Martial Unity 71

Chapter 71: Conclusion

Rui adopted a new stance. He brought his arms up, but positioned them lower than before, with their fists directed at Milliana. The physical difference between this stance and his previous one was subtle, but made all the difference in the world. His new stance was geared towards offense, whereas his old stance was partially defensive.

He dashed towards Milliana with Parallel Walk and Balance Direction, crossing the gap between them as quickly as possible.

BOOM

He launched a flying knee kick amped with Vital Pressure straight into her guard, it was an extremely powerful blow that used the momentum generated by the Apprentice-level maneuvering techniques to increase the impact.

Milliana managed to mitigate the damage with a few defensive Apprentice level techniques, but only partially, she had retreated reeling from the blow. In truth she didn't expect Rui to return with such a violently aggressive offensive strategy. She was sure he already realized that he would simply burn his energy with such highly energy-consuming tactics.

Rui launched more and more powerful blows, putting his body weight behind each of them uncaring for his defense. If Milliana was a defensive or evasive specialist, she would have been able to deal with the attacks while maintaining her ground. But she was an all-rounder stamina-specialist. Her focus on defense wasn't as strong as it would have needed to be to not be forced for her to open up distance between them.

She was also very much capable of an offensive approach too however.

She launched several jabs at Rui, but Rui blocked them briefly before continuing his offense unperturbed to her great surprise.

Rui on other hand was inwardly ecstatic.

('Minimalistic energy consumption reduces both your offensive and defensive options, you cannot launch bombastic offensive attacks like Fae because they are quite energy-consumptive.') he figured. ('I doubt you can manage such attacks in the first place.')

He was partially right. The lesser number of offensive options made her attacks easier to predict and thus easier to defend against by timing his defense well, but the process was much more taxing and stressful than he had imagined.

Furthermore, his muscles were starting to sore while Milliana appeared to be pristine condition asides from some bruises that Rui had given her. This was surely the result of stamina-supplementary Apprentice-level techniques.

('She can keep this up for a long time while I can't, I need to win quickly.')

He needed to execute his strategy immediately. He kept blasting her, while she mitigated the damage with minimal motions, however, while doing so she began reaching the edge of the ring.

('Is this his plan? A ring-out?') Milliana pondered, disappointed. ('If so, he underestimated me.') She adopted a tougher and stiffer stance, determined not back down more. She was not new to this strategy; it was one of the many tactics the other Apprentice students had attempted to defeat her.

One foot away from the ring, and Rui changed his stance abruptly, he opened his fists into open palms placing them beside him at chest height while crouching.

('A wrestling stance.') Milliana mused.

His intentions were transparent to her. He intended to shoot; a lunging action in wrestling aimed to performing a takedown, and push her out of the ring.

This was also not a strategy she had not experienced. But a simple strategy such as this had an equally simple counter-strategy.

She would merely need to step forward and shift all her weight to the pivotal front leg, and using the back leg as a force driver was the way to deal with shoots, then she would turn the battle into full-contact ground-grappling by shifting both of them off-balance. This was the least stamina-consumptive way of safely mitigating the risk of a ring out. It was hard to push someone out of boundaries when both of your bodies were on the ground in a taut locked stalemate, it would be possible for a grappling specialist, of course, but she knew Rui was not one. Furthermore, she was certain she had more experience in wrestling than he did.

Wrestling was inherently a battle of perseverance; it was a very stamina-intensive battle, where stamina was just as important as technique.

('Challenging a stamina-oriented specialist in a form of combat where stamina is king, you are more foolish than I expected, Rui Quarrier.') She earnestly evaluated, as Rui dashed at her, executing the shoot just like she had predicted.

She calmly waited for the perfect moment to step forward. If she stepped forward too early, she would be forced to stop herself once she reached the desire position, if she stepped forward too late, he would push her out of boundary. She wanted to shift all her weight abruptly onto the pivotal leg just as he collided with her so that the momentum of her weight shift would cancel his momentum out.

The moment came.

She raised her left leg and pushed it forward along with her body, intending to firmly plant itself in the ground.

"Gotcha." Rui whispered, sending a chill down her body.

SWEEP

Rui swiftly sent a low sweeping kick the very moment she lifted her left foot from the ground. The kick hooked her foot and swept it away before it could reach the ground

Suddenly, all of Milliana's weight that was supposed to be supported by that left foot, no longer could be supported.

Rui grinned as her body inevitably plummeted to the right.

He had never intended an earnest takedown; he knew it probably wouldn't work. She had a bit more weight than he did, by virtue of the age gap and she also had more experience with wrestling than he did, who had very little. It would be easy for her to convert the battle into full-contact ground grappling, where he stood almost no chance of victory in a head-to-head contest. Furthermore, it was such an obvious idea that she would not have remained a challenger for as long as she did if she could not deal with such a simple tactic

It was precisely because this was not a good idea, in combination with her energy-minimalistic approach that he could predict her very first counter; the leg planting and weight shifting was almost guaranteed, any other tactic in her position would go against her style strongly.

This allowed him to launch a sweeping kick as a counter just in time to knock out her weight support and throw her colossally off balance.

As she reflexively braced herself for the ground, Rui immediately whipped his left arm around her neck and pressed her head into the choke-hold.

A rear choke-hold

This was the riskiest part, but he had to take a gamble.

If he failed the maneuver or if she had a technique like Outer Convergence that could allow her to strike him hard in that position, she could break out. But he simply could not optimize his chances of victory any further, not in the middle of a fight anyway.

Back on Earth, there was a popular saying in the combat sports industry; 'If you get in a rear choke-hold, tap out.'

This was because there was no realistic way to beat the rear choke-hold back on Earth. It clamped down on the arteries and esophagus like an anaconda and exert such high pressure, that fighters described it the sensation as 'I felt my head was going to explode.'

Rui had to simply pray that this earthly wisdom would hold true in this world.

He squeezed down on her neck with his left arm and pushed her neck down with his right arm.

Yet she never tapped.

He squeezed and squeezed, yet she never resigned.

('What is she trying to do?!')

"Match over!" The supervisor rushed over. It was only then had Rui realized that she had passed out.

The rear choke-hold cut off the blood supply to the brain almost entirely, it was not unusual for its targets to pass out. It just hadn't struck Rui in the heat of the moment, because of his paranoia that she would break out of his rear choke-hold.

It seems she did not have any techniques that allowed to break out of the hold in a short amount of time.

Rui immediately released the hold; it would be dangerous to hold her in it any longer. Even as a paramedical team carried her away on a stretcher, Rui couldn't help but feel elated.

This was the first time he beat an experienced Martial Apprentice!

All the Martial Apprentices he had beaten were people like him, people who had recently advanced to the Apprentice Realm. These Apprentices had shaky foundations and hadn't expanded or developed their Martial Art much and were even more lacking in experience than he was.

But his rationality quickly established itself as he looked back on the fight.

('She wouldn't have lost in a real fight.') Rui realized.

There were no ring-outs in a real fight, which was a crucial part of his tactic, Rui did not think he would be able to beat her without this element.

('I've obtained enough basic experience with the six techniques I've already learnt, I can improve faster with developing more techniques and diversifying my Martial Art further yet.')

Chapter 72: Foundational concerns

"Saw you beating Milliana, good job man, she's strong." Kane complimented.

"Thanks." Rui replied, before smirking at Kane. "I heard Fae came back with a fury and kicked your butt." He playfully teased.

"I was tired!" Kane complained. "I beat her again after I came back having consumed some potions!"

Rui laughed wholeheartedly. After he left to spar with Milliana, he'd grown absorbed in his own battles, he had wanted to maintain his defender position for as long as possible. He'd heard of and caught glimpses of Kane and Fae sparring with each other for the rest of the sparring session.

Fae had come back with a fury after the initial loss, rejuvenated and healed, and beat Kane to a pulp. What Rui found amusing was that after Kane came back, also rejuvenated and healed, he repaid the favour, defeating her again. This started a petty cycle of rivalry between them, where they would each come back healed and rejuvenated after a loss and beat the crap out of the fatigued other.

He shook his head, laughing.('Teenagers.')

He often forgot that the two of them were no more than kids to him, they were in their immature stage, so he supposed this wasn't unusual, he only found it amusing and interesting. The fact that they were able to exchange wins and losses one after the other clearly implied they were truly at the same level in terms of combat prowess. The reason they lost was because one usually was more fatigued than the other.

The same could be said for Fae's initial loss, she had already defended her position against several Apprentices prior to Kane, Rui included.

"So who got more wins?" Rui asked, curiously.

"I had one over her by the end of the session." Kane smirked smugly. "I'm going to rub this in her annoying face when we run into each other next."

Rui laughed, shaking his head.

"So, what are you gonna do now?" Kane asked. "Any plans?"

"Yeah, I do have some." He nodded. "I need to increase and diversify my arsenal. The six techniques I have now barely count as a foundation but it still has gaps. My options in combat are pretty limited. I have only one offensive technique, Vital Pressure. This largely restricts my means and chances of victory. Furthermore, it's Vital Pressure is not meant to be a finishing move, it's just meant to increase the damage of your strikes."

Kan nodded. Vital Pressure was one of the foundational offense-oriented striking techniques he had mastered too. His raw physical prowess was subpar, this was due to him training his body for speed, so techniques that increased the damage he inflicted were truly necessary.

"An all-rounder does need options all-round." He concurred. "I'm heading to catch some rest. I'm reaching my limit with the rejuvenation potions and we have an academic mission coming up apparently. So catch you later."

"Sure, get some rest, see ya." Rui nodded, before heading to the Apprentice library, thinking about what he just told Kane.

"I truly do lack options, I have two maneuvering techniques, two defensive techniques, one supplementary technique and one offensive technique."

Furthermore, his offense was limited to striking, meaning he could not grapple against even a half-way decent Apprentice grappler. This was also an undesirable outcome, the VOID algorithm's effectivity depended on how versatile the user was, and how proficient the user was across the board.

Which is why he resolved to strengthen his full-contact and grappling combat prowess with the next round of techniques he was going to learn.

"One offensive grappling technique for sure, one defensive grappling technique too. What else?" He muttered to himself. "A finisher move would be nice too, ideally, it should be flexible as well. I doubt such a thing would be among the free foundational techniques though. The best would be finding a technique whose value highly depends on its utility."

There were many variables that determined the impact of a Martial Art technique in battle. Efficiency was definitely one important parameter, but there were others as well.

Compatibility was just as important, if not even more important many a times. Compatibility between the user's body and mindset and the technique could greatly influence the impact the technique had in combat.

A technique best meant for a light and agile body like Kane wouldn't be used optimally in the hands of a bulky heavy-weight with extremely developed muscles, and conversely, techniques constructed for heavy-weights would not do very well in the hands of someone like Kane.

Flexibility of a technique was also important. Flexibility usually came at the expense of efficiency. The two were inherently at odds with each other to some degree. Part of how what decided how efficient a technique was depended on how well-suited the technique was for the circumstances it was meant to be used it.

If a technique was, from the very start, constructed to excel in one and only particular situation, then it would most certainly perform extremely well in that one situation; it would have extremely high efficiency. However, that technique would not be able to be used very well in any other circumstance if it was constructed purely for one particular situation; thus, it had low flexibility.

However, if a technique, from the very start, was constructed to be used any number of circumstances; then it would have high flexibility. But since it wasn't constructed to excel in any particular scenario, it

won't be extremely effective if used in any one particular situation and its effect when used in combat was somewhat limited.

It was like the difference between a general physician and, say, a cardiologist. For all matters related the heart, the cardiologist would absolutely perform a better diagnosis and treatment, but for all other medical matters, the general physician would be more equipped to diagnose them, and thus would do a better job, even if not as good as specialists in those fields.

This was the difference between efficiency and flexibility.

It was, of course, not impossible for techniques to be extremely efficient and flexible. Just like how it was not impossible for a prodigious genius to specialize in many medical fields. But such techniques were rare, and valuable. It would certainly be difficult to obtain them.

An overwhelming majority of techniques fell in the middle, having a decent balance efficiency and flexibility, with a decent majority leaning one way or another

The Academy did grade techniques in flexibility; however, they arranged techniques via efficiency. After all, the techniques were not stored digitally where it would be easy to sort them by multiple parameters.

"The VOID algorithm works better with more flexible techniques than more efficient techniques for sure, though." He murmured to himself.

The VOID algorithm was a manifestation to embody Bruce lee's philosophy of flexibility. It was definitely more compatible with techniques that were inherently flexible than techniques were extremely rigid.

Did that mean Rui intended to forget about high efficiency and focus purely on flexibility.

Rui shook his head. "That would be foolish."

There were scenarios were specialized high-efficiency techniques would aways accomplish far, far more than any number of flexible techniques.

"Ideally, I want a solid foundation of flexible techniques with several high-efficiency specialist techniques in every field, range and form of combat."

This was an extremely tall order.

As of right now, Rui had a half-baked foundation that had more holes than it had substance.

Reaching his ideal would take a long time especially since it was impossible to accomplish his goal with the techniques that the Academy offered free of cost.

"Meaning I'll probably have to complete lots of missions before I accomplish my goal." Rui mused.

Rui intended to begin applying for missions after the next round of techniques he learnt. By then his foundation would be solid enough that nobody but the more experienced and talented Apprentices would be able to beat him, once he completely got used to those techniques.

This was because his rate of learning was far higher than his peers, while his peers would have to take a lot of rest for as many days as they consumed potions, he could spend those days grinding like a madman, furthermore his recovery was also much faster than them.

The sustained training allowed him to immerse himself in the learning of techniques. The continuous immersion allowed him to learn techniques faster. This was because the human mind was not a machine that could instantly enter into the top gear learning, it was only after expending a solid amount of mental energy would the mind reach its peak as far as learning speed went. People who spent an hour continuously learning, learnt faster than those who learnt than those who learnt continuously for in two thirty-minute sessions, who learnt better than those would learn continuously for six ten-minute sessions.

Accumulation mattered, the only reason it wasn't recommended to spend too much time on one task was because of fatigue, but with potions and Rui's great tolerance, this was no longer true.

He intended to abuse this advantage, after all, he wasn't confident of fulfilling missions as he was right now.

"After I round up a bit more, I'll definitely head to complete more missions."

Just as he enunciated this thought, he had reached the library.

Chapter 73: New techniques!

When Rui entered, he immediately headed over to the grappling wing of the defense-oriented section of the library. He intended to first and foremost strengthen his grappling and full-contact combat. There were a vast variety of techniques in there, but unfortunately, most of them were not free of cost.

Throws and flips of different forms and principles.

Locks and holds of different kinds and based on different mechanism.

A variety of takedown and rolling techniques as well.

Just browsing through them evoked a strong sense of greed within him. It almost clouded his judgement, but thankfully the prohibitive cost prevented him from acting on his greed.

"I firstly need a flexible technique that allows me to ensure I won't be defeated too easily in full-contact grappling." He muttered to himself. "This will serve as my defensive foundation in so far as grappling is concerned, if someone ever successfully executes a takedown on me, I won't be helpless."

With this in mind, he grasped a particular scroll he had been eying for a while.

"This will do, for now." He nodded.

[Shifting Silhouette]

This was a defensive grappling technique aimed at preventing successful takedowns and throws, it also allowed the user to more effectively disengage and break free from a general full-contact tussle and also to. If used correctly this could allow Rui to stalemate and eventually break free from full-contact grapples while also significantly reducing the probability of simpler grappling offensive techniques from successfully working.

It involved foiling takedown attempts and throwing/flipping maneuvers by detecting the change in center of gravity that takedown/throws were causing and cancelling it by reversing the change in the center of gravity in the opposite trajectory using one's core and legs.

"Not a flashy technique whatsoever, but it's a decent defense against grappling attacks."

Of course, like most foundational techniques, it was overall of a somewhat low-grade to mid-grade technique taking into account both efficiency and flexibility, but it would have to do for now.

Once made his decision, he continued skimming through them, looking for something that would suit his purposes, before something caught his eye.

[Binding lash]

"A counter-offensive technique, huh?"

A counter-offensive technique was a technique that was both defensive and offensive in nature.

Rui began carefully reading through the summary, as well as the more elaborate description.

"It's a technique that intercepts incoming strikes with a body hold?" Rui thought aloud. "Interesting..."

The technique function by having the user withstand the blow by having the user move with the strike in a manner similar to Elastic Shift before grasping the limb with both arms and legs, and using all four limbs as well as the core to stress the joints and dislocate them.

Rui whistled. This was quite a good technique!

It was a technique that allowed him to turn a striking contest into a grappling contest where he had a huge initiative advantage!

Although this technique was also not invincible, and also extremely difficult to nail completely, it was still quite useful and expanded his approach and options when dealing with an opponent. Even if it failed with the dislocation, it would still give the user an advantage in the grappling battle.

After he collected the two scrolls from the grappling wing of the defensive section, he quickly scurried over to the offensive section of the library, looking for something that could bolster his lacking offense.

('I'll take one grappling offense-oriented technique and another striking offense-oriented technique.') Rui thought.

Vital Pressure was not enough, he needed something that could end a fight. A technique that leaned more towards efficiency than flexibility.

"Hm?" Rui frowned as he came across an interesting technique.

[Flowing Canon]

This was a technique that increased the striking power of the user by having them build up momentum and converting all that built-up momentum into striking power once they reached the target, allowing the user to momentarily strike with raw power far surpassing what he would ordinarily be able to generate.

Rui's eyes lit up, this was the kind of technique he was looking for, Vital Pressure was extremely flexible and could work in any situation. But it could not allow him to increase his power-per-strike by much. Flowing Canon on the other hand didn't have much flexibility, but if he used it in the right time and place it could be a game finisher.

('Alright, that serves as a good offense-oriented striking technique.') Rui thought ('Time to look for a grappling offensive technique.')

This one took him a while, he spent nearly an hour browsing through techniques, looking for one that could benefit him the most. Until;

[Mirage Dive]

This was an Apprentice-level takedown technique. It was a technique that began at range, had the user bullrush towards the target and, once they were close-quarters-combat range, feint a takedown on the upper body while actually performing a takedown on the lower body. This technique used a sharp feint to trick the opponent into raising his guard to the upper abdomen, creating a weakness on the lower body that could be exploited for a successful takedown.

If executed successfully, it would either knock the opponent out or at the very least give the user a huge advantage in the grappling contest that would ensue.

Rui nodded, this fit his purposes. This was another low-flexibility technique, but increased his options and means of victory greatly. It could be a killer move if he used it wisely.

With this, he was satisfied with the variety he added to his previously lacking and empty offense and defense.

('Now for just one more technique...') Rui thought to himself.

He wanted to get a supplementary technique that could increase aspects of his fighting style the others hadn't yet.

"Maybe I should get a stamina-oriented technique and take a page out of Milliana's book." Rui murmured, pondering the option.

This was a feasible course of action. Increasing his stamina, would take a weight off his shoulders and fight more cleanly and carefully, taking his time.

"What to do..." He wondered.

Chapter 74: Training begins!

Rui had already chosen four techniques. An offensive, defensive and a counter-offensive grappling technique and an offensive striking technique.

He had already decided to pick five techniques, so that left one more. He was considering a stamina-oriented technique, this was definitely synergetic with the VOID algorithm. After all, the VOID algorithm could not work instantaneously, it needed time.

Having a stamina-oriented technique would give him more leeway to conduct the VOID algorithm.

('Alright.') He nodded. ('Let's go with that.')

There were several stamina-oriented techniques in the supplementary technique section of the Apprentice library. A lot of them were based on different principle and mechanisms that either focused on increasing the net amount of energy stored in the body to increase stamina, or focused on reducing unnecessary non-combat related energy consumption during combat.

He ended with two viable candidates screened after half an hour of browsing.

[Helical Breathing]

This technique was an advanced Apprentice-level version of Harmonic Breathing, not only did it boost general metabolic functions, but also reduced the energy-consumption significantly below what Harmonic Breathing could achieve.

[Bone Balance]

This was a balance-oriented technique that allowed the user to stand up straight purely by positioning their weight under their bones, without help of muscles. The user would be able to avoid consuming energy by standing, increasing his stamina in the long run.

This was the kind of technique that made Rui do a double-take, reminding him yet again how different from Earth Gaea was, for techniques like this to even exist and be viable and practical.

Both techniques had an equal level of flexibility and efficiency. This resulted in equal difficulty as well. The greater the sum of efficiency and flexibility, the greater the overall potency of the technique and thus the higher the difficulty.

There were no such things as potent techniques that were also super easy to master.

But despite this equality between them, the choice was clear between them, the answer was clear.

"Helical Breathing is an extension of Harmonic Breathing" Rui muttered. "It's the Apprentice level version of the technique."

Harmonic Breathing was not an Apprentice Learning, it was an Exploration technique he had mastered while he was still in the Exploration Stage. Helical Breathing was an Apprentice-level extension of it, meaning he would probably master is quicker than mastering another technique from scratch.

"Alright, that settles the deal then."

He took hold of the five techniques he decided to master. With this, he will have mastered a total of ten techniques.

Vital Pressure, Elastic Shift, Balance Direction, Acute Edge, Parallel Walk, Binding Lash, Flowing Canon, Mirage Dive, Shifting Silhouette and Helical Breathing.

This formed the bare basics of his foundation.

"No, not entirely, I still don't have techniques for all ranges of combat."

Hand-to-hand combat could be divided into several ranges even further; kicking-range combat, jabbing-range combat, elbow-range combat and full-contact combat or grappling.

Each of these ranges, despite being separated by tens of centimeters, were quite different from each other.

"Still, what I have at least ensures I don't have a weakness anywhere."

As far as offense went, Vital Pressure gave him versatility and flexibility at almost all ranges, but its efficiency was low. Flowing Canon gave him offensive options at most striking ranges although it needed accumulation of momentum from a distance each time it was to be used. Mirage Dive and Binding Lash gave him offensive and counter-offensive options at full-contact range. Thus, covering the bare basics in most regards.

His defense was better, he had Elastic Shift and Acute Edge, as well Binding Lash for defense against striking. He could use one or more of these depending on which was more apt. He also had Shifting Silhouette for full-contact/grappling offense.

Balance Direction and Parallel Walk improved his mobility and locomotion, but only in regards to travel speed, they didn't enhance his combat speed. This was something he aimed to fix in the future.

And Helical Breathing improved his stamina, allowing him to fight a slower pace and giving him more time to adapt to his opponents.

"Alright, this will have to do for now."

He applied for copies of each of the techniques and immediately head to the Apprentice respiratory technique facility of the supplementary wing, the Helical Breathing technique would be the easiest to master, no doubt, the sooner he mastered and improved his stamina, the better the remaining training regimes would work out too. What surprised him was that unlike the Harmonic Breathing technique, the Helical Breathing technique had training methodologies that specified involved actual respiratory training equipment.

"The Harmonic Breathing technique simply requires you to time inhalation with pulsing of your blood, so that the maximum amount of air can come into contact with your blood" The Apprentice supervisors explained to Rui. "The Helical Breathing technique involves not just maximizing the amount of blood coming into contact with your air, but also maximizing the amount of air coming in contact with all that blood.

The lungs inhaled air that would be diffused and mixed into blood, maximizing the amount of blood and maximizing the amount of air coming into contact with said blood allowed each cell in the body to obtain more oxygen allowing the user to generate the same amount of power with less effort, ultimately prolonging stamina.

"Since you've already mastered Harmonic Breathing, we can skip the first stage of the training, since it is Harmonic Breathing training. I recommend starting with the next stage." The supervisor explained.

"Understood." Rui nodded, having already planned that

"We'll start by increasing your lung capacity and strengthening your respiratory strength."

"Yes sir."

Lung capacity and respiration strength were important parameters of respiration even on Earth. Lung capacity referred to how open your trachea, your airway, was and how well your lung could expand. Respiratory strength was dependent on the diaphragm, the sole muscle that was actually responsible for breathing; expanding to suck in air into the lungs and contracting to expel air from the lungs.

Improving these two would significantly improve the Harmonic Breathing technique in and of themselves.

However, that wasn't all there was to it, the Helical technique was an Apprentice level technique, meaning only Apprentices and above could master it, as far as difficulty went. The later stages involved manners of breathing that further maximized the amount of air that made contact with blood! The end result was a breathing technique that facilitated much greater power and stamina.

Such was the prowess of an Apprentice-level technique.

Chapter 75: The power of deception

The exercises involved strengthening the diaphragm, in ways that were very similar to exercising the rest of the body. Muscles were generally trained and strengthened by expanding and contracting them against resistance, usually a weight load. One would shift weights by expanding and contracting particular muscle groups across the body, leading to them growing stronger over time.

The diaphragm was no different in this regard. Rui spent a lot of time inhaling and exhaling through a breathing contraption that severely hindered breathing, this meant the user had to push his diaphragm to the absolute limit if he or she wanted to breathe normally.

As Rui gasped and wheezed during this exercise, for the very first time in his second life, he came to hate a training regime.

Up until now he had taken all the different and various training sessions in stride, even though they were difficult and new to him, he truly enjoyed the feeling of his proficiency of a technique growing better and better, it was an addictive feeling.

Yet this training was truly unpleasant, the reason for that was simple.

('This sensation of strained respiration is identical to that of the asthma attacks I used to suffer back on Earth.') He gasped and wheezed.

Those moments were the worst of his life, and now he had to experience them continuously for hours.

Still, he realized this training would ultimately improve his breathing and stamina, so he swallowed the bitter pill and earnestly dedicated himself to the training.

Once he was done, he quickly bade the supervisor farewell and scurried out of the facility as fast as he could.

"I can't wait till I've mastered this technique so I don't ever have to do that training ever again in my life."

Still, that training made normal breathing feel like a luxury, making him appreciate things he had come to take for granted in his second life.

He shook his head putting aside such thoughts, before heading to the next training facility to start learning the next of the five new techniques he had procured. He had already decided which technique he wanted to look at next.

('I'm quite curious about Mirage Dive.')

This was the offensive grappling technique he had decided to learn. It was a technique in which the user feinted an upper takedown only to exploit the opening created by the feint to instead go for a lower takedown.

It was one of the measures he taken to improve his offense and expand his offensive options in combat.

What surprised him was how different the facility for this, and other similar techniques, was from other facilities. Then again, this was his first time visiting the training facility for an Apprentice-level grappling training facility. He had not learnt any Apprentice-level technique prior, after all.

The training equipment was quite different from what he was used to compared to the other training facilities he had trained in.

"Mirage Dive eh?" The supervisor mused. "Alright, no problem." He nodded. "Mirage Dive, as a technique, can be divided into three different stages; the feint, the transition and the actual takedown. The training regime for the technique involve working on each separately and then all together."

Rui nodded, listening closely.

"The feint is the most difficult part of the technique. In order to create a real opportunity and opening for the real takedown, the feint needs to be convincing, a regular faking motion ain't gonna cut it, kid."

"I did go through the recommended training regime for the feint, it is a bit strange.

The supervisor nodded. "The training regime for the feint requires being hooked up to a bodysuit that we can manually freeze at any time we want, its fabric and structure is made from multiple different kinds of esoteric bestial and floral substances, and it operates on strange principles, but that doesn't matter. We'll have you practice the perfect upper takedown until you master the form and trajectory, then we'll have you wear the suit and perform the upper takedowns, except we'll freeze the suit in the middle of the takedown, we'll do this over and over and over. This helps your body physically understand what the perfect upper takedown feint looks and physically feels like. The perfect upper takedown feint is an incomplete real upper takedown, a real upper takedown cut in half, this way no one call easily tell it's fake"

Rui nodded. Doing this would teach his body the timing of the feint and the trajectory of the feint. Mirage Dive was a technique whose feint trajectory and timing is meant to be indistinguishable from the real deal. That's what made it effective, that's what made it an Apprentice-level technique. The sheer convincingness would force his targets to subconsciously raise their guard to intercept the upper charge, giving the user a huge opening that could be exploited with a real takedown, but the quality of the feint was made it the technique Apprentice-level, and what made the technique a finisher.

Furthermore, this technique had a flipside to it. If someone was very familiar with this technique and predicted an upper takedown feint and prepared for a lower takedown, then Rui could simply turn the upper takedown feint into an actual real upper takedown!

In the Mirage Dive technique, the upper takedown and upper takedown feint were absolutely the same until the halfway point.

Meaning Rui could choose to feint, or actually perform the takedown if he wanted! Because there was no difference between the feint and the actual takedown, Rui could choose to do either depending on how his opponent responded. He could adapt to his opponent's response and reaction!

This was part of the reason he chose this technique, although it had only two possible scenario applications, because of the fact that he could cater and had the ability to make the choice after analyzing his opponent, it had more flexibility than one would expect of a technique with two possibilities.

"But that's not all." The supervisor grinned toothily. "Once you truly and fully master this technique, your feint becomes so good, that your opponent sees an illusion!"

Chapter 76: Training the transition

The training regimes for Mirage Dive were new and alien to him. For almost all the training he had engaged in prior, there were elements of it that paralleled the training on Earth, but the training for the feinting maneuvers of the Mirage Dive technique were truly different, he was no different from a normal Apprentice learning of the technique for the first time.

On Earth, feints were useful and effective, but the training for them was nothing beyond repetition and practice.

What truly surprised him was that the supervisor insisted that the feint, when done correctly, could create illusions in the mind of the target.

Rui frowned "How can a feint technique create illusions like that?"

"Because of how convincing the feint is, I suppose." The supervisor scratched his head. "If you don't believe me, I can show it to you."

Rui was intrigued. He knew the supervisors of a facility had mastered all the techniques of the training facility they were charged to supervise, so he wasn't surprised.

"Sure." He nodded. "I'll take you up on that offer."

The supervisor nodded, putting some distance between them, taking a standard wrestling stance, Rui in-turn mimicked him.

The supervisor charged, lunging towards Rui's upper abdomen and sure enough.

WHOOSH

The lunge faded away as Rui tried to intercept it!

The supervisor had not performed an upper takedown, but somehow Rui saw him doing that.

"See that?" The supervisor grinned.

Rui had requested him for a few more demonstrations before he finally deciding to begin the training. Illusion techniques were also not a real thing back on Earth, and it was an incredible experience to actually be subjected to one.

He also quickly learnt how effective the technique was. He had truly fallen for the illusion even though he knew it was a feint, it had created a huge opening which the supervisors could have easily exploited to execute a powerful real takedown.

The more Rui learnt about this technique the more he was impressed by it! He could hardly believe that this was a free technique.

He immediately started training, the first stage of training involved the feint, and he did put on the black bodysuit that the supervisor told him about. It was remarkably easy to stretch, reminding Rui of the suit the applicants were required to wear in the second round of the Martial Entrance Exam.

"Ready? Get in position." The supervisor instructed, as he fiddled with a crystal looking object. "I'll be freezing the suit at the right time so that you can physically feel the right timing."

This was the part that confused Rui. How exactly would he exert control over the suit remotely? Did such technology exist? Was it possible to communicate remotely via technology too?

Rui glanced at the crystal suspiciously, that crystal was probably esoteric matter with strange exotic effects that allowed for it transmit signals in some form or the other that triggered some mechanism in the suit that caused it to freeze up.

"Ah make sure your center of gravity remains balanced, otherwise you'll just fall down unbalanced when I do activate the freeze." The supervisor advised.

"Will do." Rui affirmed.

"Alright, just execute the normal upper takedown you learnt in your Foundation technique, it's based on that technique after all."

Rui nodded, before glancing at a wrestling dummy in front of him. He charged, before lunging at the upper abdomen, before suddenly freezing.

"You feel that? That particular instance in the trajectory, and that particular moment of body weight shifting? That's the moment. You need to memorize this timing with your body, otherwise you'll never nail it. This freezing stage is necessary to only give you a reference point for the right timing and execution of the technique. Once that's done, you'll get better at it with repetition of feint, trying to match the timing I showed you." The supervisor explained.

Rui nodded. "I still haven't memorized the timing and placement yet. But this training definitely helps, I don't think I would get the hang of the it if I had to only watch you and train by myself."

"That's what the Academy is for, now, let's try it one more time. You're going to have to repeat this maneuver many times for you to completely remember the timing and placement of the transition."

Rui acquiesced, resuming the training. Each time he performed a legitimate upper takedown, and each time the supervisor stopped him at the moment Rui was supposed to begin the transition to the real lower takedown.

The best part about this training was how straightforwardly the supervisor could directly convey to Rui when to stop. Without this strange technology, Rui would have had to spend a far longer time trying to even understand when the optimal timing was.

But this training allowed him to bypass extensive tedious training. No wonder the Academy was so vaunted. He had truly come to realize just how much for Martial Art and Martial Artists the Academy did.

The training continued for an hour, until the supervisor halted it.

"There's no point in spending all your time engaging in only this stage." He explained. "It's best if you practice the feint after feeling the timing and placement of the transition, you'll certainly fail no doubt. But we'll get you back on the body suit next training session for an hour and then have you try and replicate it again after that hour. We'll do these over and over until you've completely mastered the feint."

Rui nodded. This certainly made sense. It was probably better to do side-by-side comparisons with his attempted timing in the transition and the accurate timing as dictated by the supervisor when he wore the body suit.

This way he could continuously get an understanding of how far he was each time as well as his rate of growth of accuracy over time. These are things that he would otherwise be entirely unable to do.

This in combination with his fearsome rate of growth, and he suspected he would master this technique much sooner than expected!

Chapter 77: Flowing Canon

Rui spent quite a while training the feint, unfortunately, he didn't make as much progress as he'd hoped.

"It's to be expected. Usually, this technique takes a long time to fully master." The supervisor reassured.

Once Rui's training session ended, he consumed several rejuvenation potions before heading out, gathering his thoughts on the Mirage Dive technique

('It's a powerful technique that is most effective when the target isn't aware of it.') Rui thought. ('Still, it can be effective even if it is known about as long as it's used cleverly. In fact, if my opponent is aware and cautious of it, I can use their caution against them to set traps.')

All in all, Rui was quite satisfied by this technique. It served its purpose as bolstering his offense and grappling options quite well, better than he'd initially expected.

"Alright the next thing I should do is head out to check out the training regimes for the remaining techniques I've picked." He estimated.

The remaining techniques were Shifting Silhouette, Binding Lash and Flowing Canon.

The technique he was most interested in next was Flowing Canon. This ability would give him more potent striking options, increasing the power of his offense. It also gave him a finisher, something he was sorely lacking with Vital Pressure alone.

"I wouldn't have had to deal with Milliana the way I did if I had these techniques." His strategy against Milliana was not easy to find or execute, if he had these techniques against then he would have been able to pull off a better and less risky strategy.

He made his way to the offensive striking technique training facility. This was a more familiar environment to him.

"Flowing Canon is indeed a good pick, you've come to the right place." The supervisor nodded, turning her gaze to Rui. "Alright, let's begin if you're ready."

Rui nodded in affirmation. "Yes mam."

"I presume you've read up and comprehended the principle and mechanisms behind the Flowing Canon technique?"

"I have."

"Alright, explain it to me in your own words."

"Flowing Canon requires the user to build up momentum and kinetic energy by speeding up, then once the user approaches the target, the user converts all the built-up momentum and kinetic energy into striking power, delivering a blow much greater than the normal physical limits of the user. The amount of power of the technique depends on how proficient the user is at the technique and how much energy and momentum the user built up prior to the usage of technique."

The supervisor nodded in return. "Good explanation. Before we begin talking about the training regimes and methodologies, I'll give you a demonstration. Come"

She took him over to a large punching bag, one that was greater than any he had ever seen. She nodded, before taking a distance of three meters away from the bag.

"I could go further behind to deliver a stronger impact, but this should be enough for a show of effectivity."

She took a wider stance with both hands balled into fists, pointing towards her target.

"Fuuu..." She exhaled before charging.

BAM

Rui's eyes widened at the sight, the strike was truly powerful.

The large punching swung beyond ninety degrees and almost did a perfect one-eighty.

"That's how it looks." She explained, using one arm to stop the swinging punching bag. "That was close, anymore and I might have broken it." She murmured, glancing at the bag.

The power of the strike resembled one of Fae's palm attacks, what made the technique much inferior was that each time it was used required the energy to build-up momentum and energy, whereas Fae could spam this level of attacks thanks to Outer Convergence.

"That's impressive." Rui murmured with honesty.

"It'll allow you to deliver powerful strikes every time your opponent puts some distance between the two of you." She explained. "Alright, if there's nothing else, we can begin with the training methodologies."

Rui nodded. "Please do."

"The technique is relatively straightforward. Building momentum just requires good old running, so that doesn't require any training. You even use certain Apprentice-level maneuvering techniques to generate more momentum and energy so that the Flowing Canons trike ends up being more powerful." She explained. "What does require training is converting all that momentum and energy into striking."

Rui nodded, absorbed into her words.

"There isn't a discrete absolute way to learn how to convert travelling momentum into striking power, it's just something you get better at by repeating. That's why you'll have noticed the scroll of the technique doesn't specify any training regimes with any equipment, we haven't devised any training equipment or technology that can aid with this technique. There are certain instructions I can give you." She mentioned, before continuing.

"Firstly, you need to get rid of your instinct of slowing down your travelling speed when you're about to reach someone. This is a normal human instinct. After all, nobody wants to crash into another person and end up hurting themselves and their incidental victim. But in this case, that instinct is detrimental. Slowing down will only kill and get rid of the power you built."

Rui nodded, this made sense. There was no point in killing momentum when using a technique that used momentum to function.

"The first step is to not slow down with your feet when you're about to hit your opponent. The second step is to slow down by striking your opponent."

Rui caught onto what she meant. This was a relatively simple matter to someone who had a background in Physics.

When a person jumped off a wall and landed on their feet, they reduced their momentum to zero by applying force on the ground when they landed. This was essentially the principle behind Flowing Canon, you begin moving very fast, then when you reach your opponent, you apply all the force on them you can and end up slowing down, by doing this you have converted all your momentum into striking power that your opponent will have to withstand.

Just like how jumping from the top of higher walls resulted in more powerful impacts when you hit the ground, moving faster and striking your opponent with all you have to come to a stop also results in more powerful impacts. This is how Flowing Canon allowed the user to transcend their limits for a brief period of time.

Chapter 78: The Remaining Techniques

"Hmmm... You don't seem confused." The supervisor noted. "Generally, I have to explain the matter to those learning the technique."

"Do students even care to learn about the mechanisms and principles behind techniques?" Rui chuckled.

"Generally, no." She shrugged. "But it's necessary. Knowing how your techniques work is vital to knowing how to use them adequately. In many a scenario, using a certain technique might not be the right answer in that scenario due to bad compatibility, but you would never know why unless you understood your techniques intimately."

Rui nodded. Techniques were like tools; their application was just as important as their quality and functioning. Even the greatest tools were worthless in the hands of one who did not know how to use them.

"Alright, now that I've explained the technique more thoroughly. Let's begin training."

Rui nodded.

"As I'm sure you already know if you've gone through the scroll, the training for this technique is extremely straightforward. You need to simply keep trying until you get the hang of it. Start by using the

technique on the punching bag from three meters away. Since you're just starting out, I'd advise not using any Apprentice-level techniques for the run-up. Also, use a simple and easy attack to begin with, once you get the hang of those you can execute more complicated attacks."

Rui nodded. "I'll start with a straight punch then."

Using momentum to amplify a straight punch was actually a popular karate technique that was frequently used in MMA, it was known as the blitz-punch. However, the Flowing Canon wasn't limited to punch, furthermore, its efficiency far exceeded that of the blitz punch technique used in MMA, this was why it was an Apprentice-level technique.

Rui spent the next few hours performing the same maneuver over and over again.

"It's better to land the attack earlier in the maneuver than you normally would." She called out. "Normally, you would land a punch when you've fully extended your arm, or just a bit before for maximum power, but in this case, landing a bit before that will prolong the impact allowing you more time and distance to convert all your momentum into striking power."

Rui nodded, and immediately, his blitz punch Flowing Canon technique was getting more and more powerful.

"How long will it take me to master?" He asked, once he decided to end his training session.

She shrugged. "This is one of those techniques that you just keep getting better and better at. There is no clear line where you can declare you've mastered the technique like there are for certain other techniques." She continued. "Still, once you reach a stage where you can smoothly convert most of your travelling momentum to striking power easily, I suppose you need not train any longer."

Once his training with Flowing Canon ended. He moved onto the remaining techniques that he learnt.

Shifting Silhouette and Binding Lash. These two remaining techniques were grappling oriented techniques Rui had decided to learn to round of his foundation. Shifting Silhouette was the least flashy technique of his most recent set of techniques, it was purely defensive that allowed him to be able to cope and handle grappling attacks and disengage with them.

Binding Lash was another technique lower flexibility but decent efficiency, allowing him to clinch incoming strikes and lock them with his entire body, allowing him to potentially dislocate the joints in question or at the very least gain a huge initiative in the grappling battle.

These two techniques along with Mirage Dive made him quite confident in his grappling solutions. Shifting Silhouette for defense, Mirage Dive for offense and Binding Lash for counter-offense.

Furthermore, the training methodologies for the remaining two techniques was much simpler than the prior techniques. For one, they weren't all that different from the grappling training that could be found back on Earth in martial arts like Judo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu and Sambo. Each of these martial arts were heavily, if not entirely, centered around grappling and wrestling.

For Shifting Silhouette, he simply trained his ability to read the change in the center of gravity and how to shift his weight in exactly the correct manner needed to counter the change in the center of gravity.

"This technique does have shortcomings." The supervisor warned. "It is limited against people in higher weight classes. Furthermore, this technique cannot counter takedown or throwing Apprentice-level techniques of higher efficiency by itself."

Rui nodded. He had already grounded his expectations for the effectivity of this technique. If it could singlehandedly counter all grappling offense, it wouldn't be free in the first place.

('The more powerful defensive grappling techniques are certainly not free of cost.') He was sure.

He had already decided to begin completing missions once he mastered the five techniques he had picked, he was finally confident of completing missions with ten Apprentice-level techniques.

"Don't get distracted." His supervisor instructed. "Binding Lash is a technique that requires delicate timing, you ain't gonna nail it if you're staring off into space like that."

"Yes, supervisor Fayne." Rui put his aside his thoughts and began focusing on the technique.

He was currently in the first training session of the fifth and final technique. For the past twenty-four techniques, he had been immersing himself in the training sessions of each technique, he wanted to get a taste of each technique as soon as possible.

The reason for this was so that he could plan the most optimal schedule for himself in the next few months.

"Ready?" Supervisor Fayne asked. "Here I come."

DASH

He blitzed over to Rui, crossing the distance in an instant launching a straightforward punch to Rui's face.

POW

Rui tried intercepting by wrapping his arms and legs around it, but much to his chagrin, he failed.

"Hahaha!" His supervisor laughed. "Nah you got it all wrong. You're supposed to move with the strike young man, not stand in one place. It's pretty much identical to the Elastic Shift technique in that regard, it's just now you have to simultaneously cling the attack while executing the Elastic Shift technique, making it much harder."

Rui got up, rubbing his bruise before taking another stance.

"Once again, please."

Chapter 79: Squire sparring

"You must be hyped for today, eh?" Kane asked Rui, smirking.

"Well..." Rui smiled wryly. "I would be lying if I said wasn't."

"You better not get your ass whooped."

"Will do."

Rui and Kane bantered as they walked over to the sparring facility. It had been year since both of them had joined the Academy, both of them had hit their growth spurts in that period, growing several inches taller, their bodies had visibly defined muscle tone, uncharacteristic of normal young adolescents, having long shed a lot of their childish features.

Rui's black hair had grown in the time that he had immersed himself in training, a testament to how he focused and invested he was. A lot of the active energy Rui had, had condensed, as if it had a direction to strive towards. Gone was the Rui that had limitless curious excitement regarding all matters related to Martial Art, and in its stead was a calm driven young man with a temperament forged by immense perseverance and hard work.

Kane on the other hand appeared to have grown more comfortable and at peace. A year of freedom, exploration and growth alongside friends had done him good. Although he wasn't absolutely free from the formidable influence of his powerful father, it was still enough for the boy to catch up on a lot of what he missed his entire life. Yet underneath the nonchalant temperament was a desire to grow strong enough to protect this freedom, he did not want to lose his freedom the moment he left the Academy, especially now that he had truly understood just blissful a life without shackles was like.

"My, look who we have here." A voice called out, instantly earning a sigh from Kane.

"Fae." He muttered in resigned peace. In the past year, he had given up on trying to shoo her away. He simply accepted she would be around to pester them and had moved on.

"Such lethargy." Fae sighed, shrugging. "Rui, to think you would join us only one year after becoming Apprentice, as expected, your growth is fearsome. It took us so long to reach that stage, right Milliana?" Fae turned to the girl accompanying him, earning a quiet nod in return.

"It took me almost two years to reach that point." She murmured softly.

"It's because he's a potion junkie." Kane grumbled.

They bantered some more until they reached the facility.

"Well, here we are." Kane announced. "Oof, she looks ready to go." He gestured at a female figure standing in the center of the biggest training ring. Rui stiffened as he felt faint pressure gazing at her.

('Martial Squire Kyrie.')

Today was a routine sparring session between the combat supervisor Squire Kyrie and the senior Apprentices. The Academy had mandated sparring sessions not only between Apprentices, but also between more developed Apprentices and Squires. Martial Apprentices who had built the foundation of their Martial Art like Rui recently were qualified to spar against Squires. He had just finished polishing up the five techniques he resolved to learn when the next Squire sparring session was announced.

('Martial Apprentices who haven't built the foundation of their Martial Art simply have too little to gain from fighting Martial Squires. They're better off learning new techniques and developing their foundation like I did rather than getting into fights so above their level they can't consolidate anything from it.')

Today was his first time fighting a Martial Squire, that too one of Squire Kyrie's caliber. From what he knew of her, she was a veteran all-rounder who served in the field for more than twenty years. Although quantity had its own quality, there was no way a bunch of kids like them were beating her under normal circumstances.

"What strategy do you guys normally use?" Rui asked.

"Uh..." Kane threw an awkward look at Rui. "We try basic stuff; you know; dogpiling her, distracting her and stuff, but it never works."

"If something like that was to work on her, she would have long died in the field."

"Yeah, but it's better than nothing." Kane shrugged.

"True." Fae concurred. "At our level, any strategy we come up with is guaranteed to fail."

"Hm..." This was a fair point. There should be little to no way they should be able to outsmart her. It wasn't a matter of intelligence, the sheer experience she had was not something young Martial Apprentices like them could outsmart.

"Still, we should do our best." Rui insisted.

"You have anything in mind?"

"First, who and all are taking part?" Rui wondered, looking around. Before he could even conceive of a strategy, he needed to gather all the necessary information at hand."

"There's Felix." Kane pointed him out.

"Ah..." Rui remembered him, he was the kid who fought Nel a year ago.

"And Dalen too." Fae waved at a big burly boy.

"He was a defense-oriented Apprentice, right?" Rui asked, having sparred with him once.

"Yeah." Kane affirmed. "He's pretty good too."

Rui quickly counted the participating Apprentices, and listed basic information about them in his head.

"Eleven Martial Apprentices. three speed and maneuvering-oriented Apprentices, four offense-oriented Martial Apprentices, two defense-oriented Apprentices, one stamina-oriented Martial Apprentice and one all-rounder." Rui surmised.

"Yeah, we don't stand a chance." Kane laughed. "But that is the point of fighting a Squire, I guess."

"If we were united, we'd do much better." Rui sighed. "Unfortunately, it's unlikely we can rally everybody under a leader and fight in a more united way."

"Martial Apprentices have too much pride and individuality to submit to others." Fae shrugged.

"Yeah..." Rui nodded. ('Not only that, the coordination needed to execute more sophisticated strategies and tactics is too much. We can't expect strangers to cooperate with each other well. This group is too incapable of working together.')

"It's almost time." Squire Kyrie called out. "Gather around, we'll begin soon."

He glanced back at Squire.

('The only advantage we have is that she's lax. She's definitely not in a combative state, nor is she going to go all out.')

"Hey." Kane threw him a puzzled look. "Are you really trying to win? You know that's basically impossible right."

"Extremely impossible." Rui helped. "Still, if you want to make the most of a fight, you better fight with determination to win." He turned back to face the Squire. "It's not every day we get an opportunity like this, after all."

Chapter 80: A challenge

Rui could feel the other students weren't as driven to win as he was. To them this was a routine impossible challenge; one that could not be won, and one that wasn't meant to be won. Rui understood this perspective, but he still wanted to give it his all.

('How can you improve if you don't push yourself to your limit?') He wondered. ('And what better way to push yourself to the limit by trying to accomplish what seems impossible?')

In order to have any chance of winning, he needed as much information as he could get. This was one of his bigger problems. He wasn't sure what was necessary to defeat a Martial Squire. In fact, he didn't know what made Martial Squires special in the first place, or what separated them from Martial Apprentices. This was something even people like Fae, Kane and Milliana were not aware of despite their background.

He had observed Martial Squires in action before. He had seen Squire Kyrie spar against the senior Apprentices before, and it just seemed like she was inhuman. Her speed, power and durability were ridiculous. Martial Apprentices like himself had already surpassed conventional human limits by virtue of having discovered their Martial Paths and having learnt Apprentice-level techniques. But that still paled in comparison to Squire Kyrie.

Rui remembered the Martial Squire he had come across when he was a little toddler. This Martial Artist was powerful enough to entirely destroy a rather large tree trunk with a single attack. A feat Rui found unbelievable to this day.

('Even with a combination of Vital Pressure and Flowing Canon amplified by Balance Direction and Parallel Walk, I don't think I could possibly replicate that feat.') At best, he would be able to inflict cracks, but shattering it to smithereens was out of question.

"Take your positions." Squire Kyrie calmly ordered. Despite the others taking their stances, she merely stood there unperturbed, tying up her red hair so that it didn't obstruct her while she was sparring.

The Apprentices gathered around her, each taking their stance, concentrating on her. The air grew more and more tense, until finally;

"Begin." she instructed.

In an instant she was lunged at by three Martial Apprentices.

WHOOSH

All three attacks missed her as she gracefully slipped out of their attack trajectories. Her attackers didn't give up, pursuing her. From the other side, Fae approached, preparing a barrage of palm attacks.

Squire Kyrie didn't try to evade this time, with nearly four people upon her, pure evasion was the less optimal choice.

Instead she clasped an incoming punch from one of the offense-oriented Martial Apprentice, flipping him over her shoulder and straight into the Fae's palm attack.

"Crap." Fae tried stopping but the throw was too swift and well-timed. It was practically impossible to stop a full-powered and sped attack point blank.

BAM

The poor boy was blown away by Fae's attack. Kyrie swiftly threw a roundhouse kick that struck the chins of her two other attackers, while ducking to avoid Fae's attack. In just a matter of moments, she dismantled three senior Apprentices with ease.

POW

She checked Fae with a straight kick, opening up the distance.

Just as she began pursuing Fae, blurry shadow in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Kane had rushed in the moment he spotted an opening.

WHOOSH

Kane launched a swift jab that Kyrie narrowly, yet cleanly avoided. Kane could normally afford to take bolder risks because he was extremely difficult to hit or catch, but that did not apply when his opponent was a Martial Squire.

Just as Kyrie turned to punish Kane, Fae, Dalen and Milliana pounced at her forcing her to pay them attention as Kane managed to evade the half-hearted strike. Soon enough every Apprentice joined the battle, picking up the slack when one of their peers was blown away or slammed to the ground by Squire Kyrie.

All Apprentices except one.

Rui had not moved since the battle began; he hadn't even taken a stance. He merely stared at Squire Kyrie, as though she was the only thing he could see.

"Hey! Do you want me to give you a written Martial invitation to join the battle or are you going to actually do something?" Kane snapped as he approached Rui, having retreated from a throw.

"I'm an all-rounder, rather than haphazardly jumping in and trying to take her down with my jack-of-all trades fighting style, I can provide more utility if I observe her more carefully and adapt to her." he calmly explained, not taking his eye off Kyrie. "My Martial Art works better with more information."

"Uh huh, sure thing." Kane sarcastically replied. "How's that working out for you so far? Any insights from your Martial Majesty?"

"She's purposely limiting herself, but in very defined manners."

"Right, that's very helpful, isn't it? I feel oh-so confident after hearing you utter those words." Kane threw a contemptuous glare at Rui.

Rui smiled wryly, meeting Kane's eyes for the first time. "When dealing with single opponents, if the attacker engages in striking, she responds with counter-offensive measures eighty-four percent of the time. When dealing with more than three attackers, she responds with evasive maneuvers ninety-two percent of the time. Her counter-offensive measures are almost entirely soft-natured, in that they use her opponent's energy against them, rather than using her own energy. Her response against kicks are counter-offensive and her response against jabs are defensive seventy-nine percent and ninety-three percent of the time, respectively. Her senses are extremely sharp, effectively functioning as clairvoyance, being able to avoid attacks outside of her vision extremely well."

"..."

It was simple data science. By simply noting and segregating her many responses in specific circumstances, he could identify certain quirks and tendencies. This principle was the foundation for the later iterations of the VOID algorithm.

"In short, she's relying on her senses, as well as on precision, accuracy, timing and placement instead of her Squire level power. She's beating us all with Apprentice-level material." Rui sighed. The fact that Squire Kyrie could beat them all without using the shocking physical prowess of Martial Squires, showed just how beyond them she was. A lifetime of real-life combat with her life on the line had honed her judgement and decision-making.

"But does any of this help?" Kane wondered, unsure.

"I guess we'll find out." Rui replied, before dashing towards Squire Kyrie. The closer he came, the more his heart tingled.

('I know.') He placed his hand over his chest, feeling the excited pounding that reverberated across his entire body. ('We've finally reached this stage.') He thought, as he met eyes with Kyrie.

"Done playing scarecrow?" She poked at him. Rui responded by throwing his most powerful attack at her.

BAM

A combination of Parallel Walk, Balance Direction amplifying the Flowing Canon technique paired with Vital Pressure. This was what Rui struck her with.

But alas, to no effect. She intercepted the attack with her forearm, and rotated, pushing the attack away from a clean impact.

('She redirected the attack, as expected.') Rui noted, before following up with a barrage of Vital Pressure strikes.

Kyrie cleanly deflected all of them, before launching an incredibly swift jab at Rui's diaphragm.

POW

Rui grimaced. Despite mitigating the damage with Elastic Shift and Acute Edge, his abdomen still stung, bruising from the blow.

Before she could follow up to finish the job, she was attacked by three more Apprentices, diverting her attention.

"Heh, that worked out well indeed." Kane sneered.

Rui ignored the remark, turning to Kane.

"I have an idea, but I'm gonna need help. You up for a challenge?"