui pondered the matter deeply. ('She can beat them individually, but she would lose if she fought them both, which is likelier to happen than fighting them alone.')

He had trained up their teamwork, and together, they were able to cope much better than in the more chaotic rounds of the entrance exam because they could cover each other's backs and blind spots. Rui didn't intend to tell any of them about each other, if they all passed and found out anyway, then that was that.

#### Chapter 559: First Phase

"Good luck." Rui wished them with a gentle expression. "Do your best and look out for each other. Good luck."

"We'll make you proud, big brother."

"Yeah, we'll definitely get in, just you watch!"

Rui smiled with pride and affection, hoping he did a good job hiding his anxiety.

"Off you go, then." He sent them towards the long busy line of applicants, inspecting their competition. As predicted, they were all taller and bigger.

His senses swept through the area examining them carefully. ('Any Martial Apprentice applicants...?')

His eyes narrowed after a moment. ('Just one.')

When he applied, there were five.

Well.

Technically four, since Nel wasn't a Martial Apprentice, but he was as strong as one without a doubt. This made the difficulty of the entrance exam much lower, something Rui was relieved about. In his senses across the entire area, he had sensed several Martial Artists of various Realms, including a Martial Senior.

"So." Colonel Geringan's voice came from behind him. "You're seeing your siblings off, are you?"

"Same as you." Rui calmly replied. "You don't seem too surprised."

"Of course not." He circled around with measured strides in his military garb. "I knew that there was a high chance that you would enroll those two kids for the Martial entrance exam."

Rui wasn't surprised by this revelation. Colonel Geringan had already divulged that he had friends in the Martial Union, from his faction presumably, who could get things done for him that would otherwise not be possible.

He probably found out that Rui was commissioning a Martial Apprentice instructor, and why, through his sources within the Martial Union.

"You know, I'm surprised you commissioned me despite that," Rui commented lightly, meeting his gaze.

"Well, you have a reputation, and the commission was about more than just Crea, anyway." He replied straightforwardly. "And in my judgment, you haven't attempted to sabotage Crea or hold back in your training of her."

"Did you think I would?"

"It was always possible, I didn't know you very well, of course." He shook his head.

"..." Rui sighed as he watched Max and Mana finally enter. "Does Crea know?"

"Of course not." He snorted. "I'm not a fool to reveal something that could affect her performance. I don't intend to tell her, and neither should you."

"That sounds about right," Rui replied before turning and sky-walking away.

He exhaled heavily, trying to relax. He didn't care about Max and Mana failing to get in, it was always a long shot and they were aware of that. They had five more attempts each with an additional year of training and growth. He was sure that under his training, they could crack through it.

The failure would probably be good for tempering their psychological fortitude

He was more concerned with them getting hurt, but that too was not a problem in the long run.

But the worst outcome; death, was something that scared him a lot for Max and Mana.

Applicants died, it was part of the deterrence of the entrance exam, to prevent people who would be scared away by even a statistically low probability of death from applying. A lot more people flood the entrance exams if not for that.

He shook his head. "I've done everything I can, I need to trust them."

While he was out comforting himself.

Crea, Max, and Mana had already entered the Martial Academy and were guided to the first phase of the entrance exam. It was in a large hall, they had entered at one end of the hall, with the exit indicated at the very opposite end.

In between the two exits was a line of Martial Artists in the uniform of the Martial Union, with tables with boxes on them, filled with something they couldn't see. Time passed until the hall grew jam-packed with thousands of applicants and finally, something changed.

An old man emerged from the other side with a long flowing beard and mustache. Even his eyebrows extended, curling down. He was escorted by two Martial Artist bodyguards that intimidated anybody from approaching too close to him.

Yet, neither the row of Martial Artists forming a barrier to the other side nor the bodyguards drew, nay, wrenched their attention away. The old man singlehandedly outshined all of the other Martial Artists in the room.

"Applicants." He addressed them.

It was a simple word, yet it exerted profound pressure on each of them. They weren't able to fathom even a portion of it, yet they could sense, instinctually, that the man possessed godly power. They were no more than ants.

The atmosphere chilled, by just a degree, as none of them dared to interfere.

"Today you have gathered here for a reason. You have come from close and far to overcome the barriers and obstacles that stand between you and the Martial Academy, the greatest haven for the growth of Martial Art in the Kandrian Empire." He paused. "Most of you will fail."

The atmosphere stiffened as he very clearly iterated what they all knew.

"Some of you will succeed. Only those that have displayed the necessary mental fortitude born out of determination and perseverance, only those whose desire to walk their Martial Path is extraordinarily strong can become a Martial Artist." He paused once more, letting them digest his words.

"Steel your hearts, applicants." He continued. "I am headmaster Aronian, and I look forward to seeing you traverse your Martial Paths."

"The first phase of the exam is rather simple." He explained. "The Martial Apprentices you see before you will be handing out passes to the second phase of the exam. You need only collect the pass from the Martial Apprentices successfully. If you do obtain a pass from them, then you may proceed to the second phase of the exam. Good luck."

And just like that, he turned around and walked away.

Many of the applicants had confounded expressions on their faces. Yet, there were many that were completely unperturbed among them.

Crea, Max, and Mana calmly walked toward the Martial Apprentices.

## Chapter 560: Second Phase

Most of the applicants didn't understand what was happening. Only the applicants from the Martial community or applicants with a connection to a Martial Artist or repeat applicants knew what was going on. The first phase was unchanging, but that wasn't public knowledge, not exactly.

Yet people soon understood as they tried approaching the Martial Apprentices.

"Waaah!" One boy squealed in terror as he stumbled back, away from the Martial Apprentice holding a pass in his hands.

The Martial Apprentices glared at him with a fierce expression, terrifying him even more, while eying all the applicants, daring any of them to step forward and grab the pass.

The applicants froze as waves of bloodlust came from the Martial Apprentices. It exerted a terrifying pressure inside their minds as their subconscious danger and risk evaluation systems evaluated them to be terrifyingly strong, posing a huge threat to their life. A tremendous amount of pressure was generated in a lot of them.

"Damn...!" Another girl gritted her teeth as she did her absolute best to push herself towards the Martial Apprentice. "Not again!"

Just because one knew about the test did not mean that one could pass it. Just knowing about an obstacle did not mean that they could overcome it, and a good chunk of the applicants of the Martial community and of those who attempted the entrance last year was realizing this the same way. Mental fortitude was much harder to train than physical fortitude because the rate of success was low, there was no guarantee that the training would yield success.

"Applicant 538; Crea jenken, pass!"

"Thank you." Crea plucked the pass out of the Martial Apprentice's hand before walking past him to exit the hall.

"Woah," Max mumbled. "She was so cool."

"We can do it too." Mana reminded him. "Just remember what big brother Rui taught us."

Max nodded. "Concentration."

The two exhaled deeply before recentering their focus and walking towards the Marital Apprentices.

Each step was harder than the last.

As they approached the Martial Apprentices, the fear generated within them grew more intense. Their steps become labored as they walked on, as though they were wading through a river. The deeper they crossed through it, the more resistance the currents threw their way.

STEP

The two of them were panting by the time they reached their Martial Apprentices.

"Applicant 878; Mana Quarrier, pass!"

"Applicant 877; Max Quarrier, pass!"

The two of them quickly took their passes before quickly passing through the exit.

"We did it!" Max rejoiced.

"We sure did." Mana grinned.

"But, I dunno, is it just me, or was that easier than the training we did big brother Quarrier?" Max wondered with a curious expression.

"Now that you mention it..." Mana grew a little absorbed in thought. "Big brother does get us much more winded much quicker."

The two pondered a bit before shrugging. It didn't really matter since they had already passed it. They simply followed the directions to the second phase of the exam. They were eventually led to an open ground. It was an artificial multi-environment ground with various different kinds of topographies and vegetation.

When Mana and Max arrived they found a much smaller group of applicants that had passed through the first round. The two could vaguely feel that this group of applicants was much stronger. It was par for course, no one could pass the first round with weakness.

The two of them silently waited as an increasing number of applicants poured in, each having passed the first phase until the flow stopped.



Max and Mana looked around, getting an estimate of the number of applicants that had made it through the first phase. The sheer number of applicants that didn't make it through was astonishing to them.

Rui had never given them great confidence in their capabilities, he had always made the first phase sound basic and fundamental. They had assumed that most of the applicants would be able to pass it. To their utter surprise, it was the exact opposite. Most people failed it.

They wouldn't be surprised if only less than ten percent of the original population made it through.

"Wow..." Max whispered to Mana. "So few..."

"Yeah..." Mana nodded.

Soon, the next phase began. A Martial Apprentice appeared from the entrance, gazing at them all.

"Applicants, I am the proctor of the second round of the entrance exam. The second phase of the exam will commence here." He told them. "You will all be provided badges with your application number on them. Your objective for the second round is simple. The average application number of this group, that is when all your application numbers are summed and divided by the number of applicants, is 1026. Your objective and the condition for passing this round is to ensure that the sum of your application badges at the end of the round exceeds 1500. Meaning, you can take the badges of other candidates and wear them. As long as the sum of all the badges you're wearing exceeds 1500, you will have passed."

He paused, letting them digest the second phase of the entrance exam.

"The rules are few. You may procure the badges you need in any way you wish. Any badge in your position must be pinned on your chest at all times. You may not conceal your badge or the number on it in any way. The second phase begins the very moment the doors close behind me. The second phase lasts exactly an hour."

He informed them as he walked out of there.

Instantly all the applicants put a huge distance from each other, they had barely gotten any time to consider the second round of the entrance exam at all and it was already about begin. Each of them was highly tense as they looked at their badges, doing some quick math and figuring out who among their opponents they ought to target.

They scouted their opponents' badges, looking for a suitable number and also a suitable opponent.

STEP STEP STEP

THUD