

Martial Unity 501

Chapter 501: Cub

Catching up with the hippogriff proved to be more difficult than he had anticipated. The creature was faster in the air than he was. He would probably lose track of it if he tried chasing it in the air with Sky Walking.

THUD

He landed on the mountain hard before sprinting off in the direction that the hippogriff had taken off. The atmosphere recoiled as he shot forward at tremendous speeds. He kept his eyes on the hippogriff at all times, using Seismic Mapping to make sure he was keeping track of his immediate surroundings. Seismic Mapping couldn't keep track of things that were in contact with the ground.

Rui had already predicted that Seismic Mapping would become increasingly inadequate in the Squire Realm. Aerial maneuvering and combat were much more common in the battles of the Squire Realm. It became much more important to develop sensory skills that were equipped for the atmosphere.

There was an issue to be handled later. For now, he needed to drug this hippogriff.

Rui continued chasing through the snowy environment keeping track of the creature in the air, minimizing his presence to the absolute most that he could with the help of Mind Mask. Suddenly the hippogriff dove towards a mountainside.

('It's hunting another creature.') Rui realized as he sensed a mountain ram scaling the mountain where the hippogriff had dived.

"BAAAA!" The creature shrieked as the hippogriff clasped it with its talons and dragged it away into the air. Rui maintained a safe distance chasing after it while carefully observing it. Its prey struggled to break free from its talons, but it was already far too late, its fate was sealed.

After a few seconds, the hippogriff slowed down as it appeared to have finally landed on the ground. Rui slowed down quietly and simply observed it. The hippogriff quickly killed its prey with a simple attack with its beak.

It dragged the corpse into a cave out of his vision. He quickly closed his eyes as he focused on Seismic Mapping to continue his surveillance of it. In his seismic vision, he saw that there were more figures inside the cave, but much smaller.

('Cubs?') He opened his eyes, surprised. ('It has cubs?')

They were, without a doubt, smaller hippogriffs.

('Is that the reason that the hippogriff has been terrorizing other animals?') Rui wondered.

The mission bill mentioned that this species of hippogriffs tended to become exceedingly aggressive when in emotional distress. He hadn't bothered considering the cause for the emotional distress of the target of his mission, but now that he knew that the hippogriff was a mother, there was a pretty high chance that they were related to the cause of the emotional distress that caused the hippogriff to go berserk and destabilize the ecosystem of the Mount Cravitz.

('Hm.') Rui scratched his chin. ('I should inform the Ministry of Environment and Ecology.')

He sent a message to the commissioner that was assigned to handling his mission, informing them of the offspring of the hippogriff.

It wasn't long before he received an answer.

[We have duly noted and evaluated the information you have provided us. Please proceed with the mission normally. Do not attempt to apprehend or capture the cubs, a qualified team will be dispatched to safely acquire both the target of the mission and the cubs.]

Rui nodded. Thankfully, his discovery didn't complicate his mission. He was happy to know that the hippogriffs would be handled safely. He wouldn't be able to sleep right if the cubs were going to end up being hunted or killed.

Which made him feel odd about his meta-ethics. He normally didn't care to think about his core ethics, it was a waste of time, and he usually just stuck to what felt right. But he found himself more unwilling to kill baby hippogriffs than the many humans he had already killed.

Of course, this wasn't exactly a fair comparison. Most of the people he had killed were either people involved in crime or enemies who were trying to kill him. There was a limit to the amount of empathy he could feel for people belonging to either group, especially in the heat of battle. It was an entirely different thing to kill innocent, harmless, and probably adorable hippogriffs cubs.

He shook his head, putting aside such superfluous thoughts before quietly sky walking toward the entrance of the cave. He had already minimized his presence to the absolute limit, as he sneaked in the air.

The hippogriffs were close to the entrance of the cave, feasting away on the corpse of the mountain ram when suddenly the mother hippogriff froze as its pupils dilated.

WHOOSH

It immediately adopted a defensive position with its cubs behind it as it glared at Rui, who looked like a thief who had been caught from afar. He sighed before dashing in with the syringe in his hand. Now was the time to use the tranquilizer drug. He was quite confident it wouldn't take to the air to fight him, not when it had to protect its cubs. He was using the fact that it wanted to protect its cubs to restrain its maneuvering. Without a maneuvering advantage, the hippogriff couldn't really batter him around the way it did in their previous fight.

[GET AWAY!] It chirped aggressively and menacingly, spreading its wings, appearing as big and threatening as it could.

Rui simply ignored it before lashing forward at it, yet just before he was actually about to clash with the creature, he swerved, aiming for the cubs. The hippogriff lashed out at him with its beak preventing him from doing that.

('Gotcha.')

CLASP

He wrapped himself around the beast's neck, just under its beak where neither the beak nor the talons could reach him. The hippogriff screamed in pain as he drove the syringe deep into the side of its neck, injecting the tranquilizer into the creature.

THUD

The hippogriff quickly collapsed to the ground heavily, unconscious.

Chapter 502: Hlorn

Rui sighed to himself in relief, he was quite happy that he didn't need to injure the hippogriff while completing his mission. Thankfully, he nailed the timing and was able to latch onto it in a position where it was unable to do anything about him. The timing he had managed to nail with a predictive model he had created for it. He had exclusively used the predictive model alone without the adaptive model since the latter was not very reliable against non-human opponents.

Something he had yet to fix.

('It's not like I've been using the VOID algorithm much recently.') He sighed. The last time he had used it was against Kyrie in their spar, but it had been quite a while since he used it on a mission. It couldn't be helped, after all, his opponents were too weak for him to employ his strongest weapon. So far, he had only fought groups of high-tier Martial Apprentices.

He sighed. Only once he got to a higher grade would he undertake missions that featured actual Squire-level combat assets. Whether it be Martial Squires, potion-amped humans, or war weapons that could threaten even Martial Squires. All of it would come with grade four missions and above. That's why he was grinding through the easy missions quickly and perfectly, he would get to where he wanted to quicker that way.

He heard light chirps as the little hippogriffs tried waking their mother up, distressed. Rui sighed, putting on a mind mask of positivity as he approached them.

"Hey, who do we have here?" He cooed at them as warmly and non-threateningly as he could, trying to calm them down.

He only needed to keep them there until the team arrived. Thankfully, it wasn't long before the team from the Ministry of Environment and Ecology arrived. Eight men had trudged traveled up the mountain in motorized carriages, carrying some equipment with them.

"Squire Falken?"

"That's me." Rui nodded. "What's going to happen to the hippogriffs?"

"Oh, they'll be nursed, taken care of, and then habituated when deemed ready." The officer told him as they began strapping up the hippogriff and putting the cubs into crates. Rui was satisfied with the care they were handling the hippogriffs with, so he hit the mission completion button before finally leaving.

He was quite satisfied with the way he had completed the mission. The hippogriffs were safe and unscathed, thus the evaluation of the completion of his mission should be quite high.

He sighed.

While completing a good mission was satisfying, he was starting to grow quite unsatisfied with the lack of real stimulating combat. The aerial clash with the hippogriff was the closest thing to a challenge ever since he had begun his streak of missions. Grade three missions simply weren't stimulating enough. He couldn't wait to engage in actual Squire-level combat.

So far, he had finished three grade-three missions exceedingly well. He estimated there weren't too many more he would need to finish before he got upgraded to grade four as a Martial Artist. He intended to grind past them to reach higher grades as soon as he could.

It was a little tiring, without a doubt. Sometimes he wondered if sparring against other Martial Squires as he did with Kyrie was a better alternative than trying to seek real-life combat but he already knew it wasn't. No matter how intense sparring got, it could not replace actual combat in the field against hostile forces.

There was a different kind of pressure that one experienced when one fought a battle with high stakes, if he didn't routinely expose himself to that pressure and temper his mind under that weight, he would become increasingly rustier as time passed, and his actual combat ability would decrease.

There were several things that he wasn't willing to compromise on, and his actual effectiveness in real combat was one of them. However, it wasn't just about combat effectiveness, it was also about his Martial Path. He would not be able to go much deeper down his Martial Path if he did not have real combat experience.

He sighed. ('Just need to keep grinding.')

He traveled through the air as fast as he could towards the Mantian region and the town of Hajin. He intended to reach the town immediately and undertake another mission as soon as he could. A few hours passed and he soon enough reached the Martial Union branch.

He quickly passed the security after showing them his ID and mission bill before completing the post-mission protocols such as writing statements and a report. Once he was done with the annoying paperwork, he headed straight over to the mission library.

('I still have one more mission in me before I'll need to head home and catch some rest.')

He sighed.
('Better make it good.')

He went right in towards the offense class section, skimming through the available missions. He ran into an interesting mission rather early on.

[Offense class mission: Destruction

Client: Fushin Hunfer

Grade: three

Destruction target: Hlorn: Squire-grade siege weapon.

Target location: Fort Zurtun

Remuneration: 16,000 Martial credits / six hundred and eight gold coins

Mission summary: The target of destruction is the Hlorn, a Squire-grade siege weapon that is capable of unleashing as much damage on a human settlement or group as a higher-grade Martial Squire can. The client of the mission would like to commission the destruction of the weapon, under specific circumstances. The degree of destruction must be to ensure that light repairs cannot repair the functionality of the weapon.]

('Interesting...') Rui's eyes lit up with interest. Destruction of an object owned or possessed by another individual counted as an offense-class mission as opposed to manual labor as it was an act of aggression to the owner of said possession. If the Hlorn weapon did not belong to anybody, then the mission would not have been classified under the offense class.

Rui immediately took the mission bill to the register counter to register it to his name.

Chapter 503: Fort

He had never taken a mission centered around the destruction of property before. Not that such missions were rare, but they just usually weren't the kind of missions that Rui was interested in. However, this particular mission was interesting since it would involve breaking into a fort. Something he had never done prior.

He sat down at a table in the library he quickly read and memorized the information, adding all of it to his mind palace.

('Interesting...')

Fort Zurtun was a large fort surrounding the Town of Zurtun a small city-state colony of the Britannian Empire that was quite southwest of the Kandrian Empire. The fort was situated on a mountain, giving the location with strategic value as far as defense and security went. Attempting to overrun the fort would require scaling the mountain and facing the military forces of the fort uphill against Zurtun military on their home turf.

The military even consisted of Martial Apprentices, albeit no Martial Squires. They were a small force that was unable to produce their own Martial Squires because they lacked the scientific foundation to do so.

On top of that, the fort was armed with a Squire-grade weapon capable of unleashing vast amounts of destruction on a significant scale. Despite its great potential for destruction, the weapon was small compared to what it could unleash, this was possible thanks to the esoteric technology that went into it, making it easier to shift around and position appropriately in times of need. It was recently acquired by Fort Zurtun and it served as a deterrent to all those that wished to attempt a siege on Fort Zurtun.

Of course, climbing a mountain was a breeze for Martial Apprentices. The problem came from fighting other Martial Apprentices uphill. The terrain and location advantage made it untenable unless the invading force had a significant numerical advantage or much more powerful Martial Apprentices.

Fort Zurtun was previously an independent sovereign state until it was invaded by the Britannian Empire and colonized. The Britannian Empire had seized control of the fort after defeating the military forces of Fort Zurtun and ruling over the population. The previously sovereign city-state turned into no more than a

The client was Fushin Hunfer. According to the intelligence provided by the Martial Union, this man was the leader of a rebellion group that aimed to seize control of Fort Zurtun. The group consisted of the remnants of the military that used to protect the Fort, and according to the Martial Union, had plans of trying to size the fort and the town from the hands of the Britannian Empire.

Rui skimmed through the backstory lightly, he didn't care all that much about the motivation and intentions of the client as long as it didn't pertain to his mission directly. He focused more on the intelligence the security of the fort and the location of the weapon.

The weapon being small and easily portable meant that its position wasn't static nor evidently determinable at any given point in time. It could be shifted around wherever it needed to be at any given point in time.

Thankfully, that didn't make it harder to track. According to the information provided by the Martial Union, the weapon was mobilized every time the rebel group tried to seize Fort Zurtun. Which meant that as long as he posed enough of a threat, the weapon would be employed against any invaders.

('The threshold for how much of a threat depends on the security level of the fort.') Rui realized as he revisited the fort's military details.

The fact that not a single Martial Artist exceeded the Apprentice Realm was strange to him at first, but he realized why this was the case later on. The fort was extremely far from the Britannian Empire, it was not pragmatic to devote any military or Martial assets above the Apprentice Realm to the security of a fort that far away. Thus, they had resolved to dedicate only some Apprentice-level assets to maintain their control over the fort and the town within.

It also had to do with the fact that there were states that were competing over the control of the town in the vicinity that was above the Apprentice Realm. Thus, there was no real need for Martial Squires. They had supplied a single Squire-level weapon that was extremely effective in the terrain.

The rebel group had suffered massive casualties years ago during an attempt to climb the mountain and seize the fort back. In an attempt to eliminate the weapon, they had amassed as much wealth in the span of several years until they could finally commission a Martial Squire from the Kandrian Empire to destroy a single weapon.

('So, I just need need to make enough of a ruckus to draw out their Martial Apprentices, and force them to use the weapon. Then the second I see the weapon, I destroy it.') Rui thought. It was a straightforward plan.

The weapon was made out of Squire-grade alloys that could withstand the force of even powerful Martial Squires, so destroying it was not something that could be done quickly.

('I don't have to destroy it then and there. I could seize it and escape with it and destroy it elsewhere I guess.') Rui shrugged. That wouldn't violate the conditions or the objective of the mission.

He skimmed through the details of the mission until he was satisfied.

"Alright then." He got up. "Time to pay the utility department another visit."

Trying to destroy a weapon with Squire-grade alloys with his bare hands was foolish, there were some recommended tools in the mission bill from the Martial Union to aid with that part of the mission. An object that looked like a hammer with a pointy edge was one of them, it also happened to be the cheapest.

('Good enough for me.') He shrugged before heading over. Thankfully, he didn't need to purchase it since the Martial Union offered Martial Artists the option of renting the recommended utility gear and equipment.

Chapter 504: Meet

"How much does the Grintle-edged hammer cost for renting?" Rui asked the storekeeper.

"A gold coin for every twenty-four hours sir." She replied. "This doesn't include charges for damaging, destroying, or losing the tool either. Any amount of wear and tear will be charged based on the charges for restoration."

Rui nodded while sighing inwardly. A gold coin a day was enough for one person to lead a good life. Paying that much for a hammer seemed obscene. However, he did understand the rationale. The hammer was not ordinary, not at all. It was made from esoteric alloys that were not easy to procure and were quite valuable. Materials that could withstand Squire-level power were far from abundant and were highly in demand.

With that consideration in mind, the price for even renting it was actually quite understandable.

He purchased a rejuvenation potion before heading to the dispatch facility to sign out and head for Fort Zurtun. It wasn't long before he took to the air, heading towards the south of the country. It was the shortest path to the destination of his mission.

He also needed to meet the client before beginning the mission as requested by the client in the mission bill.

('He probably wants to coordinate a siege on the fort right after the mission is completed and the siege weapon is gone.') Rui figured.

In order to destroy the weapon, he would need to cause enough damage to their military or to the fort itself to prove that he was worth employing the weapon on. Meaning once he destroyed the weapon the damaged fort would be at its weakest it had ever been likely since the Britannian Empire had taken over and turned it into a colony.

This was the perfect timing for them to attempt seizing the fort back into their hands.

('If that is the intention of my client, then he is a smart one that's for sure.') Rui nodded.

If he were in the man's place, he would have prepared his forces for an attack on the fort so that they could immediately move out and begin an assault on the fort. It was best to not give them any time to recover from the damage that they would sustain from the attack of a martial Squire. The chaos wouldn't last long, and the damage and loss would be repaired and replenished.

Rui shook his head, putting aside such thoughts, he would find out soon enough once he reached.

It took him several hours to reach the border at the south of the Kandrian Empire. He stopped skywalking after he left the Empire, after having gone through the due process, and began running on the ground.

BOOM!

A shockwave rippled across the atmosphere as he sprinted at a tremendous speed.

Fort Zurtun was more than a thousand kilometers south of the Kandrian Empire. Even with his tremendous speed, he needed a little more than an hour to reach his destination while maintaining his high speed.

The rebel group had a base in a forest surrounding the mountain that hoisted the fort.

('It should be around here.') Rui glanced at his pocket watch, before looking around. He had been instructed to arrive at a hill near the mountain, serving as a landmark for them to intercept him. The

Martial Union should have already informed them about his dispatch and the estimated timing of his arrival. It was a whole ten minutes before he finally detected human presence with Seismic Mapping.

A group of five people arrived at the location soon enough.

('Four Martial Apprentices, one normal human.') He surmised with a single glance. The four Martial Apprentices guarded the man, clearly distrustful of Rui.

They covered their faces with masks, just like Rui, out of caution. The Martial Apprentices were in combat garbs while the man they were protecting wore something resembling a business or formal outfit.

They approached him cautiously before the man addressed him. "May I know your name?"

"I am Squire Falken." Rui responded simply, confirming his identity.

"Let us exchange verification codes." The man reached inside his jacket as Rui reached for his pouch. They quickly verified that they weren't dealing with imposters, before proceeding with business.

The Martial Apprentices didn't say anything, but Rui could vaguely sense that they were confused by his presence, probably due to the fact that he felt like a normal human being

"Thank you for accepting our commission and coming this far to humor our request to meet you, Squire Falken." He bowed, expressing the respect that a Martial Squire deserved.

"No problem." Rui nodded. "Where is the client? I was under the impression that I was going to meet him."

"Ah, he's at our base." The man clarified. "He didn't want to come here personally due to security reasons. Please allow me to escort you there."

Rui nodded, before following them through the forest. The Martial Apprentices were clearly on edge due to the fact that Rui didn't feel like a Martial Squire did, at all.

('Maybe I should drop the mind mask from here on out.' Rui wondered. He used it because he didn't like drawing attention, but having to confirm that he is a Martial Squire each and every time was a pain in the ass. Besides, it's not like he could just suddenly drop the mask now. If he randomly dropped the mask while he was behind them, he would scare them into thinking he was going to kill them or something.

He sighed inwardly, it didn't really matter too much. If they were concerned about whether he was a Martial Squire or whether he was qualified for the mission, then he could simply prove it rather easily.

It wasn't long before they happened upon the base of the rebel group. It was a group of tents and other simple structures that were hidden under a canopy in the forest, hiding them quite well from the lookouts stationed on the fortress walls. It allowed them to mount attacks on the fortress easier than if their base was much further away.

Chapter 505: Conversation

The camp was clearly prepared for his visit. They all gazed at him with varying emotions. Joy. Relief. Expectation. Confusion. Skepticism.

The men guided him to the largest tent, gesturing him inside. Inside were several more Martial Apprentices that stood guard. Rui recognized the only non-Martial Artist within the tent as his client, Fushin Hunfer.

His eyes narrowed as he felt a faint sense of pressure from the man that he shouldn't have. He was old, his body was covered in scars and his skin was wrinkled and what was left of his hair was white. Despite his visage being that of an old man, Rui didn't dare to think of him as one. The man almost had a heavier presence in Rui's mind than the Martial Apprentices in the room.

Rui recalled the details of his background from his mind palace, provided by the mission bill.

Fushin Hunfer was the fifteenth general of Fort Zurtun. When the Britannian Empire attacked, he personally led the military of Fort Zurtun against the forces of the Britannian army. When they inevitably lost, the man didn't resign to his fate, nor did he throw himself into the jaws of death in some banal sense of honor.

No.

He gathered the surviving forces of his military that would have either died or been imprisoned and escaped with them. He was the progenitor of the rebel group. And many years later, his will to win and free his land had not withered in the slightest, Rui could sense a smoldering fire in his calm eyes.

Instantly, Rui felt a measure of respect for the man, and it reflected in his demeanor.

"Squire Falken." The former general addressed him. "I'm grateful to you for humoring my request."

"Not at all." Rui politely replied.

The man silently extended a hand, refusing to say another word until Rui shook it.

"That being said..." The former general said. "I'm afraid I have another request of you."

He gestured towards a seat opposite his own as he took his own.

"I would like for you to time the execution of our commission with or slightly prior to our own assault on Fort Zurtun." He told Rui once the latter took his seat.

('As expected...') Rui nodded inwardly. He had suspected that this would be the case. The general had shrewdly realized that getting rid of the weapon had the most impact only if the opportunities it provided were capitalized immediately.

"No problem," Rui told him. "I don't mind you coordinating the timing of your commission as long as you don't alter the pre-established conditions of the mission itself or if there are other reasons that work

against my interest. You have commissioned me to destroy the weapon, and I will destroy the weapon and everything needed for me to do so. However, that is it, nothing more and nothing less. I will not play any other role in this war."

Rui sternly drew a line in the ground early on in their conversation. He needed to express this stance strongly and make it clear that he would not do anything he wasn't commissioned to do. The old man before him would exploit anything and everything he could for the sake of his goals, and Rui needed to ensure that he wasn't one of them.

"I did not intend to request or tell you to do more than what you have been commissioned to do." He blankly stated without any shift in his expression. "Once you have completed your mission, you may leave."

That sounded all well and fine, but Rui felt he needed to be careful. Even if the old man didn't request Rui to participate in the war straightforwardly, there were ways in which he could coerce Rui to take part in the war or contribute to it.

If Rui's exit was somehow restricted or if his well-being was threatened, he would need to employ force to force his way out of this predicament. This would result in Rui contributing to their cause even if he didn't intend or want to.

If the old man decided the timing and the coordination of Rui's attack, then there was a chance that he could forcefully put Rui in such a situation where he would be able to exploit Rui further than just the commission. Perhaps this wasn't likely, but the man had already proven himself to be quite shrewd.

"That's good to hear." Rui blankly stated. "Give me a timeframe for when you intended to execute your plan."

"Within a day or two." The old man replied. "I'll present the general plan to you by then."

Rui paused for a moment. That timeframe was just the maximum delay he was willing to tolerate, he didn't want to delay the mission any further.

"I'll add a bonus of ten percent." The old man offered, keenly noting from the slight hints in his body language that he wasn't too inclined to accept the offer. "In writing."

Rui sighed. Since the man was clearly expressing his goodwill and charity, he ultimately decided to accept the offer. "Alright then, please finish all your preparations as soon as possible. I will not tolerate too much of a delay."

The old man cracked a smile for the first time. "An overwhelming majority of our preparations are complete, all we need are some very final steps, and we can begin the assault any time after. We have prepared some quarters for you to rest and reside until the time is ready."

"That's good to hear." Rui nodded. "Chalk up the contract for the bonus and have it sent it to me as soon as possible."

The two discussed some other details and technical matters, confirming the basics of what preparations were still incomplete and the kind of role Rui would be playing.

"Alright then." Rui nodded, getting up. "That brings us to the end of our conversation."

"Indeed." The old man replied. "Please get some rest, you have traveled far after all."

Chapter 506: Challenge

Just as Rui was about to leave, the man who had guided him here interjected.

"Excuse me..." He sheepishly said, drawing attention. "I do not mean to be rude, but the Martial Apprentices of our group have informed me of some troubling observations surrounding you..."

Rui sighed, having expected this. "I don't feel like a Martial Squire?"

"Yes." The man replied. "It's not that we're distrusting the Kandrian martial Union's credibility by any means, but it would be of great relief if you could provide us with some form of demonstration of your power or status as a Martial Squire."

Rui sighed, yet before he could even respond, the old man interjected.

"That won't be necessary." A grin cracked at the edge of his mouth. "This man is the real deal."

An amused smile cracked underneath Rui's mask. "Are you sure about that?"

"Do I look uncertain?"

"But sir.." The man tried to appeal to him

"Forget about it." The old man snorted before turning to Rui. "Please, forgive the indiscretion."

Rui nodded, before turning to the bowing servants who offered to escort him to his quarters. As he was escorted out towards a tent that had been prepared just for him, he was deep in thought about his conversation with the old man. Everything about him made him feel wary about the mission. He realized he needed to pay careful attention to this mission. Once he entered the tent, he immediately used Seismic Mapping and Primordial Instinct to surveil the entire camp, gathering as much information as he could.

He had counted a total of twenty-seven Martial Apprentices, not a bad number for a group of this size. There seemed to be many thousands of men in the camp that was well-hidden in the densest region of the canopy of the forest. This roughly matched the intelligence that the Martial Union had provided him with. A decent force, but it was questionable whether this was enough.

After all, the fore occupying the fort was not small either. According to the Martial Union, Fort Zurtun was occupied and controlled by a five-thousand-strong military battalion of the Royal Britannian Army with more than two dozen Martial Apprentices.

While the Britannian battalion that occupied Fort Zurtun was a little smaller than the rebel force, they had other advantages that more than made up for the gap in numbers with superior Martial Artists and soldiers, superior militaristic technological assets and weapons, as well as terrain advantage as the rebel group would be fighting against the Britannian battalion uphill while the latter was protected by a fort.

Furthermore, Fort Zurtun had the Hlorn canon as well. Fighting against them in a head-on symmetrical war was practically suicide, it was a wonder they hadn't all been wiped out.

('It must be thanks to the old man.') Rui hazarded a guess. He couldn't be sure since the mission bill didn't cover that information but based on what he had gathered about Fushin Hunfer, the former general of Fort Zurtun and the leader of the Zurtun rebels, it was clear that the old man was the reason this rebel group was even together at this point.

He surveilled the rest of the camp, observing what the rebel soldiers did with their time. Most of them were tending to logistical matters. Preparing weapons and armor, a large number of horse-pulled carriages. Many of them were stocking up the final bits of food supplies that would be necessary for their climb to the fort. It did seem as though they were nearly ready to begin the assault on the fort at any given time.

A person carrying a tray made her way to his tent.

"Excuse me, sir..." She addressed him from the outside.

"Come in."

A young woman carrying a tray with a bottle of water and some light edibles walked in. "Some water and food for you, sir."

Rui nodded as she placed the tray on a table in the tent. "Thank you."

She bowed before scurrying outside.

He glanced at the tray, noting the small little balls on a disposable plate that was supposed to be his food. "Food pills."

It was to be expected. The rebels were not leading a particularly luxurious life such that they could provide guests with lavish meals at any given point in time. Rui suspected that for the most part, food pills were consumed for two out of three meals.

It made too much sense, they were cheap, portable, and had a long shelf life. They weren't appetizing, but they were nutritious and gave the human body everything it needed. They were perfect for the circumstances under which they were in.

Eventually, a few hours passed and the sun had gone down.

"Sir?" The lady addressed him. "It's time for dinner, please join us."

"I'll be there soon enough." Rui nodded.

He was looking forward to the meal considering he already knew that they had gone hunting. What he was surprised by when he came out was the intensity of the lamps that they used, they were rather dim.

('Ah, it's to avoid drawing much attention.') Rui immediately realized.

The intensity of the lamps was low because even if they were some ways away from the fort, brighter light would draw attention and reveal their location.

He glanced towards the many animals they had caught, ranging from rabbits all the way to bears. Feeding a small army was no joke. He sauntered steadily, ignoring the many eyes he felt on him. Yet, it seemed that not all of them were going to ignore him.

"Hey, you!" A Martial Apprentice approached him, sizing him up exaggeratedly. "So you're the Martial Artist they hired to help us eh? You sure don't feel like one!"

('This shit again.') He sighed. He realized he needed to drop the mind mask before he met clients, otherwise, it created too many problems. That was two times in a row now, as far as human-related missions went anyway.

Chapter 507: Course

Even as the young Martial Apprentice brazenly blabbed on, Rui's mind had tuned out. In his perception, the Martial Apprentices were talking in slow motion. He pondered how he ought to go about this.

('Should I just flex again?') Rui wondered. He very well could drop the mind mask and unleash the bloodlust of a Martial Squire.

('No.') He decided against it. ('These aren't the same circumstances as last time.')

He wasn't isolated like he was with the two Martial Apprentices and the finance minister two missions ago. He was in a densely populated area with a small army that was on edge because of an upcoming battle. Unleashing the bloodlust of a Martial Squire at this point in time would have negative consequences that he would rather avoid taking the responsibility for.

At the bare minimum, he would be hurting morale and terrifying the already anxious and nervous soldiers of the rebel group. The bloodlust of a Martial Squire would spread far and wide, unlike that of a Martial Squire, and would impact the entire army. It might even delay the operation as the old man would likely decide that the army was in an insufficient state for the war. That was something Rui definitely wanted to avoid.

He pondered even as the young man threw taunts at him in extremely slow motion.

('Should I just ignore him?') Rui wondered. He could just walk around and avoid the man, that option was always there.

('No...') He quickly glanced at the Martial Apprentices in the vicinity, the look in their eyes indicated this most likely wasn't something spontaneous. Knowing how cocky Martial Apprentices could get, it probably wouldn't work. Besides, running away from them also would be bad for morale, since he was

someone that they had paid an enormous sum of money to hire for one specific purpose, that too. In the

('Hm, I guess I ought to handle this head-on?') He wondered before his eyes narrowed. ('Did the old man put them up to this?')

From his observations of the camp across the day, the camp was exceedingly well-run, like an oiled machine. There was a lot of order and discipline in the way things worked around here, clearly. The man knew how to run an army efficiently, as one would expect from his position.

The fact that the Martial Apprentices were seemingly running around free didn't exactly sit right with him in that case. He glanced at some of the Martial Apprentices and their clothes, noting that several of them weren't even supposed to be in this part of the base given what unit they seemed to be a part of.

('Was he lying when he expressed I was qualified to be here?') He wondered, he couldn't be sure. This could be some sort of test on his part.

That still left him with what he ought to do.

('I ought to ensure that this confrontation does not alter anything significant firstly.') Rui noted. That meant no seriously injuring the Martial Apprentices or killing them obviously. But it also meant that there could be no collateral damage whatsoever, he could not destroy their storage and inventory or other essentials that would slow down their preparations and extend the time he spent on this mission.

He also ought to prove his strength in a constructive manner, maybe he could help the Martial Apprentices out. He could take off his mind mask slowly amidst combat while avoiding an extreme emotion that would make his aura scarier than it needed to be. As long as he warmed them up to it in the right manner, there ought not to be any problem.

He finally turned his attention back to the Martial Apprentice in front of him.

"-like a normal person. Is that Martial Art uniform even yours?" He snorted, putting his hand on Rui's shoulder, feeling the fabric.

THUD

He fell to the ground with a resounding impact, having hit the ground before he realized what had even happened.

The man grimaced lightly, glaring at Rui.

"You talk too much," Rui murmured softly, yet everyone heard him clearly as the weight of his presence slowly escalated, bit by bit.

"What the fuck did you say?" Another joined in, as they walked in closer. "He was just talking to you. No reason to flip him!"

Rui snorted, ignoring his words. "Come."

They rushed at him, throwing a volley of attacks from all directions. Rui didn't bother employing any Squire-level force, as planned. He carefully grabbed their attacks, forcefully redirecting them to the ground or against each other, ensuring that the destructive power they possessed as Martial Apprentices didn't do any real harm to anybody or anything else.

"You!" The Martial Apprentice who had first picked a fight with him had lashed out at him. He threw a powerful right kick straight to Rui's jaw.

POW

His eyes flew wide open as Rui didn't so much as budge under the weight of his attack, despite it hitting his jaw! He couldn't believe that he wasn't able to move his head in the slightest. The resistance was so hard that he actually ended up falling backward.

A shiver went down his spine as Rui finally removed the entirety of his mind mask after having slowly removed it across the little clash. He, and everyone around him, had begun to realize how tremendously strong Rui actually was.

"I will be risking my life to protect you, all of you, from a Squire-level threat." He sternly announced. "I do not believe I am overstepping my bounds when I expect a certain degree of respect and courtesy."

When the onlookers remembered that this powerhouse would be fighting on their side soon enough, a surge of confidence sprung within them. A smile broke on their faces as they imagined the sheer devastation that the bastards that had seized their hometown would be experiencing when this menace would be unleashed upon their foes soon enough.

Rui nodded inwardly at their reaction, it had proceeded more or less as planned. He glanced back at the Martial Apprentice before him, extending an arm to help him up.

Chapter 508: Conversation

The man accepted Rui's hand, pulling himself up before lowering his head to Rui.

"I'm sorry... I did think you would be strong, but to be this strong was beyond my expectations." He sighed. The others quickly followed through issuing quick apologies.

"It's alright, as long as you understand." Rui nodded before walking away towards the food gathering. He didn't want to interact with anybody beyond what was necessary. He simply procured a meal while ignoring the attention that he was still receiving.

The mood had gotten better because the spat had ended amicably and also because of the confidence boost they had received thanks to him.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Rui glanced at the woman who had approached him, recognizing her. She was one of the few Martial Artists who had not attacked him back then.

"Feel free." Rui shrugged.

She smiled, taking a seat beside him, holding a plate of meat, rice, and some greens. "I appreciate you holding back against those hot-headed fools earlier. It might have gotten bad if things had escalated."

"It's nothing at all." Rui dismissed.

"I'm Vemy, by the way." She told him. "What's your name?"

"Falken." He replied straightforwardly, using his official alias.

"Earlier, you took a kick from Deny to the face without moving even an inch." She noted, before peering at him with curiosity. "That was unbelievable, can all Martial Squires do that?"

"Most, I suppose," Rui replied. He hadn't even used Inner Divergence to dispel the impact, his inherent toughness was enough to withstand the impact of the blow. Meaning most Martial Squires should be able to replicate the feat asides from perhaps the most fragile Martial Squires whose Martial bodies had an extremely strange configuration with weak durability.

There was also the fact that he was better than Martial Squires with Martial bodies of a similar configuration due to the fact that all of his performance parameters were better thanks to autophagy supplying him with energy and other sustenance that one could get only from multiple high-grade potions mid-fight.

"That's truly incredible. It makes me want to become a Martial Squire even more." She laughed. "It's the reason why I wanted to talk to you."

('Well, at least she's honest.') He didn't particularly think less of her for it. He hadn't been much different when he was a Martial Apprentices, after all. The secret to the Squire Realm was something that he had tried to pry out of Martial Squires himself, thinking back fondly to all the times he had spoken to Squire Dylon and Kyrie on the matter.

"We... don't have Martial Squires, not even when we were at our prime before the Britannian Army had invaded." She sighed. "I keep thinking to myself if we Martial Apprentices had been stronger, if I had been a Martial Squire, we would not have lost. We would not have needed to spend years accruing the funds needed to commission you."

Rui didn't respond to her, though he did understand her perspective. Martial Apprentices were physically human, there was a limit to what they could do. In fact, prior to the age of Martial Art, Martial Apprentices were controlled via force or coercion because they alone weren't enough to turn the tide. That changed when the first Martial Squire was born. Martial Squires truly defied logic in a way that Martial Apprentices couldn't.

"I know that you have no obligation to fulfill it... but I did have a request." She told him, turning towards him, meeting his eyes with a pleading gaze. "Can you please divulge to me the way to become a Martial Squire? I'll do anything in return."

Rui stared at her, before sighing. "I cannot."

Squire candidates needed to sign oaths swearing they would not divulge the information that the martial Union provided to them regarding the Squire Realm before they could be briefed about the whole matter.

Of course, technically, Rui knew about the secret of the Squire Realm before the Martial Union briefed him about it thanks to Julian explaining the research data that Rui had provided him. However, that didn't matter, he would still be considered to be violating his oath if divulged the secret to the Squire Realm.

"Why... not?" Vemy asked with a dejected tone.

"Because it would get me in trouble."

"I won't tell anyone else!"

"I cannot trust you. Even if your intentions are genuine, this is an extremely sensitive and important matter to the Martial Union and they aren't half-assed about their efforts to keep the information you're asking for a secret. I cannot take that risk." Rui told her.

"I see..."

"That being said, the information is useless to you even if I did tell you," Rui explained. "There's nothing you can do about it, trust me. Rather than wanting to know exactly how Martial Apprentices break through to the Squire Realm, you should be more concerned with even being qualified to undergo the breakthrough.

"Qualified?" She frowned. "Meaning only some Martial Apprentices can breakthrough?"

('Well, no shit.') "Correct."

"I see." She pondered his words deeply. "What decides whether a Martial Apprentices is qualified?"

Rui stared at her before his gaze wandered across her entire body unapologetically, intensifying as he stared at all her beautiful features.

('A well-toned body. She exudes a decent amount of pressure even when she tries to hide it. Grade seven or so. I suppose I can answer her questi-') "Pervert!"

His thoughts were interrupted by her words. She covered her chest and crotch with her arms with a disapproving glare on her face, yet her cheeks were tinted red.

"...Huh?" Rui tilted his head, confused.

"You may be a Martial Squire, but don't even think of trying anything, OK?" She huffed.

"You-" "-But you know," She interrupted him. "If you could, do answer my question, please. Hehe."

Rui just stared at her, before bursting out laughing, much to her surprise.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." He shook his head, chuckling. "But to answer your earlier question..."

He raised two fingers. "Individuality and maturity. That is what you must seek to achieve."

Chapter 509: Individuality

"Individuality... and maturity?" She frowned.

"That's right." Rui nodded. "Individuality and maturity. Your Martial Art needs to obtain enough of both, otherwise, you won't be able to even survive the breakthrough process to the Squire Realm."

"What exactly do both of those terms even mean?"

"I was getting there." He nodded. "Individuality is a measure of how much your Martial Path diverges from others, and how much of its depth comes from you."

She wordlessly stared at him with a skeptical expression.

"Your techniques and the way you apply them, that is what need to possess individuality. They need to possess a measure of uniqueness and originality."

"So... I need to create my own techniques?" She frowned. "That's super difficult!"

"If it were easy, everyone would be a Martial Squire." Rui snorted. "But you don't specifically need to create a technique from scratch, and all kinds of viable modifications and alterations to suit yourself, newer applications of an existing technique, combinations that you yourself derived from existing techniques, and really anything that originated from you that sets you apart from the others will be one step deeper into your Martial Path."

"I see..." She hummed as she processed her words. "So that means your Martial Art is much more unique than any other kind of Martial Art that exists out there?"

"You can say that." Rui nodded.

In reality, one could say much more than that. The fact that he inherited the VOID algorithm from his past alone meant that his individuality was on another level. He wasn't even sure how much of it he had, in all honesty. He knew he had more of it than any other Martial Artist his age, without a doubt. It would be rather shocking if there was.

"So, my Martial Art just needs to gain enough individuality, hm." She nodded. "Will do. But why is that necessary?"

Rui paused for a moment, considering whether he could answer her question, before shrugging. "To survive the procedure."

"Hm?" She frowned.

"The greater your individuality, the deeper your Martial Path, and the greater your mind can withstand," Rui told her, arriving dangerously close to the limit of what he could tell her.

"How much individuality do you think I have?" She asked him.

He once ran his gaze across her.

"Hey!" She complained, covering her chest and crotch again.

"I'm just observing you." Rui sighed, shrugging helplessly.

There was an awkward pause before she finally relented.

"Alright then." Uncovering herself, she even puffed her chest out a bit, as if that would somehow make his job easier.

It didn't.

"No, I'm good." Rui turned away. He felt too self-conscious, especially with all the attention on him. Furthermore, while his mind was pure, his seventeen-year-old hormonal body had other thoughts as blood gushed to his groin, awakening little Rui from its slumber down below.

"Hey! This is beneficial to my Martial Path. Just... get it over with." She looked away with a miffed expression, yet her blushed expression revealed her embarrassment.

Rui turned back to meet her eyes.

('She's hot.')

She looked to be in her early twenties. He wasn't even able to look at her body without his cursed hormonal teenage body revving up, ever since she perverted the conversation.

"Forget it, this method isn't all that reliable anyway." He sighed. "It relies on my instincts, which are unfortunately clouded right now."

"Clouded?"

"Forget about it." He growled.

"Well, how do I know how close I am to fulfil the individuality condition to be able to survive the breakthrough to the Squire Realm?" She asked him.

Rui shrugged, before freezing.

He recalled when he went through the evaluation examination where a Martial Squire evaluated whether he had indeed fulfilled both conditions for Squire candidacy. The way she had verified whether or not he had fulfilled the individuality condition for Squire candidacy was by stressing him with her mental pressure and noting how much he was able to withstand.

If a Martial Apprentice was able to withstand pressure above a certain degree, then that Martial Apprentice would at the very least not die due to being too mentally weak.

He even recalled how much pressure she exerted on him, and since he was also a Martial Squire, he was capable of generating that mental pressure and more.

He looked around, recalling the dense population of normal humans around him. He couldn't perform that here, not in front of all these normal people, they would be too disaffected by the psychological stress.

"What happened?" Vemy asked him, noticing his demeanor.

"I have a way of answering your question, but I can't do it here." He told her. "You need to come to my personal quarters, it's detached enough from the main camp that others won't be affected."

She threw a skeptical glare at him.

"What?" Rui raised an eyebrow, confused.

"You know what."

"I haven't the faintest clue."

"You're just making all of this up so you can lure me to your personal quarters where nobody can see us and where you can try to do something to me, aren't you?"

Rui just stared at her wordlessly, speechless.

"Never mind." He turned away, a hint of exasperation creeping into his tone.

"I'm kidding. Kidding!" She laughed. "Come, let's go."

She got up, trying to pull him up, unable to even budge him.

"I said I'm good." He grumbled lightly.

"I said it was a joke, I'm serious!"

He turned towards her with skeptical eyes.

"This is really important to me, okay?" Her tone grew soft, yet serious.

Rui sighed, relenting. The two of them scurried to his personal quarters quietly.

"Alright then." She turned towards him once they entered.

"Why did you zip it close?"

"I don't want anybody else knowing what you're going to do to me." She innocently replied.

Rui narrowed his eyes at her wording, shaking his head. "Sit opposite to me."

"Sit?"

"Yeah. Sit." His voice grew heavier, as she sat opposite him.

The air grew taut. The world shivered ever so slightly. Vemy gasped as a profound amount of weight crashed onto her mind.

Chapter 510: Graduation

She winced at the sheer force her mind experienced from Rui exerting a bit of charged pressure against her. She steeled her expression, trying to withstand the pressure.

Rui narrowed his eyes as the atmosphere grew chillier.

Had any normal human being been present there, they might have already fallen to the ground and lost control of their bladders. Yet her fortitude as a Martial Apprentice was far beyond the limits of the human mind. She grimaced, clenching her fists and gritting her teeth.

Huff...

Huff...

She executed a basic breathing technique, trying to center herself.

Huff...

Huff...

She felt her heartbeat returning to normal soon enough.

The pressure hadn't reduced even by the slightest, but she managed to pull herself together.

Rui could see a profound resilience as she met her soft, yet steely brown doe-like eyes.

A small grin cracked at his mouth.

His eyes widened as he directed all-out bloodlust at her, a tsunami of pressure washed over her as she gasped, overwhelmed.

Her eyelids fluttered as her body went limp, falling backward.

The pressure disappeared as Rui rushed forward to catch her, laying her body on the bed immediately.

"Urgh..." She woke up immediately.

"You okay?" Rui asked, concerned.

"Fine, surprisingly" she smiled at him. "By the way..."

"Hm?"

"How long do you intend to hold me like that?" She stared at him with a teasing expression.

Rui quickly let go of her, realizing how close he was to her, with an exasperated expression.

"Well, what did you learn?" She asked, amused. "You didn't do that just to bully me, right?"

"Ah, right." Rui shook his head as he ignored his hormonal body. "You're far from ready. You'll need several years of working on your individuality before you might be ready."

She got up, leaning forward towards him with a disappointed sigh. "As expected."

There was an awkward silence for a bit.

Rui coughed. "Well, I should get some rest."

"Are you actually tired?" She raised an eyebrow with a sarcastic tone. "Or are you just trying to kick me out?"

"Take a guess." Rui sighed. He had had enough of her cheeky and frankly immature attitude.

His youthful body begged to defer.

He had leaned forward trying to hide his groin.

"Well, if I don't, then I won't have to leave, right?" She smirked, running her hand across his arm.

Rui groaned inwardly as he felt his body revving up in excitement.

"Just go before something we do something that probably violates the rules that such a disciplined and well-run base has." Rui sighed.

"Hehe, too bad that won't work." She giggled before a hint of melancholy crept into her tone. "Gramps is extremely strict when people are on duty. Even the slightest mistake gets harshly punished. That's how difficult our predicament is, not even the slightest mistake can occur for us to win. So when we're on duty, he's extraordinarily strict, but when we're off-duty, he allows us to do whatever we want..."

She turned towards him. "...With whoever we want. Otherwise, even the remaining spirit we have will break."

Rui felt the emotion she tried to hide from him with his sharp senses. He could feel his reluctance disappearing, which alarmed him.

('Stop it you horny pig! You're on! a fucking! mission!') He groaned inwardly but clearly, his body didn't care.

"Well, what if I don't want to do whatever with whoever?" He used the Mind Mask technique to try and sell indifference and apathy.

"Hehehe." She walked her two fingers up his leg until they bumped into something rock-hard.

She didn't even need to say more. The gesture alone was so erotic that he lost the last shred of self-control that he had. He popped off his mask against his better judgment.

"Oooooo." She cooed as she studied his appearance, leaning in closer. "You're cute."

She kissed him softly and slowly as he reciprocated her energy, she placed a hand on his face as their bodies leaned closer. They kissed passionately, falling onto the bed as they began stripping their clothes off one by one.

Rui ran his arms across her nude body, drowning in lust and arousal as he indulged in feeling every curve and bump on her body. She moaned lightly as she gently stroked him, kissing him aggressively and sloppily as she pushed him deep into the right place.

Rui gasped in shock as he entered. It had been literally decades since he last experienced the intoxicating feeling, the surrounding warm and wet sensation. He shuddered as he felt waves of pleasure flow across his entire body.

"It's a safe day."

His last shred of self-control melted away at those words as he thrust in and out vigorously, almost completely consumed by the raw pleasure he was experiencing.

"Mmmmm." She moaned lightly, grinning excitedly as she saw how completely overwhelmed he was by the experience. Rui slowed down periodically, trying not to finish too early, he didn't want to lose the pleasure he was experiencing. At that moment, he wouldn't mind if he could continue forever. Yet soon enough that moment came. He accelerated energetically as a tremendous build-up of pressure in his groin accrued.

Until he finally couldn't hold it in any longer.

For several seconds he was completely consumed with infinite pleasure, frozen stiff as his muscles were as taut as iron in a response to the sheer stimulus the experience of ejaculating inside gave him.

He finally gasped for air desperately once it ended. Falling on top of her, powerless for a moment.

"Hehe... That was intense." She grinned, her face flushed red, and she leaned in to whisper in his ear. "You... wanna keep going?"

He groaned inwardly as he grew hard again.

Outside in the camp, someone had finally taken notice of their disappearance.

"Hey, have you seen the martial Squire?" The man who first picked a fight with Rui appeared. "I last saw him together with Vemy."

"I dunno, haven't seen them in a while."

"Hm..." The man turned around wistfully. "I wanted to know more about the breakthrough to the Squire Realm."