

Martial Unity 411

Chapter 411: Conflict

"Which territory were you assigned to?" Rui asked Fiona.

"The State Hreefal." She replied. "You?"

"Kingdom of Nochus."

Rui found it a shame that they weren't working together, but the decision wasn't in their hands.

"Martial Apprentices assigned to the Kingdom of Nochus." Commissioner Carnes addressed all of them at one point. "The data regarding the defenses of the territory of the Kingdom of Nochus are present in the mission bill each of you was provided, but I'll be breaking it down once more."

He projected some images onto the wall of the room they were all in.

"The Kingdom of Nochus has opted for a rather straightforward standard fortification structure. The territory is protected by a rather straightforward large spiked wall that prevents entry. The wall has openings through which heavy artillery can be mounted and fired. The twenty-four of you are best off simply bypassing the wall from the top. With your capabilities, it cannot prevent your entry indefinitely." Commissioner Carnes explained. "Remember, your goal isn't necessarily to conquer but to hinder and obstruct their expansion capabilities."

The Martial Artists nodded, well aware of their role. Rui glanced around him, counting the number of Martial Apprentices that were assigned to the Kingdom of Nochus. A total of twenty-four Martial Apprentices were assigned to the mission. It was a rather formidable offensive force that would be no doubt extremely difficult to counter. Especially considering that each of the Martial Apprentices was high ranking Martial Apprentices.

Rui sighed as he sensed the hostility of Ian Nepomniachtchi from the crowd. It was rather unfortunate that he was paired with the hostile Martial Apprentice, Rui would rather have been assigned a different target.

Soon, it was time for dispatch. The Martial Apprentices all prepared themselves as the time for the commencement of the assaults began.

They all set out in the direction of their respective targets immediately. The Serevian Dungeon was as large as a small city, however, that wasn't too big a problem for the Martial Apprentices. It didn't take more than twenty minutes for the Martial Apprentices to arrive at the target territories that they were supposed to assault.

Suddenly, Rui's Primordial Instinct warned him about a barrage of attacks from the enemy base.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

Rui avoided cannon balls that narrowly missed their targets as each of the Martial Apprentices dealt with them in their own way. Each of them was high-grade Martial Apprentices that had been chosen by the Martial Union to partake in the Serevian Dungeon wars and the assault on the territories of the Kingdom of Nochus.

BAM!

One of them blasted the canon balls into tiny smithereens with a fist. Another simply rampaged forward through the attacks that barely fazed them. Rui merely shifted slightly as he moved the bare minimum needed to evade them.

BOOM!!!

One of the Martial Apprentices, a burly large man, landed a staggering blow to the fortified wall. The sheer force with which he struck the barrier was tremendous.

CRACK CRACK

A deep web of cracks formed on the fortified walls. The materials with which the walls were constructed were certainly not average as they managed to not instantly get utterly annihilated by the devastating attack that the Martial Apprentices had unleashed.

BAM BAM BAM!

The other Martial Apprentices took that as a cue as they launched a barrage of attacks on the damaged wall.

BOOM!

RUMBLE

An entire section of the fortified wall collapsed as the weight of the attacks of the Martial Apprentices was simply too much. The Martial Apprentices rushed in immediately, yet they were immediately met by enemy Martial Apprentices.

A battle ensued as Martial Apprentices clashed with each other.

Rui simply walked in as he looked for the most powerful Martial Apprentice. Primordial Instinct precisely gave him the danger evaluations of every Martial Apprentice in the vicinity, thus he could tell that the Martial Apprentices of the Kandrian Empire were stronger.

It likely had to do with the fact that the Martial Union went above and beyond in investing in the growth and development of Martial Artists and Martial Art. A small country like the Kingdom of Nochus simply couldn't compete with the Kandrian Martial Union as far as the growth of Martial Art and Martial Artists went. This clearly reflected in the difference in the quality of Martial Artists.

Rui didn't feel much threat despite being in the middle of a war between Martial Apprentices. His sense of security was simply too high, at this point.

"Him." Rui muttered as he fixated on one individual who was casually defending from the attacks of two grade-nine Martial Apprentices of the Martial Union.

Rui dashed towards him at an incredibly swift pace.

BOOM!!

He exploited a momentary pause in the battle between the three Martial Apprentices as he rammed into his target with a heavy Flowing Canon, separating him from the Martial Apprentices that he had been taking on.

"I'll take this guy on," Rui told them.

He didn't even bother listening to their response as he began unleashing an onslaught of attacks on his opponent with extreme power and speed.

Yet, much to his joy, his opponent cleanly redirected every attack with surprising accuracy, precision and success.

('Hehehe. I'm going enjoy this one.') Rui grinned behind his mask.

His opponent was a defense-oriented Martial Artist. He had a clear focus and slant toward active defense.

Active defenses were defenses that required the conscious cognition of the user to function. The Inner Divergence, Elastic Shift, and Acute Edge techniques were all dynamic. These techniques required the user to process and time them correctly, otherwise, they were simply ineffective. The advantage of active defenses was that they were much more flexible their effectiveness didn't usually have a hard upper limit and often depended on the skill of the user and the accuracy of the timing of the user.

Rui enjoyed fighting against active defenses, they were a better exercise for the VOID algorithm and allowed him to thoroughly test the offensive prowess of his opponent.

Chapter 412: Initial

POW!

Rui swung a hook only for his opponent to step towards the strike, blocking it with an armed guard. Rui seamlessly hurled an already-wound straight punch to the man's face.

BAM!

Once again, the man stepped forward in the direction of the attack, blocking it with a forward guard. He was incredibly swift for a defensive Martial Apprentice, being able to keep up with Rui's every attack. Rui launched a barrage of blows, yet time after time, the man somehow continued blocking all of Rui's attacks casually.

('He's ruining the timing of my attacks.') Rui quickly realized. ('He's using a technique where he steps forward in the direction of the attack and blocks it prematurely before the attack has charged enough to reach its peak.')

It was a simple yet fascinating principle. Every attack had a peak as speed and power went. Martial Artists swung their fists and legs and spaced themselves such that the attack would land on their target when the attack was at peak power in order to deliver the maximum possible impact.

Rui's opponent instead, rapidly stepped forward in the briefest of moments before the attack had reached its peak and intercepted it when it was weak. This way he could prevent his opponent from showing their best striking power in a fight. Of course, he used other techniques to mitigate the impact, including some passive defense that came from conditioning.

Yet, it was this mistiming technique that drew Rui's interest.

This technique also foiled Reverberating Lance since Rui always timed the technique for the normal collision of the attack. But that was only if Rui continued to fail.

BOOM!

The man grimaced for the first time as a powerful body blow slammed into his guards

Rui kept a careful eye on his movements with Primordial Instinct boosted by the Mindmirror secondary brain, carefully readjusting the timing of the Reverberating lance to suit the sabotages of his opponent. Rui continued whaling away at him as he began inputting data about his opponent into his mind palace.

BAM!

Rui cleanly bypassed his guard as a powerful blow crashed into the man's guard launching him some distance away.

The biggest problem with the mistiming technique was that it made him predictable and easy to read. If he approached attacks through them off-timing, then Rui knew exactly what he would do to each attack.

The actual predictive model of each attack was not even complete, yet at this stage, Rui wasn't even sure if he actually needed it.

Rui launched a powerful hook aimed at the man's jaw. The man, like clockwork, prematurely moves to mis-time the attack. Yet;

WHOOSH

It was an illusion.

BAM!

Before he could even process it, a sudden attack appeared and crashed into his jaw. The sheer impact of Rui's true, unhindered power crashed into his jaw. The impact shook his brain, immediately triggering brain trauma.

THUD

He collapsed on the ground.

Yet, Rui wasn't done.

('This lart sucks.') Rui sighed with a solemn expression.

BAM!!

A powerful drop kick to the head was the end. A pool of blood began forming from the man's head. His skull had been shattered and his brain had already been damaged.

BAM!

Rui immediately turned over as the deed was complete.

The mission bill had been extremely clear. There was to be no mercy shown to hostile competitors' Martial Apprentices. The participating Martial Apprentices were not allowed to let the vanquished Martial Artists survive. Rui began attacking the Martial Apprentices one by one.

The tide of the battle had begun to overwhelmingly devolve in the favor of the Kandrian Empire. The reason for that was that the Kingdom of Nochus was a small and weak country that simply was unable to compensate for the large disparity in quality and quantity of Martial Apprentices.

Rui was the biggest problem, as everyone soon came to realize.

He was a menace. An incredible all-rounder who was highly capable. On top of that, the VOID algorithm was particularly brutal. Yet what was even more brutal was how none of them were Martial Apprentices where Rui genuinely would be unable to win without it.

BAM!

Rui landed stray attacks on other hostile foreign Martial Apprentices. He pranced around the battlefield looking for especially powerful Martial Apprentices, yet he couldn't find them.

He sighed, disappointed mid-battle. Although he knew the Kingdom of Nochus was small and weak he hadn't expected how much weaker it actually would be. The lackluster Martial Apprentice all reflected the inferiority of the Kingdom of Nochus.

Rui sighed as he evaded a canon attack. Primordial Instinct kept a focus on the battle yet his mind was preoccupied. He had no competition in the little place.

Rui was certain that the large nations would be different. These were nations that were more or fewer supernations that were on par with the Kandrian Empire. Rui was sure that at the very least one of the supernations had enough Martial Apprentices who were powerful enough to take him on. What were the odds that he was genuinely unmatched even with such a drastically wide and large ample size? What were the odds that not a single Martial Apprentice across so many countless Martial Apprentices was simply insufficient to take him on and truly test his powers against a genuine equal who could push him to his absolute limit?

Before he could even ponder the manner:

Suddenly.

WHOOSH

Rui side-stepped as he cleanly and smoothly evaded the attack, glancing back at the direction it come from.

His eyes widened as he clearly beheld two Martial Apprentices in the room.

One of which was Ian Nepomniachtchi, who had been eying him in hindsight.

('No way...') Rui thought to himself. ('No way he just fired an attack at me?')

Rui felt several conflicting thoughts as he analyzed the situation and many different possible explanations as to why the other Martial Apprentice was the one to have fired the attack. Yet his gut told him that he was wrong.

Chapter 413: Return

Rui wanted to walk over immediately and smack some sense into the treacherous moron. But his rationality quashed that urge quickly.

They were in the middle of a battle. The most important matter was the successful completion of the assault on the expanded territory of the Kingdom of Nochus. Rui would be doing himself harm by being the one to escalate the matter in the middle of battle. He could not prove Ian had deliberately aimed at him, but Ian would be able to prove that Rui escalated the matter in the middle of combat.

He would be playing into his hands if he simply acted on his emotions, thankfully Rui was quite rational regarding the matter

But Rui realized he needed to be careful of Ian, the man's grudge was stronger than Rui had expected if he was willing to backstab a fellow Kandrian Martial Artist in a battle against other nations.

BAM BAM BAM!

Rui took down another Martial Apprentice as he glanced at the state of the base of the Kingdom of Nochus. The base had been evacuated, and the sheer environmental damage caused by many dozens of high-ranking Martial Apprentices was immense.

"Hm?" Rui's Seismic Mapping sensed the seismic radiation of motorized carriages heading towards them at incredibly high speeds.

"Reinforcements!" He shouted, announcing the Kandrian Martial Artists.

It seemed that the Kingdom of Nochus had gone as far as to forsake a part of the defense of the core territory to reinforce the Martial Apprentice assets that were still defending the expanded territories.

The motorized vehicles rushed towards the battlefield even as the Kandrian Martial Artists were whittling down the Martial Artists of the Kingdom of Nochus.

The carriages spread out as several uniformed soldiers leaped out of them. They were part of the military of the Kingdom of Nochus, distinct from the Martial Artists that Kandrian Martial Artists had been fighting up until then.

Rui frowned as he felt a strange sensation from all of them. They emitted a faint threat to the Martial Apprentices yet they didn't feel like Martial Apprentices. Rui noticed strange devices across their arms, recalling seeing something similar on many soldiers of the Kandrian Royal Family.

('Potions!') Rui's eyes widened.

The soldiers dashed at the Kandrian Martial Apprentices with fearsome speed and power.

"Retreat!" Rui bellowed as he maximized Primordial Instinct and the Mindmirror brain. Time slowed down from his perspective as he took in the whole situation. The Martial Artists had begun retreating at the sight of the motorized vehicles, thankfully. Rui launched several Tempestuous Ripples as he himself backed away from the battlefield, slowing down his pursuers.

Yet, he wasn't worried that they wouldn't let them retreat. As defensive reinforcements, they weren't meant to pursue. Furthermore, potions had time limits. They couldn't afford to engage in a lengthy, time-consuming chase.

The Martial Artists were hurt and damaged by the overwhelming offense from the Kandrian Martial Artists.

The operation was successful.

"Ian." Rui sternly addressed him. "Why did you attack me? Your action is a violation of the oaths you swore not only to become a Martial Apprentice but also the ones you undertook when accepting this mission."

Martial Artists were required to sign statements that they would be held to in order to obtain their Martial licenses. Among these statements was the pledge to good faith, to never act detrimentally to the Martial Union or a mission.

"It was a mistake." Ian coldly replied without even bothering to look at Rui. "I was locked in combat with a Martial Apprentice and he avoided an attack of mine, which then traveled on to find you in its path. I did not have any ill will against you."

He was lying. Rui could feel it with his Primordial Instinct.

"I see." Rui instead replied. "Take care to ensure that it never happens again. Surely you wouldn't want to hurt a fellow Martial Apprentice in a conflict against foreign nations."

"Surely I wouldn't." Ian echoed.

('This is going to be a pain in the ass to deal with.')

Rui sighed inwardly.

He was sure this wasn't going to be the last attempt by the man to try and harm Rui. The circumstances were anything but convenient. He would need to find a proper way to deal with Ian or this would likely be a long-term problem.

He couldn't just attack him without proof. The ramifications of such actions would not be light. There was very little to no point in complaining to commissioner Feristen or HQ. Without concrete evidence, there wasn't anything that either would do to him. Still, Rui could at least request to be not assigned to the same missions as Ian. That would solve most of the problems.

Rui shook his head as he put aside the matter. However, he decided he would keep Primordial Instinct active the entire time he was at the Serevian Dungeon. He couldn't trust Ian to not try something when they were at the base.

"Woah." His eyes widened as the Kandrian Empire's territory emerged in his field of vision.

What surprised him was that the territory had more than doubled in the time that he had been away.

('They weren't kidding when they said 'aggressive expansion'.') Rui mused.

In fact, the Kandrian Empire would simply have colonized a gigantic portion of the Serevian Dungeon, however, the underground cave network that created many security issues meant that they couldn't simply place gigantic barriers over a large territory. Any territory they seized had to be quickly secured before expansion could begin. It appeared that the security process had been fully completed and thus the Kandrian Empire had chosen to expand further outside the core territory.

('At this rate, the Kandrian Empire's expansion of territory will lead it to eventually have a direct border and territorial conflict with the other nations in no time at all.') Rui estimated.

These would be where the actual conflicts would take place, the inevitable conflicts. The assault mission he had undergone was merely a proactive measure that the Kandrian Empire had taken to suppress its direct competitors.

Chapter 414: Musings

"You're saying Apprentice Ian Nepomniachtchi attacked you amidst the mission?" Commissioner Feristen asked him, frowning.

"Yes, commissioner Feristen." Rui nodded. "He insisted it was an accident, but the explanation he provided was implausible. I also sensed his lie as a master of the Primordial Instinct technique and Mindmirror Symbiote. He also has the motive to do something like this."

"And what motive might that be?" Commissioner Feristen asked him.

"I defeated him in the Martial Contest last year, he did not take it well and has maintained a grudge by all accounts," Rui explained.

"Is that all you have?" Commissioner Feristen asked. "I'm afraid you've offered nothing but your word."

"I can't be expected to provide more," Rui replied. "I'm not asking for an investigation or even for justice. However, it would be appreciated if you could place us in different missions."

"I do not make the decision of assigning Martial Apprentices their particular missions. Those are made back home by the higher-ups. Nevertheless, I can put the word of your complaint back to the higher-ups, though I can't guarantee that your wish will get fulfilled."

"I see, then please do that." Rui nodded. "Thank you."

He bade commissioner Feristen goodbye before leaving the office, sighing. This was about as far as he could go in regard to relying on his superiors to solve the problem. The Martial Apprentices had just returned and filled in a report, submitting it. Rui had decided to take the time of contacting commissioner Feristen and informing him about Ian.

For now, he put the matter aside.

The Kandrian Empire's territorial expansion was going remarkably well. Rui had heard rumors that another team of Martial Apprentices had been brought in to bolster the defenses of the expanded area. The Kandrian Empire had set a minimum Martial Artist per unit area ratio in order to ensure that the territory could be adequately defended.

Rui's face lit up in elation when he ran into a friendly face.

"Hever!" Rui called out to him. "It's been a while!"

"Indeed it has." Hever calmly replied.

"You're part of the defensive squad, I'm guessing?" Rui asked him.

"Indeed."

"Figured." Rui nodded.

Hever's Martial Art was fundamentally counter-offensive, he didn't have a single actively offensive bone in his body. His being part of the offensive squad would be a brain-dead decision on the part of the higher-ups.

"I heard your assault mission was successful," Hever told him. "How did it go? What were the Martial Artists of the foreign nation like?"

"It went well," Rui replied. "The Martial Artists of the Kingdom of Nochus were frankly several notches below than the Martial Apprentices of the Kandrian Empire. Their Martial Art were much more generic and grounded, and they didn't possess counters for a lot of the more exotic Martial Art techniques that the Martial Apprentices of the Kandrian Empire showed."

"Seems like the Martial Apprentices of large nations are more than just a little favored by virtue of being born in more powerful nations," Hever noted.

Rui nodded. "The quality of the techniques of Martial Art is very important, the visible power gap between the Martial Artists could be entirely explained by the difference in the quality of the Martial foundations between the nations. I don't think the defensive squad has much to worry about, there are only smaller nations in our vicinity. None of the super nations' core territories are even remotely close to ours, relatively speaking."

"Still, we need to be careful. Eventually, the territory of the Kandrian Empire will expand significantly until it covers swathes of the Serevian Dungeon." Hever noted. "When that time comes, direct conflict at the very border of the Kandrian Empire will be inevitable. The defensive squad's merit will be truly tested when that happens."

"True." Rui nodded. "None of the smaller nations will attack the Kandrian Empire's territory unless absolutely necessary. Only the other three fellow super-nations such as the Sekigahara Confederate, the Republic of Gorteau and the Britannian Empire have the power to do something like that, but the territories of these nations were not particularly close to each other."

In fact, the core territories of the four nations were nearly as far away from each other as possible. This wasn't done by accident, there was a very strong reason that the four nations each placed their core territories at the most distant part of the Serevian Dungeon.

The closer the core territories of the super-nations were with each other, the greater the conflict the nations would have to be subjected to for otherwise the same number of resources. There was no point in having the nations close to each other only for the nations to immediately engage in tumultuous conflict.

By giving each other the wide distance that they would each like, each nation could freely expand in the Serevian Dungeon with only the weaker nations and the many fauna life forms in the Serevian Dungeon impeding their progress. Neither could compete with the super-nations.

The Kandrian Empire's plan was to expand aggressively and comfortably as fast as possible while being restricted by the necessity of closing all the underground cave networks in their new territory while also eliminating the many low-level Apprentice-level lifeforms that existed in the Serevian Dungeon in their newly seized territory every time they expanded it.

The problems would begin when the territory of the Kandrian Empire would eventually hit the territories of the other super-nations despite the massive distance between them, simply due to the sheer expansion that all the super-nations would eventually complete.

When that happened, the only land that would remain uncolonized would be the core of the Serevian Dungeon. None of the twelve nations had placed their core territory in the center of the Serevian Dungeon, there were simply too many disadvantages to such a decision. The territory would face stiff competition from every direction. Furthermore, the territory would be boxed out of the border of the Serevian Dungeon making it impossible to receive supply shipments from their home states.

Chapter 415: Happenings

The Kandrian Empire's initial plan in regard to the Serevian Dungeon was simple;

Expand aggressively and fast.

Prevent the closest competitors from expanding.

The former was, of course, to capitalize and colonize as much land and as many resources as possible. The latter was to ensure that none of the Kandrian Empire's closest competitors could colonize land and drain it of resources.

It wasn't good enough to seize land already seized by the competitors of the Kandrian Empire. If the Kandrian Empire seized lands from other nations, those lands will likely have already been completely drained of their fruit. The fruit extraction process was rather easy and quick, after all. Even if the Kandrian Empire invaded and conquered territory only a few days after they had been initially colonized, it was entirely possible that all the fruits will have been entirely plundered by the colonizing group that the Kandrian Empire conquered the land from.

That was why, in the context of the Kandrian Empire, prevention of colonization was more important than stealing colonized lands. That was why the second objective of the constant assault on the territories of the closest competitors was there at all.

By having the offense team constantly assaulting the territories of the small nations, the Kandrian Empire could significantly slow down if not entirely impede the expansion of the small nations outside their core territories. This was why the offensive team comprised the best of the best that the Martial Union was able to gather in a short amount of time.

Days flew by as the Martial Apprentices of the offensive squad continued conducting an increasing number of assaults into the expanded territories of the Kingdom of Nochus, the State of Hreefal, and the Republic of Jerefin.

BOOM!!!

A large section of the fortified wall barricading the territory of the Republic of Jerefin in the Serevian Dungeon collapsed.

Dozens of Martial Apprentices of the Kandrian Martial Union leaped in.

The very atmosphere contorted and wrung under the combined weight of mind of all the powerful Martial Apprentices.

Yet, among all of them, a single Martial Apprentices stood out.

All of the Martial Apprentices of the Republic of Jerefin were drawn to him as they gazed at him with fear.

He met their eyes.

What was a meaningless gesture to him sent chills down their spines as they found themselves unable to break eye contact? His eyes froze their gaze, as they greedily sucked out the light from the air.

It was as though they were naked before his gaze.

The titanic pressure he exerted on them was almost crippling. But not nearly as crippling as the onslaught he unleashed upon all of them.

It wasn't as though he had godly physical power. It wasn't as though he moved as fast as lightning. It wasn't as though he was as tough as a mountain.

Yet, Martial Apprentices collapsed like bowling pins before his rampage.

Later on, when the Martial Apprentices of the Republic of Jerefin were asked to fill in their reports, it was discovered none of them could quite describe it.

None of them could quite describe the reason for the sheer dominance that Rui displayed on the battlefield. When the intelligence department pressed them for an answer that was vital for understanding the prowess of the Martial Artist combat asset that had wreaked havoc, the explanations provided were so ridiculous that the intelligence officers felt embarrassed typing them out into the profile created for the extremely dangerous Martial Artist in their database.

"It was... magic." One Martial Apprentice described with a whisper.

"I felt like a puppet. My movements were pre-ordained, known, and seen through. He was no Martial Artist, he was a prophet." Another murmured.

Yet, to the horror of the higher-ups of the Republic of Jerefin, confusion was not the worst symptom of fighting the powerful Martial Apprentice.

No.

"I can't see it." The hands of a Martial Apprentice shivered as she held her held.

"See what?" The intelligence officer asked, confused.

"I can't see my path... I-I can't see my path." Her sense of balance deteriorated. She held her arms out as though she were balancing on a ledge. "I can't... Path. I can't. Where Wait, I can't..." She began mumbling incoherently.

"I'm going need to medical aid here." the intelligence officer spoke through a communication device. "Apprentice Ferlin is showing signs of disorientation and incoherence."

"I'M NOT SICK." She screeched. "HE DESTROYED MY MARTIAL PATH."

She wasn't the only victim.

"What do you mean you're retiring?" A staff member asked politely, confused.

"Knowing that... thing... exists in the Martial World..." The Martial Apprentice whispered. "I don't want to fight in a world where that Martial Artist exists. I think I'll just inherit my father's farm and lead a peaceful life. I do not ever wish to see that void ever again."

"You're in the middle of a grade-ten mission!"

The Republic of Jerefin was far from the only sovereign state that had experienced such bizarre anomalies. The State of Hreefal and the Kingdom of Nochus had experienced similar happenings. Martial Artists that survived an extended battle against the menace Martial Artist were all psychologically impacted.

Confusion and incomprehension were the most basic symptoms. Not a single Martial Apprentice understood what was happening. As time went on in their fights against him, it was as though a mystical force was warping fate in his favor.

Why did every attack, every defense, every maneuver, all of them magically work? Why did each of their fights feel like a scripted fight from a cheap action play where the hero magically defeated the villain impeccably?

They didn't know. Their ignorance was a void, it ate away at them the more time passed. Many went to sleepless nights as they struggled to understand. Yet try as they might, they were unable to fathom.

Very quickly, an urban legend spread through the dungeon teams of the three nations. The Voideater, The Antithesis, The Scourge. The intelligence agencies tagged the profile of this anonymous Martial Artist with many a title.

The legend of Rui Quarrier spread through the Serevian Dungeon.

Chapter 416: Progress

The Kandrian's offensive initiative was incredibly effective. The goal of the offensive initiative was to hinder the expansion efforts of the State of Hreefal, Republic of Jerefin, and the Kingdom of Nochus.

Thus far, the efforts had been more than just successful. The Kingdom of Nochus had been more than just merely impeded, they had been pushed back. The constant assaults from the Kandrian Empire had forced the Kingdom of Nochus to seriously consider and eventually go through with the plan of reducing their expanded territory to tighten their defense and be able to withstand the destruction the Kandrian Empire left behind each time.

All three of the small nations gritted their teeth as they did their best to withstand the onslaught from the Kandrian Empire. The performance of the Kandrian Empire had exceeded the expectations of the spectating nation. The fact that the Kandrian Empire was displaying such dominance despite fighting against three nations while also spending a lot of resources towards the expansion of its own territory indicated that the Martial Apprentices were incredibly remarkable.

Even the other three super-nations had taken notice. It was not something that could be ignored. Even if Martial Apprentices were of the lowest Martial Artist Realm, the Martial Apprentices of today were the higher-Realm Martial Artists of tomorrow. It was evidently clear that the Kandrian Empire, and the Kandrian Martial Union, in particular, were not going away any time soon.

The nations had also noticed the performances of one particular Martial Artist that seemed nearly invincible in the Apprentice Realm.

He wasn't extraordinarily strong, fast, or resilient, yet somehow his motions were such that he could defeat people who were much superior to him.

Furthermore, there was strange vague news that went around regarding the curse of the masked Martial Artist. It was said that those that fought against him one-on-one for any meaningful period of time experienced things that left them traumatized. The super nations' formidable intelligence-gathering capabilities had gathered a lot of information regarding the details.

From confusion to depression, to hysteria and delusion. Many of the Martial Apprentices who fought him experienced and displayed lasting psychological effects. However, not all Martial Apprentices collapsed against him. It was discovered that Squire candidates were mentally strong enough to not experience any psychological distress.

Many nations took the threat seriously and had begun treating it as an advanced grade-ten Martial Apprentice technique.

This was a response Rui could only laugh at. As long as the very basic premise of their research into the matter was just hilariously wrong, he didn't expect them to make any progress.

A month flew by as the three states of the Kingdom of Hreefal, the Republic of Jerefin, and the Kingdom of Nochus got utterly dominated by the Martial Apprentices of the Kandrian Empire. The three nations had gotten so bullied that they even made their own alliance!

The Serevian Fringe Alliance was an alliance between the Kingdom of Nochus, the State of Hreefal, and the Republic of Jerefin. It's an official charter was a statement where the governments of the alliance pledge to never attack each other so long as the contract is valid. Its stated goal was merely a front, everyone knew that the alliance was to help the three nations cope with the Kandrian Empire's aggression.

It was an imperfect solution and helped mitigate the damage that the Kandrian Empire left in its onslaught. The Kandrian Empire would need to apply more pressure and force if it wanted to silence these weak and small sovereign nations.

Yet, for now, there were bigger fish.

A month went by in a similar monotony as the nations engaged in long-established patterns of war between each other. However, soon, the Serevian Dungeon wars were beginning to reach the meat of the entire saga.

The four super-nations had enjoyed a dominant display against the many smaller and weaker nations that suffered at the hands of the larger nations. They had been aggressively expanding each, and eventually, they were bound to run into each other.

Each of them was aware of this.

No longer would the Kandrian Empire experience casual dominance with greater quantity and quality of Martial Apprentices against its victims.

The final phase of the Kandrian Empire involved direct head-on conflict over the remaining territory of the Serevian Dungeon. The Kandrian Empire had long since prepared for this since the very discovery of the Serevian Dungeon. A huge number of defensive and offensive Martial Artists had come a long way to partake in the conflict to monopolize as many resources as possible.

The sheer scale of these conflicts would far exceed what Rui had partaken in thus far. Thus far, he had mostly participated in assaults on the smaller nations. These missions that Rui had been much smaller. Most of them were relatively simple and straightforward for assaulting bases that merely fought to protect and defend.

Furthermore, Rui had the ability to retreat easily and be relatively safe despite being the aggressor as well as being a trespasser on enemy territory.

However, in active reciprocated war, there were no such guarantees of safety. Rui would be fighting against the genuinely powerful grade-ten Martial Apprentices that were powerful enough to ensure that even someone as strong as himself couldn't just effortlessly walk over them.

Yet this didn't discourage him, it only made him feel more eager to participate in a battle of the pinnacle of the Martial Apprentice Realm. The best of the best, it was an opportunity he would never be able to get in nearly any other setting. He was quite grateful to the Serevian Dungeon in many ways.

The very concept of dungeons increased the importance of each Realm much more so than would normally be the case. Because only Martial Apprentices could participate in the Serevian Dungeon, that made each high-ranking Martial Apprentice was an extremely important asset. Furthermore, it created settings that catered remarkably well to what Rui was looking for at this stage in his Martial Path.

Chapter 417: Summon

The game had shifted as the four super-nations expanded aggressively towards the center of the Serevian Dungeon. The smaller nations had been drowned out of the competition as they sat tight struggling hard to maintain their territory. The four super-nations continued funneling more Martial Apprentices and other resources into the Serevian Dungeon as the tension between the nations began escalating.

The amount of territory left for grabs was decreasing every day.

The Kandrian Empire welcomed a new influx of Martial Apprentices in response to the growing potential for larger scale conflict.

"Kane, Fae, Nel!" Rui's eyes lit up in elation. "You guys are here already."

The three of them had informed Rui prior that they would be accepting the Serevian Dungeon mission. They were previously tied up with other missions, but quickly made haste for the Serevian Dungeon when they completed their prior engagements.

"Just in time too!" Nel grinned.

"I happened to hear things were spicing up in the Serevian Dungeon." Fae offered. "Now is the most crucial phase of the mission."

"Can't let you have all the fun." Kane smirked.

The four of them didn't even catch any respite as their accounters received notifications for the very next mission.

"A new assault mission..." Rui murmured. "And the target is the Sekigahara Confederate. Wow."

This was the first time the Kandrian Empire had ordered an assault on one of the three other super nations. Rui glanced at his friends; it wasn't a coincidence that the Kandrian Empire had chosen to attack its competitors head-on, the last surge of Martial Apprentices was likely chosen for the sake of gathering enough Martial Artist assets that would be required to launch a viable attack on one of the super-nations.

The defense measures that the other three super nations had enacted weren't nearly as paltry as those of the smaller nations. From higher-grade technological measures to more powerful defensive Martial Artists. Successfully assaulting the territories of the super nations was no small joke.

"You guys got the notification too?" Rui asked as they all checked their accounters.

"Yep, seems that way." Kane affirmed.

All of them were part of the offensive squad. Fae was naturally a given, being an offensive striking Martial Artist. Kane would also do better in an offensive setting thanks to his stealth.

Nel was neutral in so far as his affinity went, but his temperament was suited towards assault.

Rui read through the information detailed with greater scrutiny. The assault mission was scheduled in six hours. The territory they were supposed to siege was actually remarkably close to the Kandrian Empire. The reason for this was because the distance between the territories was no longer as large as it used to be due to the continuous expansion of the super nations in the Serevian Dungeon.

Suddenly, their accounters buzzed once more as they received a summon to the Martial Union branch office in the Serevian Dungeon territory.

"Figured." Rui had anticipated it.

This was standard practice. The commissioner would take the liberty of breaking down the operation in more detail and addressing any concerns that the Martial Artists may have. Normal missions that featured a single Martial Artist or a single party didn't normally require the commissioner to breakdown the mission in such a fashion, but high-grade missions such as this that required a large number of exceptionally powerful Martial Artists required this additional step.

Soon the Martial Apprentices gathered at the Martial Union's office.

"Apprentices." Commissioner Feristen addressed them. "I'm sure all of you have realized the significance of this mission. This will be the first conflict that the Kandrian Empire will be having with the Sekigahara Confederate. The mission objective, as always, is to inflict enough damage to their territory, assets and Martial Artists. However, this time, there are several things that will be different."

He paused, before fiddling with a device that projected an image onto a screen.

"The Kandrian Royal Army will be partaking in this assault mission as well. The Sekigahara Confederate's defensive measures will be extremely difficult to overcome. The fortified wall protecting their territory is a meter thick wall made up of tempered Ferendil Iron, an esoteric substance which is capable of withstanding a lot more punishment in the Apprentice Realm. Based on reports from the Kandrian

Intelligence agency and the intelligence department of the Martial Union, the Sekigahara Confederate has gathered more than a hundred powerful high-grade Martial Apprentices."

Commissioner Feristen paused, letting the number sit. "A half-hearted attack will simply be crushed by the sheer defensive fortress they have created. Thus, you will the Kandrian Royal Army will be aiding this assault mission. The Kandrian Army will be deploying thirty Falcon-class siege tanks that will be aiding you in the assault of the fortress walls. However, the most important matter to be discussed is the Sekigahara Confederate's response."

He projected another image onto the screen.

"Unlike the Kingdom of Nochus, State of Hreefal, and the Republic of Jerefin, the Sekigahara Confederate's surveillance capabilities are quite impressive. With the former nations, they become aware of an impending attack far too late, due to inferior surveillance technology as well as lesser number of Martial Artists with sensory techniques. However, the same cannot be said for any of the four super nations in the Serevian Dungeon. Just as we have elaborate surveillance and reconnaissance measures that would allow us to almost immediately realize the existence of an impending attack the second any of the other three nations make large moves, the same can be said for them."

He paused, before continuing. "It is highly likely that the other three nations have already obtained intelligence on the high influx Martial Apprentices that our base has welcomes very recently. It is inevitable that they will detect the attack the second our assault team leaves our base and they will likely have prepared well in advance. The strategic and intelligence departments of the Serevian Dungeon team have evaluated the measures and strategies that the Sekigahara Confederate may enact, and I will be presenting them to all of you."

Chapter 418: Time

"The immediate goal of the Sekigahara Confederate upon any such invasion would be to ensure that no conflict occurs within their territory." Commission Feristen explained. "After all, ideally our goal would be to ensure the conflict occurs within their border, this would inflict the most amount of damage to their base and would ensure that their expansion is hindered the most. Their goal is the exact opposite. They'll want to minimize the amount of damage we inflict, while also maximizing our losses."

Rui nodded. This was common sense. It was impossible to prevent any damage from being inflicted in such a conflict, but at the very least the damage could be significantly minimized depending on their strategy and tactics.

"If they want to minimize the damage done to their territory, it logically follows that not letting the conflict take place within their territory is ideal. There are only two ways of doing this." he paused, before continuing. "Either their defensive measures prevent us from entering their territory, which is certainly a tall order. Or they intercept our force away from their territory with their own counter-offense striking force."

He projected another image detailing the known information regarding the defensive measures of the base Sekigahara territory.

"The probability of a powerful force not inflicting at least some damage to their territory once the assault team reaches their territory is low. This is because their territory is large and their defensive resources are spread across a wide area whereas our offensive resources are going to be very focused on a single part of the border. Once we reach the border of their territory, it will become untenable to ensure that no damage is inflicted on their territory. Therefore, the second option is evaluated to be much more likely."

He pressed a button on his projector that switched to a map featuring the Kandrian Empire's and the Sekigahara Confederate's territories in the Serevian Dungeon.

"Our analysts predict that once our assault team is dispatched from our territory the Sekigahara Confederate will quickly mobilize their Martial Artists and military to intercept our assault team a little away from their border." Commissioner Feristen continued. "This is expected because our protocols entail something similar as well."

"Thus, it is quite likely that all of you on the assault team will be intercepted a little earlier by their military. Regardless, you will have to fight, the only variable is where. That depends purely on their response." Commissioner Feristen explained. "If the battle occurs at the border, then you may retreat only after you have compromised the security and stability of that portion of their territory, which will be evaluated by the strategic department in live time. You will receive a specific number of beeps from your mission tracker devices that correspond to different orders."

He paused before continuing. "In the case of being intercepted by the forces of the Sekigahara Confederate, you will have to ensure that the damage and loss of assets inflicted on the opposing force exceed the loss of assets endured by the Kandrian Empire. This will also be evaluated by the strategic department, and orders will be relayed mid-battle via a certain number of beeps that will each correspond to a different order."

He dove deeper into certain finer details of the mission before the mission breakdown finally ended, and would soon be commenced in a few hours.

"Nervous?" Rui asked his friends.

"Hell no!" Nel grinned.

"A little," Fae admitted.

"Not nearly as much as I should be." Kane shrugged.

Rui could definitely understand why Kane was more nonchalant. It was extremely difficult to hurt him at all even when people knew of his abilities and had time to prepare against him. In a chaotic scenario like the conflict they were going to be engaged in, as long as he was careful, he was going to be quite safe for the most part. Although it wasn't too unlikely that there would be Martial Apprentices with enough sensory prowess to at the very least sense him, there was likely almost nobody that could sense him well enough to pose enough of a threat to him.

Even Rui, who had actually beaten Kane and the Void Step technique before, wouldn't be able to do much in such a chaotic scenario. He was simply too slippery and Rui had needed to use a niche tactic in order to defeat him in combat.

Nel being a battle-loving freak meant that it was very difficult to intimidate him. It had taken the bloodlust of a Martial Squire to scare him, anything below that was simply too weak. He would dive head-on recklessly. Rui made a mental note to keep an eye on him to ensure he doesn't get killed.

Fae was the most balanced out of them, her striking prowess was quite extraordinary, and she had even become a grade-nine Martial Apprentice in the past month, which meant she was an extremely powerful Martial Apprentice.

However, she was fighting in a huge war where everybody was exceptionally powerful. In this context, she was merely above average. It was not strange to feel a certain amount of nervousness, this was a new yet incredibly dangerous circumstance.

The same could be said for most of the Martial Apprentices of any of the nations participating in the dungeon wars. War on this scale was something most Martial Apprentices were unaccustomed to. There weren't too many wars of this nature. Although there was a conflict between nations, none were nearly on this scale, they were limited to smaller-scale scuffles that were par for the course between nations regardless of whether they were allies or enemies.

These Apprentices had all gone through war for the very first time, and it was visible to all of the nations. There were inadequacies and shortcomings in their performances that were sub-optimal.

A few hours passed, and eventually, it was time for the mission to be commenced. The military had taken their time ensuring all the preparations were done carefully.

"It's time."

Chapter 419: Clash

The Martial Artists were ready to leave at any given time, but the military wasn't nearly as flexible. This was because of the differences in the logistics of the two groups. Martial Artists had very low logistics in general. They merely needed to prepare their uniforms and masks and other necessities such as potions, before getting ready to dispatch.

And soon, they did.

The Martial Artists immediately rushed out as they sprinted toward the Sekigahara Confederate, they were each on extremely high alert. After all, the Sekigahara Confederate's territory was just around the corner. Although it wasn't a long time away by carriage or horse, that meant nothing to Martial Apprentices, especially to Martial Apprentices of as high a grade as they were.

The tension in the crowd was high. This was their very first time fighting an even battle. No longer would they be able to secure a dominant advantage thanks to the quality and quantity of Martial Apprentices.

No.

This time, they were fighting against equals.

Death was inevitable. It was absolutely impossible for them to get away with very few to potentially zero casualties.

That fact weighed on the air, burdening it.

Yet it wasn't the only thing that was.

Rui's concentration was so fierce that it distracted other Martial Apprentices around him. He focused his mind into a sharp lance, as he gazed forward.

"Their Martial Apprentices have been dispatched." Rui declared loudly as he counted them with Seismic Mapping. "There's sixty-three of them."

This was a grim number. Sixty-two high-grade Martial Apprentices were more or less the same as the size of the Martial Apprentices in their assault group.

It seemed that the predictions of the strategic department were spot on. The Sekigahara Confederate would indeed rather avoid war in their territory. They had more to lose. Not only would their territory take damage even if they successfully repelled the assault team of the Kandrian Empire, but also the closer to their territory they fought in the

"The siege tanks of the Kandrian Royal Army are trailing behind us at a distance" Rui further announced.

The siege tanks were much slower than the Martial Apprentices, especially in an environment like the Serevian Dungeon.

Although it seemed counter-productive to begin a battle without them, it was much more detrimental to reduce their speed to travel along with them. It simply gave the Sekigahara Confederate more time to prepare a more concrete response to the assault team heading their way.

"There they are," Rui whispered as they entered everybody's field of vision, bringing along with them a grave sense of danger that one would naturally expect from dozens of highly powerful Martial Apprentices.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Many Martial Apprentices from both sides, including Rui, launched long-range attacks. The many attacks collided against each other in the middle point between the forces, the sheer energy in those attacks shook the very air.

Soon, they made contact.

BAM BAM BAM!

The Martial Apprentices began exchanging waves of attacks at each other.

RUMBLE

It was as though the very dungeon was shaking under the onslaught of the sheer power that the Martial Apprentices outputted.

WHOOSH

BAM!

Rui casually dodged a swift and powerful round-house kick as he rushed in.

BAM!!

A tremendous Flowing Canon crashed into an opening that was inherent to the roundhouse kick. Rui had used the perfect counter while launching his most powerful strike. The sheer power of the strike was far beyond that of any of his normal strikes. It was boosted with the power of Outer Convergence, Flame Breathing, Vital Pressure, and Adamant Reforging that had strengthened the flesh of his fist. His momentum was also driven by Parallel Walk, Wind Breathing, and Balanced Direction.

"ARGH!" The man grimaced as the strike propelled him into the air and into the distance.

BOOM!

Before Rui could even launch Tempestuous Ripples, a powerful projectile with an incredibly high momentum crashed into his opponent, launching him further away.

Rui didn't even need to turn back to figure out what that was. The siege tanks had arrived, making haste. Yet they didn't fire down at the Martial Apprentices fighting because they weren't able to selectively hit only hostile Martial Apprentices when they were all mixed together.

However, they weren't aiming to.

The only true goal of the assault team was the loss of assets on the side of the Sekigahara Confederate.

And that was what they would do.

The elevation of the canons atop the siege weapons raised higher.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

They fired cannonballs with incredible momentum. Each cannonball whizzed through the air at speeds that made it hard to even perceive for normal humans.

They fired not at the enemy Martial Apprentices, but at the fortified wall of the Sekigahara Confederate in the distance.

The best part about the siege weapons was the sheer distance over which they could project attacks of immense power with very little loss in power due to the drag of air that would dampen their power. Their design was highly aerodynamic and cut through the air with remarkable speed.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

Despite the distance away, the sound of the cannon balls slamming into the highly durable fortifications was loud and clear. Rui rejoiced inwardly as he heard debris falling with his Seismic Mapping. The attacks from the siege tanks were at least effective.

What he hadn't expected was an even greater number of cannon balls to come flying back from within the territory of the Sekigahara Confederate. The barrage of cannon balls crashed into the many siege tanks that had accompanied the Martial Apprentices. Like the siege tanks of the Kandrian Empire, none of the cannon balls struck the Martial Artists. The siege weapons couldn't specifically target only Kandrian Martial Apprentices just like the siege cannons of the Kandrian Empire couldn't, they lacked the accuracy and the precision to accomplish such a feat.

But instead, they could attack the greatest threat to their security, which weren't the Martial Apprentices, but the tanks that were chipping away at their fortification.

Chapter 420: Forced

WHOOSH

Rui's image faded as his opponent was flummoxed at her attack hitting what seemed like an illusion.

POW POW POW!

Rui assaulted her with a violent flurry of jabs to her rib. Yet even before she jerked down due to the impact of the attacks, his right foot lashed out toward her shoulder

PEW!

"Argh!" She grimaced as the Stinger cleaved through the air, whistling as it made its way to its target and burying itself in the flesh of her shoulder.

THWACK!

Rui immediately retracted his leg as he seamlessly transitioned into a low sweeping kick that struck her ankles with remarkable force, knocking her over.

BAM!

A soccer kick to the head ravaged her as it mangled her, knocking her out. Just as he was about to kill her, Primordial Instinct warned him of an impending attack on his back.

WHOOSH

CLASP

He ducked as he evaded the jab, clasping his opponent's hand as he activated Flow Flux, using his own momentum as Rui threw him over his shoulder onto his previous enemy with the power of Outer Convergence and Flame Breathing.

BAM!

The man landed flat on the ground atop his comrade.

BAM!

Yet another soccer kick knocked his opponent out.

Yet just as Rui launched yet another killing blow, Primordial Instinct detected yet another attack incoming.

WHOOSH

"Tsk." Rui tutted, irritated as he cleanly evaded a wind attack from behind him. This particular battle was far more chaotic than any of the previous ones. He was unable to even spend time on a single enemy, every time he defeated one, he would be confronted.

He glanced at his attacker with a raised eyebrow.

('Strong.')

Rui's eyes twinkled with interest.

The man had a heavy weight to his presence that matched his giant size. He was one who would truly be classified as grade-ten even by the updated grading standards of the Kandrian Empire.

He immediately forgot about his unconscious targets as he dashed toward the Martial Apprentice. Yet despite all of the fierce pressure that Rui exerted on him, he was unperturbed.

He raised his open palm as he pushed it forward straight in Rui's direction.

BOOM!

A huge and wide wind blast attack crashed into Rui remarkably swiftly and impactfully. Rui guarded as he was pushed back by the sheer force of the wind blast despite his resistance. Rui was surprised by the sheer net power that the man had outputted with a single attack.

('The attack is incredibly wide and large, making it really hard to sidestep it. Yet despite its size, it was still ridiculously fast and strong.')

Rui swiftly analyzed he managed to stop his motion.

This was the most powerful wind manipulation user that Rui had come across. He put the likes of Ana Mariane, one of the sixteen representatives of the Martial Contest, and even Fernan, who was a

defending champion in the Martial Games. None of them could compete with the powerful Martial Apprentice before him.

Rui grinned behind his mask.

This was why he had joined the Serevian Dungeon mission. Precisely so that he could fight strong Martial Artists such as the man in front of him with his Flowing Void Style.

He dashed once more at the man with extreme speed, yet the distance between them was too great for Rui to reach him in time.

The man's arms swayed as he breathed powerfully, using a breathing technique to gather a vast amount of air as he used his arms and body to channel the powerful air currents being generated by the breathing technique into a pocket of extraordinarily dense air. Even the optical density of the air pocket had changed as light passing through it had begun being diffracted like it would in a drop of water.

BOOM!

The man palmed the sphere forward as an enormous power as the attack propelled forward with an incredible amount of momentum as it expanded in size.

BAM!

Rui had launched a Tempestuous Ripple as the attack feebly collided with the wind attack that his opponent had launched, being snuffed by an attack much more powerful than it.

Yet it had served its purpose. Rui hadn't used the Tempestuous Ripple as an attack that was supposed to pierce through the gale that his opponent unleashed. Instead, it was a shield that lessened the power of the portion of the wind blast that had hit him.

And it worked.

Rui merely skidded back instead of literally being launched airborne.

He dashed forward again and yet, as expected, the wind blast came as Rui himself launched a Tempestuous Ripple to reduce the impact of the attack on himself. Yet he wasn't able to nearly nullify the main problem of range restriction when he was being pushed back despite all his strength resisting it.

His master was a master at the long-range onslaught. Unfortunately, Rui's means to deal with long-range Martial Arts weren't nearly as developed as his solutions against close-range Martial Apprentices.

Ideally, he would cross the distance between his opponent and himself and engage them in close-range combat where he certainly was at an advantage. But he couldn't do that this time as easily. The wide and large attack made dodging and sneaking past it extremely difficult, even if he somehow moved several steps to the side before the swift attack reached him, it would still not be enough to dodge the attack, that was how wide it was.

Furthermore, this largely negated one of the most impactful advantages of having the Mindmirror brain. The processing advantages he had gained from the brain were largely useless in trying to cross the distance between them. It did not matter if he could react extremely fast if there was no way he could outspeed a wide attack that was that fast with his own feet.

Rui grinned in eagerness and elation as he processed his current circumstances. It had been a long time since he fought against a Martial Apprentice that was strong enough to force him to strategize. The last two Martial Artists that had forced him to strategize were both Martial Squires, after all.