

Martial Unity 81

Chapter 81: Gentle Fury

"I mean, sure." Kane shrugged.

"Good, hear me out." Rui moved closer to him and began whispering his plan, he knew the Squire had sharp senses, so he took all the precautions he could, to avoid letting her in on the plan.

Meanwhile, Fae launched a flurry of powerful palm attacks, each one with incredible force. Yet Kyrie managed to parry all of them handily.

WHOOSH

Felix lunged towards her from the other side, looking for a takedown, but she simply evaded his attack with a summersault, cleanly dodging the shooting maneuver. This resulted in Fae's and Felix's attacks heading towards each other.

"Not this time!" Fae narrowly avoided Felix's charge while diverting her attack away from Felix.

"Looks like the same trick won't work too many times, eh?" Kyrie noted blankly. Yet four Apprentices attempted to dogpile her from four sides, while three more were circling around ready to pounce the moment they failed.

All eleven of them couldn't attack her simultaneously. It was almost physically impossible, there was limited space around a person through which they could be attacked. Even if it were physically possible, it could only be achieved through practiced and rehearsed well-timed and well-placed attacks. Such a thing was, of course, impossible in this sparring session, which was why no more than five people ever attacked Squire Kyrie.

BOOM

Kyrie blew away the last of her attackers with blitz kick, dusting her attire as the Apprentices recuperated.

Suddenly a commotion of the other side of the ring grabbed her attention.

"NO NO NO! That's a stupid plan!" Kane shouted at Rui. "That's not gonna work!"

"HUH?" Rui snarled. "You think you can do better?!"

The two of them started bickering loudly, uncaring for their opponent, who simply gazed at them blankly before sighing.

('These idiots are arguing in the middle of a fight.') She facepalmed. ('They're the type to die young in the field. I'll beat some sense into them.')

"Enough." She commanded, earning their attention, interrupting their debate. "Seems you the two of you have much to learn. I'm going to beat that attitude right out of you."

Kane responded by resuming the fight. He dashed at her with multiple Apprentice-level techniques, throwing speedy jabs. She responded by throwing a long straight kick into his gut, literally kicking the air out of his lungs.

"Rushing straightforwardly towards an opponent with greater range and power than you, is a foolish move." She told him as he dropped to the floor.

She turned her gaze towards Rui, who glanced back at her with a fearful expression, earning her ire.

('If you're afraid of a sparring session, you're not cut out to be a Martial Artist.')

She dashed over to Rui at incredibly high speeds, throwing a barrage of punches and kicks. Rui simply tucked his tail between his legs and ran away from her as fast as he could, nearing the edge of the ring, all while still facing her, using Elastic Shift and Acute Edge to mitigate the damage, all while trying to open the distance between them.

This irritated her even more. She forbade blatant escapism in her sparring sessions. Her sparring sessions were meant to push the Apprentices beyond their limits, to have them get used to fighting losing battles under extreme pressure and exhaustion, yet Rui was merely running away.

She chased him with even greater speed, reaching the edge of the ring.

"End of line." She announced, yet Rui immediately turned around with a grappling stance standing at the very edge of the ring, making his intentions very clear.

('He wants to use my own momentum to throw me over the ring.') She mused. It wasn't an original idea, but at the very least it was better than running away. She intended to beat him up a bit before throwing him back in the center of the ring.

She twisted her core, generating torque, launching an uppercut to Rui's solar plexus.

Just then, the slightest hint of a grin could be seen on Rui's face. He rushed in for an upper takedown simultaneously. The uppercut reached Rui faster than the takedown reached Squire Kyrie, yet the moment her fist made contact;

WHOOSH

The upper takedown was an illusion, and her uppercut hit empty air.

This was the Mirage Dive technique.

Rui grinned like a madman as he rushed in for the lower takedown, yet just as he began the shoot, Kyrie halted her missed uppercut, and swung down her elbow, aiming to crush the lower takedown. The timing was impeccable, she launched the elbow almost as if she knew that the upper takedown would be a fake.

('Every Martial Squire is well-versed with all the foundational Apprentice-level techniques.') She mused. This was the orthodox way one countered the Mirage Dive technique; to throw counters that could very easily be diverted to handle real takedown. Yet to her surprise;

CLASP

Rui grabbed onto the incoming elbow hammer with all four limbs, using the Binding Lash technique, the sudden shifts in center of gravity was dangerous at the edge of the ring. But she was not impressed.

('A desperate attempt, the force you're using is just barely enough to destabilize my center of gravity temporarily.') She sighed mentally. ('You won't be able to throw me out with just tha-!')

Her thoughts were interrupted as her senses detected an attack moving towards her incredibly fast, in just an instant, it had crossed almost all of the distance and was about to strike her.

Kane was moving so fast that every Apprentice, including Rui, could not even see him!

This was the same technique that Kane had used in his fight with Fae! It was an incredibly high-efficiency Apprentice-level technique with extremely low flexibility; it could only be used in one way. But in that one scenario, when used, it was extremely potent, reaching the very pinnacle of what Apprentice-level techniques could offer.

In the span of several milliseconds, he had crossed the distance.

Yet Kyrie was able to perceive him, such was the prowess of a Martial Squire. But she had limited herself to peak Apprentice-level speed and power. Furthermore, Rui had brought her to the very edge of the ring, and had destabilized her center of gravity with the Binding Lash technique, Kane had aimed to strike her at that very moment. Under these extenuating circumstances, she could only do so much while holding back almost all of her power and speed.

Ordinarily, she would have cleanly redirected him back into the ring, but with her center of gravity destabilized towards the edge of the ring, she was remarkably off-balance. It was almost an incredible coincidence that Kane had chose to strike her at the moment.

('Or it was all planned from the very start.') She realized with a tinge of shock.

Just as Kane was about to strike her, time slowed down from her perspective, she glanced at both the boys, realizing they had coordinated this from the very start.

From the very start, the arguments between them, and Kane's defeat at her hands immediately after were to take her attention away from Kane and focus only on Rui. Then Rui went through an elaborate and convoluted course of actions all with end goal of hampering her defenses by either locking her body partially, or destabilizing her gravity, all so that Kane could use that incredibly potent ability to knock both him and the Squire outside the ring.

This was the only strategy Rui had been able to think of that wasn't an utter failure. Kane's technique was their very best chance, yet it had too many flaws. It had low flexibility making it extremely predictable, it required preparatory stances, its rigid linearity meant that Kyrie would normally be able to easily redirect or knock him out or use his own momentum against him with delicate finesse.

Rui's one and only goal was to mitigate these shortcomings to give Kane a better chance of landing that technique successfully. He was fully prepared to be knocked out with Kyrie if that was what was needed to win.

He knew Kyrie wouldn't knock him out of the ring,; this was one of her policies after all. He also knew she would chase after him aggressively, just as he needed her to, when she saw him blatantly running away. She punished those who blatantly ran away from all confrontation with a painful beating, this was to ensure students didn't do that.

All of these were quirks and patterns Rui had observed from her in the initial part of the battle, as well as her own instructions and rules. Allowing to create a plan that wasn't a complete dud.

('You did well to push me this far.') She smiled, closing her eyes. ('Gentle Fury Style: Whirlwind Tempest.')

WHOOSH

All three of them disappeared for a moment, a huge gust of wind washed over the bewildered onlookers. They seldom witnessed such raw speed and power!

In the very next moment, Kane and Rui landed in the center of the ring, unconscious at Kyrie's feet. The other Martial Apprentices looked on with awe and shock.

"These two won't be getting up any time soon." Kyrie announced. "Let's put an end to today's session just a little early this time." She turned and walked away, having ended the sparring session, only confusing everybody even more.

"Er, what just happened?" Fae couldn't help but ask.

Kyrie halted, turning to meet her eyes.

"...They forced me to use a Squire-level technique from my Martial Art."

Chapter 82: Martial Concerns

"Hm, interesting tale indeed..." Headmaster Aronian stroked his beard, as he skimmed through the report before him. As the headmaster, he had received a variety of reports from the various branches, wings and departments of the Academy. This was one such report he had received from a Squire instructor.

"To think two fourteen-year-old boys would be able to force you, the vaunted Berserker of Hajin, to use a Squire-level technique..." Headmaster Aronian glanced up at the figure standing across the table.

"Truly a fascinating tale, isn't it, Kyrie?"

"I was quite shocked myself. Those two boys are truly remarkable." Kyrie remarked, concurring.

"Kane Arrancar, son of the legendary Devil, is a prodigy who reached Apprentice at the age of eleven..." Headmaster Aronian continued. "And Rui Quarrier who became an Apprentice at the age of fourteen... These two have bright futures ahead of them."

He placed Kyrie's report down, before looking at their profiles and personal data. Although Kane was quite interesting and promising, Rui was truly fascinating.

"Explorer in three months and then Martial Apprentice in two months. And then he proceeds to learn ten techniques in the next seven months and is able to fight well enough to force you to use a Squire-level technique..." Headmaster surmised. "Not even his absurd tolerance for mental and physical rejuvenation potions can explain all of this. Even his extremely high IQ cannot explain how he discovered his Martial Path this quickly." He set down the documents.

Discovering one's Martial Path was a long explorative and introspective journey. It was regarded as the most important and profound of breakthroughs. It wasn't a matter of talent, no one should be able to discover their Martial Path as quickly as Rui did. The reason for his breakthrough was because of his past life, something that unbeknownst to the headmaster.

"Hoho." He chuckled. "These two shine too brightly, the Martial Sects will not let go of them easily. Particularly the Lightning Sect for young master Kane. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Kane Arrancar will be approached by them soon, or perhaps it has happened already..."

Squire Kyrie's eyes sharpened at those words. "Headmaster, surely the Martial Sects would not violate the clauses set by Grandmaster; His Honour Sage Damian."

Headmaster Aronian chuckled at her naivette. "Not openly, no, and not within the Academy premises." He continued. "But I would imagine they might take covert measures."

Squire Kyrie narrowed her eyes at those words.

"Hm?" Headmaster Aronian caught her reaction. "Do you dislike these matters?"

"I do." She shook her head. "The students may be Martial Apprentices, but they're ultimately children. Entrenching them in the politics of the Martial Union is no different from exploitation."

"Quite the distaste." Headmaster Aronian chuckled. "The Sects would not look kindly upon those words, you might be accused of slander if word got out."

"I merely stated the truth."

"Well, you're fortunate that I'm the only one who heard it." Headmaster smiled. "After all, Martial Masters cannot have been members of a Martial Sect or a Martial Faction within the prior ten years of their candidacy for headmaster. I've religiously avoided Martial Sects, which is why I was anointed as the headmaster of the Mantian branch of the Martial Academy by His Honour."

Squire Kyrie remained silent.

"However, Kane Arrancar might have a bit of a rough time ahead..." Headmaster Aronian mused. "As the son of His Honour Sage Arrancar, he will feel immense pressure to join the Martial Sect of his father; the Fire Sect, yet as a speed and evasive-maneuvering-oriented Martial Artist, he would most certainly have the most affinity with the Lightning Sect."

"What about Rui Quarrier, Headmaster?" Kyrie felt the need to ask.

"Hmmm..." Headmaster Aronian pondered. "As an all-rounder, he doesn't have any strong affinity to any particular Martial Sect." He paused, before continuing. "Yet, with that prodigious mind and learning speed, as well as the peculiar Type X nature of his style, I'm sure every Martial Sect would clamor for him."

"Considering this, would it not be wise to educate them about these matters immediately so that they can be better prepared?" Kyrie inquired, concerned.

"His Honour the Grandmaster has forbidden such measures." Headmaster Aronian shook his head. "He is strongly against inculcation of political education within the Martial Academy. These are no more than stains and impurities to the purpose of the Martial Academies in His Honour's view. The Martial Academy is an institution whose one and only purpose is to produce Martial Apprentices and Martial Squires, nothing more and nothing less."

Squire Kyrie sighed inwardly, biting back a retort. It was one thing to express distaste to Martial politics. It was another thing to express disrespect to a legendary Martial Sage. Even Headmaster Aronian alone was a Martial Artist two whole realms above her, thankfully his easygoing personality made interactions with him comfortable, otherwise he could apply immense pressure on her mind through his concentration alone, if he wanted.

"Well, I've received your report, good work, keep an eye on those two and continue reporting. You may leave." Headmaster Aronian dismissed her.

"Yes headmaster." She bowed before taking her leave.

Headmaster Aronian stroked his beard as the door closed, deep in thought. The fact that that two Martial Apprentices could force a Squire to use a Squire-level technique of their Martial Art, particularly a Martial Squire as powerful and experienced as Squire Kyrie, was not a small matter. The Martial Sects hungered and lusted for fresh blood. Although His Honour Grandmaster Sage Damian had forged an accord between the Martial Academies and the Sects that prohibited inculcation and indoctrination of Martial students of the Martial Academy into their Martial Sects, this was not absolute. Although Martial Sage Damian was a powerful and influential Martial Sage, the dominant Martial Sects were led by equally powerful Martial Sages.

The almost unprecedented incident of two fourteen-year-old Martial Apprentices forcing Kyrie to use a Squire-level technique through a combination of powerful techniques and brilliant tactics was sure to reach their ears and direct their attention towards his Academy.

"Well, nothing bad should happen. But still... I hope they don't cross any lines."

Chapter 83: Awakening

Rui opened his eyes, groggy and disoriented. As his vision proceeded to unblur itself, a white ceiling came into view.

"An unfamiliar ceiling." Rui muttered, taking the opportunity to utter a common trope he heard in anime, before chuckling. His head throbbed as he got up, struggling to remember what happened.

('The spar with Squire Kyrie.') He realized. ('The last thing I remember is Kane using his that Apprentice-level technique...') He closed his eyes, as he struggled to remember.

('And then I woke up here... I see. We failed, and miserably too.') He chuckled self-deprecatingly. Although he knew the chances of success were low, it still wasn't a pleasant outcome.

Rui's eyes caught something to his right, he turned only to be surprised.

"Kane."

Kane was still unconscious, however he looked perfectly fine physically, lying in a bed not too far away.

"They must have healed us up and allowed us to rest and wake up."

Rui sighed getting back to bed. He immersed himself in his thoughts peacefully as his headache slowly subsided.

('I wonder what she did to us.') To be able to knock both of them out and hospitalize them in the circumstances she was in was truly amazing. He just didn't know whether it was possible with Apprentice-level prowess.

Could any Apprentice really replicate her feat in those circumstances?

('Probably not.') He felt. Sure, both Rui and Kane were young. But Kane's technique was surely somewhat close to the pinnacle of Apprentice-level as far as efficiency went. It has a handful of rather severe shortcomings in general, which Rui had done a pretty decent job of mitigating. Yet for them to be crushed despite that, Rui wasn't sure it was possible for an Apprentice to replicate that.

('Which means... She must have used Squire-level battle prowess.') Rui concluded. That would explain how they got crushed instantly. She must have used a Squire-level technique of some sort, allowing to dispel the threat and knock them out.

In a way, Rui felt a bit happy that they were knocked out. If Kyrie knocked them out, then it must have been necessary for her to do that. She never knocked out the students in these sparring sessions, only pushing them to their physical limits. The fact that she knocked them out, meant they had managed to push her farther than she had in any previous sparring session.

Although a loss was still a loss, knowing this made the loss much more tolerable. He even felt a measure of pride well up.

"Ugh..." Kane woke up with a disoriented expression.

Rui waited a few seconds for him to process himself and his surroundings, before calling out to him.

"Hey."

Kane turned towards him with squinted eyes.

"You look like shit." Rui chuckled. "How are you feeling?"

"Where are we?" Kane wondered.

"Medical wing."

"Huh..."

"We were knocked out during the fight with Kyrie." He explained. "Do you remember what happened?"

"I recall using Flash Burst at the timing you told me to..." He continued, trying to recall. "...But after that, I dunno."

"Hmmm... She must have knocked both of us nigh-simultaneously then." Rui surmised. "Definitely a Squire-level technique."

"That's crazy."

"Right?" Rui grinned.

Suddenly, a nurse walked into the medical room they were in, taking note of their awakening.

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier and Apprentice Kane Arrancar. You're awake. Both of you were rendered unconscious during a sparring session." She dutifully informed. "You have made almost full recoveries physically, however we'll be performing a few check-ups and examinations."

"How long have been unconscious?" Rui asked, he still didn't know how long it had been since the sparring session ended.

"It's been a little over six hours since you were brought to the medical wing." She replied as she prepared some medical instruments and other items.

She proceeded to wear a stethoscope-like instrument, and placed one end of the instrument on Kane's chest. "Breathe deeply." She instructed.

A few more checkups and lines of questioning of various sorts followed until she moved onto Rui, performing them on him as well.

"Both of you are fit to be discharged." She told them. "The headaches will persist for anywhere between a few hours or a day. Be sure to take rest for a day until you have recovered fully. If the headache persists beyond a day then be sure to revisit the medical wing."

After a bit of paperwork, Rui and Kane walked together towards the Apprentice dormitory.

"Next time we see instructor Kyrie, we should ask her about what actually happened." Rui said. "It's a shame she isn't always free and available in the sparring center like the Apprentice Sparring head instructor was."

"She is a Martial Squire after all, and a particularly powerful one." Kane replied.

"Heh, hearing that just makes getting knocked out by her all the more worth it." Rui smirked.

"That's a weird fetish, you Martial pervert."

"Shut up." Rui retorted lightly.

They bantered a bit before Kane remembered something. "Oh yeah, I've been meaning to ask. Are you going back home for the winter break?"

Rui's ears perked when he heard that. "It's that time of the year already?" He wondered. He'd begun to lose track of time very easily once he had joined the Academy, especially since rejuvenation potions made it difficult to keep track of the passage of days.

"Yeah, it's in three days. You going?"

"Absolutely, I haven't seen them in quite a while." Rui had gone back home once after he had become an Explorer, although it was a brief visit. He didn't want to miss any chance of seeing his family.

"I thought you intended to get into missions the moment you formed the basic foundation of your Martial Art." Kane noted.

"Yeah but, missions can be done any time. I can't see my family any time." He replied. "I can just begin missions when I get back. I won't be able to see them during the break if I begin doing missions now."

"I see."

"What about you?" Rui asked.

"Psshht, hell no!" Kane exclaimed. "In fact, I'm going to take a longer mission so I have a good excuse for not going back!" He declared, earning Rui's laughter.

"Are you sure you don't wanna come with me?" Rui asked. "I'd love to introduce you to my family."

"Not this time." Kane shook his head. "I'll be approached and summoned if my family finds out I returned from the Academy."

"I see, that's a shame." Rui sighed. "Another time then." Earning a nod from Kane.

"It's a shame I have to return to my family too, otherwise I would have accepted the offer in his stead." Fae commented.

"He didn't invite you." Kane grumbled, sparking a round of bickering between them, earning Rui's laughter at the sight.

"Milliana, you're headed back to your town as well, right?" Rui turned to her.

She nodded passively. "It's four hours away from here, so I intend to leave immediately."

The four of them chatted for a bit longer until it was time for those returning to disperse.

"See you guys when I get back." Rui exchanged farewells with everyone before setting out on foot. He didn't have any money on him, but that wasn't a problem. Even without techniques, with just the physical training from his foundational stage, the journey was no longer something that could strain his stamina.

The town of Hajin was a lot less chaotic than he recalled it. One of the reasons for that was the last time he actually travelled around was during the start of the new Academic year. What was a bustling, loud and busy place in his memories had become a much more relaxed environment.

"Man, it's been such a long time since I stepped outside the Academy." Rui said in delight, taking in the atmosphere as he made his way home. The Academy had a lot of open space, but it still could not substitute actual society.

It was a nostalgic feeling, reminding Rui of when his university days. He'd felt similarly back then, although to a greater degree because the universities of sciences back on Earth were nowhere near as large as the Martial Academies.

The further Rui walked away from the core of the town, the more scarce grew the population and infrastructure. Once he exited the districts on the outskirts of the town, the atmosphere grew serene quiet. Gone were the markets, and the commercial hubs and the businesses. Instead, he was greeted with farmlands and small patches of forests with a handful of small village-like settlements scattered across. Winters were harsh in the Mantian region, especially since this region was among the northern most regions of the Kandrian Empire, which was a country that was already deep into the northern hemisphere of the planet, making it quite cold in the very first place.

The country had sets of crops that could only be grown during Winter, currently Rui was walking past these farmlands and settlements.

He paused, when a familiar path entered his sights, smiling as a rush of nostalgia and excitement crept into his emotions. He picked up the pace running until a familiar house entered his sights.

"They've made a few renovations since last time" He noted happily. The Quarrier Orphanage benefitted greatly from its adult caretakers, each taking contributing to the income of the Orphanage that allowed it to sustain itself.

"This must be courtesy of big brother Julian." He smiled knowingly. Julian had gotten a well-paying occupation as an apprentice scholar in the research and development department of the Kandrian Institute of Sciences. Knowing him, he must have insisted in using generous portions of his income for maintenance of orphanage.

Rui intended to surprise his family, but even before he reached the gate.

"Rui...?"

He glanced up towards the balcony, recognizing both the voice and the appearance instantly.

"RUI YOU'RE BACK!" She squealed with joy.

"Alice!" He chuckled, waving at her vigorously. She ran from the balcony enthusiastically running down the stairs, announcing to the entire orphanage at the top of her voice that Rui had returned. Even as he reached the gate, the front door was already open.

"RUIIIII" She dove at him with such force and energy he felt like he was hit by an Apprentice-level technique!

"When d-did you master Flowing Canon?" He muttered gasping for air from her bear hug.

"Huh?"

"Nothing nothing. Forget it. How have you been Alice? I've missed you so much." He returned her embrace in earnest.

"Oh you! We've been doing just fine. Come in, everyone's waiting for you" She let go of him, gesturing him inside, enthusiastically.

He glanced at the door, and several small heads poked through their eyes sparkling with innocent excitement.

"Big brother Rui!"

"You're back!"

They chirped as they ran towards him with enthuse and excitement, gathering around him for hugs and lifts.

Rui smiled at the children, trying to return as much affection as he could, struggling to return fifteen arms with of hugs with his own.

"Alright alright!" He laughed as they swarmed him. "I'll give all of you lifts, so don't worry!"

"Rui." A soft voice called out to him, instantly wringing his attention away, towards itself.

"Mom..." Rui squeezed out, feeling sentimental. She walked over, cupping his face in her hands, ruffling his hair, before pulling him in for a hug. "You've grown so much taller."

"Yeah..." He replied softly.

"Welcome back home, my child. We've missed you so much." She said, squeezing him in her embrace. Rui wanted to respond, but didn't trust himself to not sob. His throat felt choked with emotion upon seeing his mother after so long.

"Come in, lunch will be ready soon." She said, pulling him by his hand.

Everyone gathered to the large living room, hugging him and embracing him, remarking about his growth spurt and his long hair. It took a whole twenty minutes for the excitement to die down, finally allowing him to relax with a soothing cup of tea.

"Maaan a hot cup of tea in the dead of winter really hits the spot." He relaxed as the beverage warmed him.

"Congratulations on becoming a Martial Apprentice Rui." Julian gently congratulated. "You've achieved the first step of your dream."

"Thanks Julian, how's things been going on with you?"

"Better than I could have hoped, I have a lot to talk to you about." He replied, intriguingly.

"Oh? Let's hear it then."

Julian shook his head. "No no. I'm not the first Martial Artist of the Quarrier Orphanage. If anybody has a story to tell..." He smiled. "It's you, isn't it?"

Instantly, everybody's eyes turned to Rui, fixating on him like owls.

"Alright alright." Rui chuckled. "Let's see... Where do I begin?"

Chapter 85: Insight into the Path

Rui recounted his time at the Academy. Describing the various training regimes and sessions he went through in the physical and Martial foundation stages that overall constituted the Foundational Stage. He went on to narrate his times in the Exploration Stage and ultimately went on to talk about his Martial Apprentice breakthrough and his Martial Path.

"To think you discovered your Martial Path in a dream." Julian commented, once the excitement died down a bit, leaving them alone. "Quite the fairy tale-like story, isn't it?"

"It was a magical moment." Rui affirmed.

"The discovery of a Martial Path... I'm not unfamiliar with it." Julian commented. "In fact, some of the research projects I'm involved in are actually about the phenomenon of discovering one's Martial Path."

"Oh?" Rui's interest immediately perked. "Are you allowed to tell me that?"

The Kandrian Institute of Sciences were royal institutes, meaning the research and development that occurred was property of the Kandrian Royal Family. He didn't think that such research was available in the public domain.

"The projects I'm involved have extremely low confidentiality grades. As long I don't blatantly sell the actual data collected, I'm not violating my agreement with the Institute. It's the kind of project that is purely an intellectual pursuit with no real-world applications you see. Talking about it in a general sense isn't problematic."

"I see..." Rui pondered about the information that Julian provided. He certainly wasn't aware that the research and development department of the Kandrian Institute of Sciences graded research and

development projects in regards to confidentiality. "What research have you worked on, generally speaking?"

"Part of it has to do with the psychological and neurological impacts of the Martial Apprentice breakthrough on the Martial Artist." Julian replied. "This was also the area of research of my thesis paper in my final year you see."

"Interesting." Rui commented. "So, what exactly did your research yield in so far as the changes and impacts of the discovery of the Martial Path?"

"We discovered that the discovery of one's Martial Path causes an increase in cognition, reaction speed, kinetic vision and reflexes, as well as body-eye coordination, to put it simply." Julian explained.

"Sounds about right." Rui nodded. When he broke through to Martial Apprentice having discovered his Martial Path, he experienced a great overall boost in several mental parameters and attributes. "I did grow much stronger once I became a Martial Apprentice."

"It's not as straightforward to that though." Julian replied. "We made some very odd discoveries about these enhancements, you see. For one, the data reveals that the degree of these enhancements is not static and unchanging, but rather variable. The superhuman boosts you gained are constantly changing."

"Huh?" Rui squinted in confusion when he heard that. The mental boosts he gained from becoming a Martial Apprentice were constantly changing? That sounded like an absurd proposition to Rui at first inspection.

"What do you mean?" He asked, waiting for further clarification.

"We discovered that the superhuman augments provided by the Martial Path are in flux, they're variables rather than constants." Julian sipped his tea, before proceeding. "In some situations, Martial Apprentices demonstrate superhuman mental attributes and parameters, but in others, they're perfectly normal human beings."

This made more sense to Rui, though he wasn't sure if he observed this in himself. These were complicated phenomena that were picked up through proper empirical research, it was impossible for him to discover these things by himself through introspection.

"Let us take three scenarios, and this is actually a simplified version of some of the experiments and surveys we conducted." Julian continued. "Let us take scenario A, where a Martial Apprentice is engaged in combat. Scenario B, where a Martial Apprentice is engaging in time-pressure manual labor tasks. Scenario C where a Martial Apprentice is participating in a time-pressure math exam. Do you think the superhuman reaction and processing time of the Martial Apprentice will be the same in all three scenarios and activities?"

"Hmmm..." Rui pondered. "Shouldn't it?"

It seemed intuitively obvious to him that this should be the case. Why would these mental and neurological parameters change? But given what Julian said earlier, he was probably wrong.

"It does change, that is what our research revealed." Julian answered, meeting Rui's expectations.

"Interesting." Rui commented.

"The mental processing speed of the Martial Apprentice in Scenario A; combat, was quite superhuman.

The mental processing speed in Scenario B; time-pressure manual labour tasks, was also superhuman but less than scenario A, much lesser, in fact." Julian continued. "As for Scenario C... The time-pressure math exam... We found something quite surprising."

"Oh?"

"The mental processing time of a Martial Apprentice in scenario C was not superhuman at all. It was perfectly normal and average. As though these were normal humans and not Martial Apprentices."

Rui understood the implications of the data immediately, having been an empirical researcher himself. "So basically, the activity that a Martial Apprentice is engaging in is the influencing factor of how well a

Martial Apprentice performs. Furthermore, it seems that the closer to actual combat that activity is, the more superhuman a Martial Apprentice is. So the mental performance parameters increase the closer to combat the activity is, forming a sort of spectrum, am I right?"

Julian smiled. "You understood immediately, as expected of my little brother."

Rui grew absorbed as he pondered about the implications of the data. It was truly fascinating. Martial Apprentices performed best, as far as mental performance parameters went, when they engaged in combat, sub-optimally when they engaged in physical tasks, and least optimally when they performed tasks that had nothing to do with combat.

"Scenario B was a time-pressure physical scenario. Although it was not combat, it was not too far from combat and probably shared some similarities. Which is why the Martial Apprentice showed sub-optimal results, but not zero results." Rui murmured. "But a math test is too far from combat, hence the Martial Apprentice performed least optimally. This shows a causation between the closeness of the activity to combat, and a Martial Apprentice's performance parameters, assuming all other feasible variables were controlled for."

"They were." Julian assured. "I'm impressed by your insights into this, even though you have no experience with empirical research, quite remarkable." He threw Rui an odd look.

Rui was too absorbed by the prior revelations to try and justify this. The information Julian revealed implied that the neurological phenomenon caused by the discovery of the Martial Path were dormant when Martial Apprentices did things that were further away from combat.

As for exactly why and how, Rui was able to come up with a few bare-bones hypotheses and theories based on his scientific background!

Chapter 86: Warning

The relationship between the brain and the mind was extraordinarily complicated, and largely not understood. Back on Earth, it was clear the mind was housed within the brain, and to some degree, the structure of the mind could be mapped over the structure of the brain. However, it was much more difficult to make more progress than that. Centuries of research in the fields of neurology, psychology and philosophy of mind had yet to uncover the depths of the human mind.

Furthermore, Rui possessed only a shallow understanding of neurology. He was not equipped to fully understand the phenomena associated with the discovery of the Martial Path.

However, even the shallow knowledge he came to possess allowed him to make some conjectures.

The brain could be divided into three sections; The cerebrum, the cerebellum and the medulla oblongata. The cerebrum could further be divided into the Frontal Lobe, Temporal Lobe, Occipital Lobe and Parietal Lobe.

Each of the sections and sub-sections of the brain were associated with and caused different neurological phenomena.

The Frontal Lobe was responsible analysis and judgement, morality, personality, social regulation, emotional regulation and motor functions.

The Temporal Lobe was responsible for cognition, language, hearing, speech and memory.

The Parietal Lobe was responsible for recognizing sensation, body position and objects, sense of time and space, and association between functions of other Lobes.

The Occipital Lobe was responsible for Vision and the processing of visual information.

The Cerebellum handled balance and muscular coordination.

The Medulla Oblongata was responsible for the regulation of heartbeat, respiration, body temperature.

Out of all these functionalities, the Cerebellum, the occipital lobe and parietal lobe were sections of the brain that had the highest relevance to combat! The remaining sections were not involved with the general neurological phenomena associated with combat.

Thus, Rui strongly suspected that the permanent superhuman boosts provided by discovering the Martial Path must have altered these three portions of the brain.

A time-pressure math test does not test the three lobes as much as combat or a time-pressure physical activity. Therefore, Martial Apprentices were no different from normal humans in this particular.

In conclusion, Rui strongly suspected that only portions of the human brain and mind, relevant to combat, evolved when one discovered one's Martial Path.

Any activities that did not involve these portions of the human brain ended up being ordinary, activities relevant to these portions of the human brain ended up being extraordinary performances, depending on how relevant to the three combat-related portions of the brain.

This would succinctly explain why the performances of Martial Apprentices were variable and changing!

"I think it's possible that the discovery of the Martial Path, enhances only some portions of the brain, those portions that are relevant to combat." Rui conveyed his thoughts to Julian.

"That's one of our leading theories." Julian nodded, with a look of surprise. "Unfortunately, it is difficult to estimate which portions of the brain are responsible for which particular mental functions, you see."

Rui nodded. The knowledge of brain structure that he inherited from Earth was confirmed after countless CT and MRI scans. This was something Rui suspected the medical researchers of the Kandrian Empire might not be able to replicate, a suspicion that Julian more or less confirmed.

"Another research project revealed that Martial Apprentices performing two tasks simultaneously could have drastically differing quality of performances." Julian informed, continuing. "We performed the equivalent of having Martial Apprentices perform scenario A and scenario C simultaneously. And we found out that even when they're performed the tasks simultaneously, the performances of the two tasks were heaven and earth apart. This suggests that it is not the brain itself that is changing, just the portions of the brain relevant to each task."

Rui nodded; this further corroborated his theory. It's a shame he couldn't divulge the information he knew about the human brain, Julius had once jokingly come very close to discovering Rui's secret. He was incredibly intelligent. There was no way Rui would be able to fool him.

"The research you're working on, is it all centered around Martial Art?" Rui asked, curious.

"Not all, no, but a large portion of it." Julian commented. "Another field I partially specialize in is esoteric technology. Particularly, I'm interested in potions."

"Potions are fascinating." Rui offered.

"They are. I cannot divulge any data in regards these projects, but my focus lies on temporary augmentation." Julian explained.

"Interesting..." Rui murmured.

"The reason I brought it up, is because I wanted to warn you." Julian's expression became more solemn. By this time, they had a bit of privacy as their nerdy discussion drove away the bored children and the adults returned to their duties. Julian saw fit to bring up a matter that was clearly touchy, causing the atmosphere to become tense.

"What do you mean?" Rui asked, expressionless.

"This is something you'll learn eventually, I'm sure. But it's better learnt sooner than later." Julian continued, turning to look Rui straight in the eyes. "Rui, potions are not to be underestimated."

"Hm?" Rui threw a confused look at Julian.

"You are aware of the friction between the Royal Family and Kandrian Martial Union, I presume?" Julian asked, broaching a dangerous topic without hesitation.

"Somewhat, nothing too specific though." Rui narrows his eyes.

"Have you ever wondered how the Royal Family is able to rival the Martial Union to some degree, despite having nowhere near as many Martial Artists?" Julian asked.

Rui remained silent. It was a well-known fact that an overwhelming majority of Martial Artists of the Kandrian Empire were part of the Martial Union. If so, how was the Royal Family not inferior to the Martial Union as far as military power was concerned?

"Numbers... Technology... Other mitigating factors." Rui murmured in response.

"What technology, specifically?" He asked.

Rui caught on to his implication. "You mean temporary-augmentation potions?"

Julian nodded. "These potions temporarily amplify physical and mental abilities to the point of allowing normal humans to fight Martial Apprentices, Martial Squires and even Seniors from what I am aware of."

Rui's expression grew shocked! Julian straightforwardly dropped a bombshell.

"I suspect that higher grade augmentation potions can even combat Martial Masters, or dare I say; Martial Sages." Julian explained. "Unfortunately, I lack clearance to have access to these research and development projects, so I cannot confirm this."

Rui stared at Julian, speechless.

"This information is partially confidential. Most certainly not public, once you reach a higher status economically and politically, you'll naturally learn about this." Julian explained, expressionless. "But it would take you far too much time to reach that status."

Rui realized where Julian was going with this. "You wanted me to be aware and wary of these potions."

Julian nodded. "These potions are one of the ways the Royal Family is able to stand up shoulder-to-shoulder to the Martial Union. If you choose to join the Martial Union, you'll inevitably oppose the Royal Family as far as allegiance goes." He explained. "You need to be aware of the tools of your opponents."

"There is no way you telling me this isn't in some violation of your position as an apprentice scholar." Rui noted, concerned.

Julian smiled gently. "You're my brother."

Rui felt emotions choking his throat. His brother had violated his oath and taken a risk, all for his sake.

"Thanks... It means a lot." He managed to squeeze out.

Julian shook his head.

"You would have done the same."

Chapter 87: Winter

The two conversed some more about lighter topics, as they joined the others for lunch. Julian was particularly interested about the breakthrough.

"So, what exactly does it actually feel like?" Julian asked out of curiosity.

"Like the biggest epiphany possible in the human experience." Rui replied. "For a moment you no longer care about anything in this world. You experience true happiness and satisfaction, and your mind has absolute clarity."

"Hmmm..." Julian hummed, engrossed in Rui's explanation. "Remarkable, really."

"Hey! Pay attention to your food, you haven't even touched it yet!" Myra, the head cook of the Orphanage, insisted. She had always been quite strict about all matters regarding food and meals.

"Yes yes." Rui laughed.

"You're as strict as ever." Julian sighed with a resigned smile.

Rui proceeded to inquire about the Orphanage affairs, wanting to catch up on having missed a whole year of their lives.

"You must have seen the fully-fixed roof when you came right?" Lashara asked, while showing an affectionate smile to Julian. "Julian was the one who paid for all of that."

"It wasn't that big a deal." Julian smiled modestly.

"Not that big a deal? You're too humble." Rui chuckled.

The Orphanage was able to fix the infrastructure that needed the most amount of maintenance, while also able to expand its housing capacity a bit, being able to in more children.

"There have been far more children out on the streets these days." Lashara sighed with resigned melancholy. "I've wanted to do something for these children ever since."

"How did all these children end up this way?" Rui wondered.

"Part of it is because there naturally aren't enough caretakers. Another part of it is..." Lashara's voice trailed off.

"...Is?" Rui tilted his head.

"Another part of it is because of a series of child trafficking busts." She sighed, as an even more macabre expression crept onto her face.

Rui's eyes widened, before sharpening. He recalled when he was almost abducted by a random man who spoke about selling him like he was no more than goods in demand. This was in one of the outer districts of Hajin. Was Hajin home to an underground black market of trafficking?

"Huff... Let's not talk about such matters while eating." Lashara sighed. "I'm glad that increased housing capacity has allowed us to take in more children."

Rui nodded. The adolescent children from when he was an infant had all become full-fledged adults, although a lot of them no longer resided in the Quarrier Orphanage, several had chosen to stick with the Orphanage, supporting in whatever way they could. This meant there were hands on deck, allowing for more children to be taken care of.

The number of children that could be cared for by the orphanage was constrained by the number of caretakers present, the housing capacity and funds at hand. Julian singlehandedly increased the latter two with his high-income occupation.

"By the way Rui." Nina drew his attention. "Will you be staying for the Winter Festival? It's day after tomorrow, after all."

"Ah..." Rui recalled. "I'll be there for the first day, I'll have to return unfortunately."

The Kandrian Winter Festival was a nation-wide festival. It was celebrated in some form or the other across the entirety of the nation, lasting three days.

"Are we going to visit the outer districts this time as well?" Rui asked.

The Orphanage took the luxury of taking the adolescents to the outer districts where they could visit the festival fares and events.

"We were planning on going on the last day, as usual..." Lashara paused. "But since you won't be here for the last day, we'll go for the first day."

"Thanks, that works well for me." Rui nodded. "I would hate to miss the outing."

Going with the family to enjoy the festival was a rare occasion, and one that Rui cherished the most. He thought back to his memories of the festival. This was just around the time where the snowfall was at its most pleasant. It was substantial, yet not overwhelming. Just the perfect amount for it to be enjoyed, before the citizens prepared for the incoming harsher snowfall and potentially even blizzards if they misfortunate enough.

"Do we have all our supplies for this winter?" Rui asked, pondering aloud.

The Orphanage was too disconnected from the heartland of the town of Hajin. Winters could be absolutely deadly if they were not prepared. Every year for a period of two weeks, roughly, the snowfall peaked, reaching to incredible heights, and extremely low temperatures. Furthermore, there were years where it extended beyond the norm or devolved into full-blown blizzards. In such circumstances, their supply lines would be completely cut off. It was practically impossible to wade through the snow, the winds and the freezing temperatures and haul back the heavy supplies the Orphanage needed.

Thus, it had become customary for the Orphanage to stock up on all necessities well in advance. Two weeks' worth of different grains, pulses and dried meat for food, lots of water, firewood, heavy clothing to endure the freezing-cold temperatures, tools and equipment to clear the massive accumulation of snow on and around the orphanage, lest they become trapped within the orphanage!

"We still haven't acquired all the firewood we need." Lashara sighed. "The deforestation in the closest sources of firewood has made it so that we need to travel much further to chop it down. This has also inflated prices of firewood, making it difficult to pay for."

"I'll handle it." Rui reassured.

"Eh?" Lashara glanced at him. "No no, there's no way we can make you do work that requires eight adults across a week, merely in the span of a few days."

Rui chuckled at her words. They stemmed from simple ignorance of what an actual Martial Apprentice was capable. She likely found it hard to imagine that despite his youth, he was actually extremely strong! Helical Breathing alone would give him net power and stamina rivalling several healthy adults combined, Balance Direction and Parallel Walking would allow him to make trips many times quicker than normal.

"Don't worry about it mom, I'll handle it."

Chapter 88: Kandrian Winter Festival

"Huff... This should be enough." Rui wiped sweat from his forehead. He glanced at the firewood in front of him, making a few mental calculations. He had spent the previous day and today assisting with the winter firewood stockpile of the Orphanage. Making several round trips to bring back a large cloth bag of firewood.

"This should be my last round..." Rui estimated. He sat down a for a bit, taking some rest. He had been using Helical Breathing continuously, but the Apprentice-level technique was not limitless, even he had begun to feel exhaustion and fatigue creeping into his muscles and bones.

"It's a shame I don't have any rejuvenation potions..." Rui muttered to himself. "Those things were incredibly convenient." Rui had pretty much abused their use since joining the Academy. Only after having left the Academy had he realized how incredibly useful the rejuvenation potions were.

"Once I leave the Academy, I'm going to have purchase these potions myself." Rui sighed, partially depressed. First, he needed to pay back his debt, until then, he wouldn't be able to splurge of rejuvenation potions the way he splurged on them in the Academy. He wasn't even sure he would be able to buy them until his debt was repaid.

He shook his head, putting away such thoughts. That was still quite some time away, no point in thinking about it too deeply.

He gathered his firewood and tied it up into his cloth, before tying it to himself.

"Alright, time to head back." He said before using Parallel Walk, Balance Direction and Helical Breathing. He moved incredibly fast despite his heavy load.

Within a short period of time, he had already reached home.

"You really gathered all the firewood we needed all by yourself..." Lashara murmured, dumbfounded as Rui unloaded the firewood.

"This should be the final pile..." Rui informed, wiping away his sweat.

"Unbelievable" Farion muttered. "You're so incredibly strong! So this is what a Martial Apprentice is capable of."

Rui chuckled, before heading inside. "I'm off to wipe myself down."

During winters, warm baths were far too much of a luxury. Especially for an Orphanage. During winters, the Orphanage members would heat a small bucket of water with some fragrant herbs. It was a bit of a scale-down from Rui who enjoyed hot water perpetually at the Academy.

"Be sure to finish quickly." Lashara called out. "We have a festival to get in time to."

"Yes mom. I'll be out quickly." He replied.

Rui quickly gathered his clothes and towel heading in and scrubbing himself down. He knew there were many people who were waiting in line, so he ended up finishing quickly.

"Ooooo." Nina chuckled as she playfully poked his chiseled abs when he got out. "Someone must be incredibly popular with the girls."

Rui snorted. "As if. Everybody has abs in the Academy." He said before heading back to his bed to put on a shirt, leaving her dumbfounded.

"Rui! Can you look after the kids for a while?" Alice called out to him.

"Sure thing." He obliged.

The entire Orphanage was busy in chaotic excitement as everyone prepared for the festival. Too many children were too young to make the trip and it was impossible to take the entire orphanage to the outer districts in the middle of snowfall.

"Big brother Rui!"

"Can you show us how to fight?"

"Big brother is a Martial Apprentice!"

"Show us some moves!"

The boys and girls crowded him, pestering him with questions and requests.

"Alright alright." Rui laughed mirthfully. "One at a time, okay?"

The children obediently listened to him.

Over the next hour, Rui proceeded to show them some flashy Martial Art moves. Most of them looked incredibly impressive and bombastic, but weren't moves he would use in a real fight.

"OOOOH!"

"WOOAH"

"That's so cool!"

Their eyes sparkled as they cooed every time Rui moved. He laughed at their exaggerated reactions, but felt a small sense of pride well up in his chest. Showing off to his family was more validating than he'd expected.

Soon enough it was time to leave, the adults had cleaned up and the adolescents were ready as well.

"Ah, there's the carriage." Mica announced. "That idiot Farion is late."

"We have the whole day to ourselves." Julian chided. "No hurry."

They boarded the carriage, squeezing in as much as they could within a single carriage. They could bare afford a horse-drawn carriage, and that too was a luxury that could be afforded only once in a while, Lashara did not allow Julian to fund the Orphanage any more than he already did out of guilt.

The outer districts of Hajin weren't that far, and within a span of twenty of minutes they made it to their location, and boarded off quickly.

"Waaaah." Alice cooed as she saw the festival fair of the district. "They've gone all out this year!"

"This year the temperature has been quite pleasant, after all." Julian explained. "More opportunity for smaller businesses and shops.

There were lightings, lamps and sparkling ornaments colouring the entire fare. The infrastructure of the entire fare itself was a temporary makeshift, that could be put together quickly and could be dismantled pretty quickly as well. What was otherwise a large open field in the heart of the district was now the most populated and energetic part of the district.

There were food stalls of various sorts, selling seasonal Kandrian dishes that were customary to the Winter Festival. Shops selling festive clothing articles, ornaments, jewelry, toys and firecrackers were littered around. Many challenge game booths and stalls that offered various prizes for successful attempts in whatever events they had.

The Orphanage group toured the fare, getting drawn into the festive excitement. It was hard not to be infected by the compelling enthusiasm. They indulged in some spending, at Julian's insistence, who leveraged the mood to get his way. Soon enough all the adolescents were scattered into the fare with greedy eyes, as they decided what to spend their allowance on.

"Here, have some." Rui offered a roasted skewered fish. Seafood was incredibly popular in the Kandrian Empire. Bordering an extremely bountiful and eternally rich portion of the Namgung Ocean made the Kandrian Empire the eye of envy to the surrounding small and especially the large nations; such as the Republic of Gorteau, the Sekigahara Confederate and the Britannian Empire.

"I'm fine." Julian refused.

"Have some." Rui insisted. "What's the point of coming to a festival if you're not going to indulge yourself?"

Julian chuckled, accepting that rationale on the face. "Being able to facilitate the smiles on those children as well as out older brothers and sisters is good enough for me." He said, before noticing something that caught his eye.

"Hm? What's all that you have by your side?" Julian quizzed.

"Oh this?" Rui glanced at the many toys and other items he had in a bag beside him. "Just some stuff I won for the kids and adults back home."

Julian threw a proud smile at him, before pausing. "Wait. Martial Artists are banned from participating."

"It'll be our secret."

Julian burst out into laughter, he really did enjoy talking to Rui. The two of them ate in silence as they watched the boys and girls of the Orphanage running around playing cheerfully, without a care in the world.

For a moment, the two of them felt they didn't need anything else in life.

"Part of my motivation to get a high-income job was so I can see this more often." Julian gestured. "Do you feel the same way?"

Rui nodded in silence. He had already resolved to support the Orphanage when he began earning for himself. He was never a materialistic person, as long as his basic Martial Artists necessities were tended to. He had no qualms about giving away every coin he earned to the Orphanage.

"Big brother Julian! Big brother Rui!" One of the girls of the Orphanage called out. "Come play with us!"

Julian chuckled, getting up. "It's been a while since I played with the kids like this." He said before turning to Rui. "Come, you wouldn't want to miss it for the world, would you?"

Rui smiled. "Not for this world, or any other world out there."

Chapter 89: Return

"Be careful, don't push yourself too hard, okay?" Lashara asked with a worried expression.

"Don't worry mom, I'll be fine." Rui insisted, yet she didn't appear convinced.

It was a cold morning, as always. Rui had been standing at the entrance door of the orphanage, facing Lashara and other members of the Orphanage. Three days had gone by and now it was time for Rui to return to the Academy.

The Academy allowed for short vacations per season for a reason. So that students didn't lose their disciplined mindset. This was especially true for students at earlier stages. The Foundation and Exploration Stages, in particular. Three days was around the sweet spot where there was just enough time for a break, but not long enough to break the students out of their mindsets. They all knew they were returning to the Academy in three days so they psychologically didn't relax too much and adapt to their circumstances, knowing they would be returning soon.

Rui wasn't too sad either, he loved his family and truly enjoyed catching up with them. However, three days was a lot of time for chit-chat and banter. He had conversed with all of them for hours and the all the standard topics of conversation one would engage in when conversing in family reunions were already over. Rui had satisfied his homesickness and now his urge to complete missions grew even stronger!

He couldn't wait to get a taste of what it was like to be a Martial Artist. Furthermore, he couldn't wait to earn credits so that he could purchase higher-grade techniques. His Martial Art yearned for greater development! His Martial Path yearned for more depth!

He felt the itch to begin running towards the Academy even in the middle of his farewell! Immediately invoking even stronger feelings of guilt. Which he pressed down, forcefully.

"Alright mom. Everybody. Goodbye." He said. "I'll be back sooner than you think, so don't miss me too much." he grinned.

He began his journey once he finished exchanging farewells with all those who were there to see him off.

This time, he focused purely on speed. He didn't care to conserve stamina by getting a rickshaw like he did when he applied for the Entrance Exam. Back then he had a difficult exam to give, he needed every ounce of his stamina.

Thinking about that day made him feel nostalgic. More than a year had passed since that day, and he had gotten vastly stronger since then. The bloodlust test in round one, the bouncing slimes, the tag stealing game.

In hindsight, those trials were trivial. In his current state he would comfortably place top five or even top three.

He was considerably stronger than the Kane from back then, who had scored twice his score and ranked number four.

The only real problems would be Fae and, of course, Nel.

Rui suddenly did a double-take as he realized it had been truly a long time since he thought of Nel. He had been so engrossed in his Martial Path that he had long forgotten about the number one freshman of their batch.

"I don't think he's an Apprentice." Rui murmured. He hadn't seen Nel in the Apprentice sparring sessions, which he would have had he actually discovered his Martial Path.

"Maybe I should look into him when I get back." Rui shrugged, though he was curious why someone so talented was being stalled so long. Nel was so gifted physically, he was able to defeat an Apprentice while still being a novice. Relying largely on brute strength. Only after Rui became a Martial Apprentice did he realize how absurd that feat was, even if Felix was much weaker back then, much weaker than Rui was now.

Rui wasn't sure why he was taking so long to discover his Martial Path.

"Then again, one year isn't abnormal." Rui remembered. He was the freak, not the norm.

"Once he discovers his Martial Path, he'll be a menace." Rui concluded. The mental evolutions that discovering the Martial Path provided would complement his innate physical gifts remarkably. Rui was a bit curious how strong he would be as a Martial Apprentice, would he be able to beat Martial Squires?

What about Squire Kyrie?

Rui shook his head. Kyrie would mop the floor with him hard with just a portion of her full combat power even if he became a Martial Apprentice. She was just ridiculous.

Rui dispelled such superfluous thoughts as he reached the central districts of Hajin, he could even see the large prominent figure of the Mantian branch of the Martial Academy standing proudly in the distance.

Thankfully it was still quite early in the morning, since he left well ahead of the already early reporting time, so the traffic and rush were still low.

He pushed himself to the limit as he used Parallel Walk, Balance Direction and Helical Breathing to their maximum, zipping through the town as fast as a sprinting horse.

"Ahhh, we're finally here." Rui sighed in relief. He smoothly grabbed his student ID, verifying his status as a student of the Academy to the security before rushing towards the Apprentice dorms.

"Good to be back!" Rui grinned as he opened the room to his dorm. "Maybe I'll take a rejuvenation potion or two before hitting Kane up and heading to out to check out some missions."

Just as he knocked on Kane's room after having put his belongings away, he remembered something important.

"Oh wait. He's out on a long mission." Rui recalled, before sighing. He shrugged, looks like he would have to do this by himself, it was a shame Kane wasn't around to show him the ropes.

"Maybe I'll run into Fae and Milliana." He hoped, though he wasn't sure if they were back yet. He was quite early, after all.

"No no no." He shook his head. "This is my personal endeavor. I can handle it by myself."

He headed down to the commission department, drawing attention to a staff member boldly.

"Excuse me. I would like to apply for an Apprentice-level mission please."

Chapter 90: Mission nuances

Once a staff member heeded Rui's requests and sat him down, he asked.

"This is your first time undertaking a mission, correct?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware of all the due process and procedures needed to undertake a mission?" She asked.

"I'm afraid not, mam." Rui was aware of some of the processes associated with undertaking commissions

"Alright, let me begin by explaining some procedures you must complete. First, every Martial Artist who aims to undertake a mission must be licensed." She explained. "However, for Martial Apprentices who are still students within the Academy, you will be provided with a learner's license."

This was something Rui happened to be aware of.

"A license is proof of competence, as well as a declaration of the recognized right to undertake missions. All Martial Artists who join the Martial Union obtain one. Along with it come certain exclusive rights and obligations."

Rui nodded. He had read this when he went through the mandatory theory lessons during the Exploration Stage. The Martial Union obtained several Royally authorized exclusive rights and privileges, such as partial impunity from the law and partial tax cuts and access to restricted areas among other benefits here and there, all listed in the Kandrian Martial Covenant as well as the employment contract of the Martial Union. The obligations that came with few mandates from the Martial Union such as mandated missions issued by the Martial Union.

"A learner's license possesses neither of the many privileges and obligations that come with a full-fledged license, they're meant to help students like yourself acclimate to the occupation of Martial Artists of the Martial Union." She continued, receiving a nod from Rui.

"You will have to fill and sign this application form as well as submit a statement from the academics department of the Academy that lists out your Martial Art Type categories, the Martial Art techniques you have learnt, as well as your performances and competence as a Martial Apprentice." She explained. "Once you do those, the application will be briefly processed and accepted as long as you pass the criterias."

Rui nodded. "Is the statement needed to assign missions that fit my profile? I thought the Academy didn't mandate specific missions to students." He wondered.

"No." She shook her head. "The Academy does not mandate specific missions to specific students based on their profile. You may choose missions of your choice, however, as an inexperienced Martial Apprentice we cannot allow you to fulfill missions that are outside your skillset." She explained. "If you do choose certain missions outside your skillset, you will be assigned a mentor who will assist you in completing the mission. This is a limited option and service and is merely meant to help you gauge different types of missions to help you understand them and make more informed choices on what kinds of missions you would like to apply for in the future."

This was quite the student-friendly policy, something Rui appreciated.

"There are some missions which have bare minimum skillset requirements, and you will not be allowed to partake in them at all, with or without a mentor." She added. "Please be mindful of that."

"Understood."

"Once your applications is accepted and your learner's license is issued, you will initially not be allowed access to the entire pool of commissions. Your grade as a Martial Apprentice will be objectively evaluated by our department based on the academic statement and records provided by the academics department of the Academy." She explained. "In short, a learner's license does not permit a Martial Apprentice student to take on missions above his competence, as evaluated by us."

Rui nodded. This made sense and was to be expected. Martial Apprentice students like himself had only just built the foundation of their Martial Art, and had spent most of their time cooped up in training. They lacked the experience, knowledge and perspective to understand the difficulties of missions based on the provided information, and could not be trusted to make informed choices.

Many of the missions were actual private commissions made by customers of the Martial Union. The Martial Academy could not afford to allow clueless Apprentice students to foolishly undertake missions above their paygrade and fail the mission!

"Another matter to discuss, is the remuneration. Each mission has a fixed reward of a certain number of Academy credits instead of Kandrian currency, which can be used to purchase techniques." She explained.

Rui nodded. He was fine with this arrangement. He didn't particularly need money whilst he was in the Academy, and money would not allow him to purchase techniques. The ultimate goal for undertaking missions was so that he could purchase more techniques with money and expand develop his Martial Art.

"Finally, we need to go over the process of completing missions, there are a variety of missions, to I will speak generally. Missions are commissions submitted by customers of the Martial Union in exchange for completing a specified criteria or fulfilling a certain objective as well as other parameters such as specified timeframe and any pre-requisites etc." She established. "Each mission as provided to Martial Apprentices will be encoded in a booklet, known as a mission bill. Within it will be specified all relevant information needed by the Martial Artist to complete said mission. Including the objective as well as all relevant intel that you have clearance too." She paused before taking out a sample mission bill to show him.

"All mission bills are kept within the Mission library and are all organized by different parameters and categories. The first classification is class. All techniques are initially divided into the five different classes of missions: Assault missions, defense missions, covert operations, hunting missions and miscellaneous missions. Then they're further divided by difficulty grade, then further divided into categories by pre-requisites and locations." She explained.

Rui nodded. It was a convenient setup that allowed Martial Artists to find what they're looking for with relative ease. A Martial Artist or a party of Martial Artists of a certain class could simply walk over to his class of missions, further navigate to the difficulty grade of his capability or comfort, then choose focus on missions in a location of convenience and a preferred timeframe, and finally pick a mission whose pre-requisites he satisfied. A relatively simple process. If the Martial Academy and Union did not possess this level of user-friendly organization, then it would simply be one hell of a mess for Martial Artists to choose missions conforming to their needs and wants!