

Martial Unity 511

Chapter 511: Considerations

The next morning Rui woke up peacefully, feeling quite serene. He could hear birds chirping outside and the light of dawn cracking through the fabric of the tent. He felt a warm sensation on the right side of his body. He looked down to his right, Vemy was peacefully asleep on his chest clinging to his body, looking equally serene. Rui sighed, embarrassed. It was more than a little embarrassing for him to have given in to the urge of his hormonal teenage body.

He'd forgotten how good sexual intercourse felt, especially since he had lost all of his libido for decades due to his failing health. But now that he had returned to a youthful healthy body, he was beginning to recall how frightening the power of lust could be.

He sighed, shaking his head as he recalled last night. Thankfully, he had managed to gain a better hold of himself after his initial shot, taking into account her experience as well. It had been so long that he was effectively no different from a virgin.

Yet a part of him wished he hadn't had the experience because he was better off not remembering what it was like to experience it, not just the intercourse, but all of the intoxicating and blissful physical intimacy he had with her after as well. He realized life would be a lot more pleasant if he could have that with someone he truly cared for.

He sighed, shaking his head. He did not intend to spend energy and detour from his path especially, for chasing opportunities for it. If they came, he would take them, if not, then that was that. His determination to elevate his Martial Art to its peak was a dream that had survived the rigors of an entire lifetime and even carried over to his next one.

He would never forsake chasing after it in exchange for chasing after another childish dreamlike love. He was far too driven. He could only hope they could coincide somehow. As for how that could be? Now was not the time to think about it.

('I'm on a fucking mission. I need to get my head back into the game.') He exhaled deeply, closing his eyes and tempering his mental state.

"Mmmmrgh." He heard a soft moan as Vemy woke up.

She turned up towards him before smiling. "Hehe good morning."

"Morning. I should get up now. I'm here on a mission you know." Rui sighed, as he gently placed her head on the pillow as got off from under her.

He pulled a new set of Martial Art clothes from his utility belt and began clothing himself.

"Woah, where did that come from?" She asked.

"They're made from a rare esoteric fiber that shrinks tremendously under pressure, allowing me to travel with a spare change of clothes" He sighed before putting his old clothes into a pouch that shrunk tremendously.

"Wow." She looked impressed. "Wish I had one of those. The Kandrian Martial Union sure is impressive."

"You should get going too," Rui told her. "And try not to let anyone know what happened, I don't want people to think I'm unprofessional."

"Oh relax, we've commissioned Martial Apprentices before. This isn't particularly strange or common." She glanced at her pocket watch. "But I am due to be on standby soon, so I really should go."

She hurriedly put on her clothes.

"Bye-bye, I had fun. Let's do that again if we can." She left sneakily before blowing a kiss at him.

Rui shook his head, trying to get his head back into the game. Once he was fully clothed, he stepped out of his tent, heading towards the main camp. The air was noticeably tenser than it was the day prior and almost all the preparations were completed. Soon, he reached the large tent that served as the headquarters.

"Squire Falken." Fushin Hunfer addressed him without even looking up from all the paperwork he was working on. "I trust you've rested and rejuvenated in the past day? I hope you had a good night."

There was nothing in his tone or words that implied anything beyond what his words conveyed, but Rui could tell the man knew about his nightly affair.

"Just fine, thank you." He said with a straight tone.

"Good to hear." The old man nodded, facing him for the first time. "Have a seat. We have important matters to discuss."

"The attack will commence at dusk." He straightforwardly informed Rui as Rui took a seat opposite to the latter, he pointed at a section of the mountain on a map that he had before him. "We aim to climb the mountain from the south, where the mountain's inclination is gradual. The attack should commence around three hours after commencement."

"Hm." Rui nodded. An attack in the night favored the ambushing force. The ability to surveil and gather information on hostile third parties in the vicinity was hampered due to the darkness, for all parties. Not only did the ability to gather intelligence generally decrease, but the risks in attempting to do so also increased. Thus even attempting proactive intelligence gathering was no longer as easy and simple.

Even though this also affected the rebels, they possessed an intelligence advantage due to their extreme familiarity with the mountain and the fort, their familiarity with the protocols of the battalion of the Britannian Empire stationed at the fort from previous conflicts, as well as the fact that the location of their enemy being very well known, made it easier to gather information.

Attacking during the day when both sides would be able to detect the other was far more beneficial to the Britannian battalion than it was to the Zurtun rebel group. Thus, it simply made more sense to eliminate that factor by operating at the night.

"Tell me about the details, and specifically where and when you wish for me to time my mission and remember, I have the right to refuse if I want to."

Chapter 512: Amiss

"Of course." The old man nodded, seemingly having expected that. "You will disguise yourself amongst our soldiers at the vanguard of our formation and only act when the Hlorn weapon is brought out, which according to our predictions based on previous assaults is presumed to be anywhere between five and seven minutes depending on multiple factors such as preparation, alertness, and, of course, luck."

Rui nodded memorizing those details, they made perfect sense.

"The assault will begin as soon as we approach the boundary of guaranteed detection." The old man stated. "This is the boundary beyond which, no matter what, we are unable to avoid detection from the surveillance of the Britannian battalion occupying the fort. The Martial Apprentice engaging in surveillance in this section of the fort will detect us about one hundred meters from the fort, and from there we will immediately accelerate while the long-range squads of our army will begin launching explosive arrows once we reach fifty meters away from the fort in order cause as many casualties in the Britannian battalion as possible as well as much as chaos as possible and slow down their preparation."

He paused before continuing. "Once we reach the fort, our offensive Martial Apprentices will immediately begin launching coordinated attacks on the fort wall and work to pierce through it and form an opening for the army to infiltrate the castle. We've tried variants of similar strategies before, however, we incur too much damage for us to continue, due to the Hlorn being fully operational at this point in time. This is where you come in."

"I see..." Rui nodded.

It was a rational plan that had a clear goal and made the best of the resources available to them. Using the darkness in this particular circumstance made sense, and the change in their approach once surveillance once they were inevitably detected also made perfect sense, the goal of wanting to infiltrate the fort was also quite logical as seizing back the fort would be an impossible task otherwise. However, there were certain holes that made Rui concerned.

"If your goal in approaching the fort is to infiltrate it, then why not go for the actual transit entrance gate instead of trying to forcefully create an opening in the middle of the fort wall?" Rui asked. "Doesn't it make more sense to go for a strategy that creates an asymmetrical warfare where you focus on gaining control over the gate covertly or forcefully one way or another and then simply opening it when the time comes?"

"Your proposal is what we would ideally desire, but there are issues with trying to accomplish that." The old man sighed. "The gate is actually the most secure point of the entire fort. Furthermore, it is extensively locked with multiple fail-safes when dusk arrives, meaning gaining control and opening it for when we launch an attack will be a time-consuming task. Combining the power of ten offensive Martial Artists who have trained specifically for this task to coordinate their attacks efficiently to blast a hole in the fort is actually less time-consuming. Ten Martial Apprentices when combining their power can effectively yield an output that surpasses the Apprentice Realm greatly."

Rui nodded. "It is a simpler plan, that is for sure."

"Simplicity is ideal. Trying to open the gates would require a degree of complexity that increases the likelihood of a mistake being committed or some other variable going wrong or unexpected which can botch our whole plan. If we do not get into the fort in time, then we have to immediately retreat down the steeper and quicker side of the mountain lest we get blown to hell by the Hlorn weapon."

Rui nodded. It was true that the greater the complexity and sophistication of a plan, the greater the likelihood of a mistake or unexpected outcome occurring and the greater the likelihood that said mistakes and outcomes would cause too much of a deviation from the projected plan.

Simpler plans had fewer variables, meaning there were fewer things that could go wrong. In the case of this plan, unless one of the offensive Martial Apprentices got taken out very early, or continuously blundered, there wasn't much that could go genuinely wrong conceptually.

In the heat of battle, it was best to keep things simple. Although it was tempting to pull off incredibly sophisticated and complicated operations as one might see in the Mission Impossible franchise, anyone who had ever been in a large-scale battle knew that it was best to keep things simple.

"Once I destroy the Hlorn, I will immediately leave, I will have completed my mission, and I'll immediately leave, clear?" Rui glanced at him, observing his reactions carefully.

"Of course."

His tone, expressions, micro-expressions, and demeanor were impeccable, yet something told Rui he was missing something.

('The Hlorn is not a recently transferred weapon to the Britannian battalion.') Rui noted. ('Yet the old man never commissioned a Martial Squire. Even though the weapon's power is immense, it is a somewhat large unwieldy cannon that is quite inflexible, and slow with limited effective range, accuracy, and precision. It also cannot be used if the army is inside the fort or too close. The window for which the Hlorn is at its most devastating is in the time period between their detection a hundred meters away and reaching the fort walls, once they stick to the walls, there isn't too much the Hlorn can do otherwise the fort walls will also take damage from the cannon.')

Rui's sharp mind furiously computed and analyzed the motive behind his commission both from an empirical standpoint with the data he had available as well a personal evaluation of the former general of the Zurtun Fort. The man was not a fool, if the Hlorn had been around for years and the rebel army was still not only alive and kicking but also in a position to launch attacks with a reasonable chance of victory, then spending funds accumulated across years to commission destroying the Hlorn weapon was clearly not something worth doing.

His eyes narrowed as he eyed the man. ('Just what are you up to old man?')

Chapter 513: Confirmation

"Ah, one thing to remember." The old man said, turning to face Rui. "This is a premium guarantee mission. Meaning you will face more severe consequences in failing to complete your mission within the stipulated mission."

The atmosphere froze as the others inside the tent felt shudders climbing up their spines, as their knees buckled, collapsing under their own weight. The world creaked to a halt as waves of pressure emanated from Rui.

"...Is that a threat?" He asked with narrowed eyes.

"It's a warning made in good faith." The old man calmly replied. "Now then, if you have any other questions, please do go ahead."

Rui stared at him until the pressure in the room subsided. He was actually quite impressed that the old man was unfazed. That kind of mental pressure wasn't something that could be shaken off easily, the old man either underwent some kind of mental training that improved his fortitude or had undergone

extraordinary experiences that tempered his mind to be able to keep its composure under the flux of pressure of Rui's hostility.

"Why commission me to destroy the Hlorn weapon if it was unable to stop you from launching assaults year after year?" Rui asked straightforwardly. He had already inferred and deduced all the information he could through deductive and inductive logic. The only way he could learn more was by creating scenarios where he would gain more information.

Of course, he didn't expect old Fushin to answer him honestly, but there was still information to be gleaned, directly and indirectly.

Fushin threw a flawless confused expression at him. "... I didn't suppose I had to explain that. The Hlorn weapon outputs power in the Squire Realm while we are compromised almost entirely of ordinary humans barring the two dozen Martial Apprentices we have. The reason should be obvious unless, of course, you're saying the Squire-level power means nothing here."

That was an extremely well-constructed evasion of Rui's question. The way he framed it threw out all the nuance for why Hlorn was not as obviously devastating as he was making it clearly seem. It completely skimmed over the many disadvantages that all canons possessed, but especially the Hlorn in these circumstances.

Furthermore, he also hampered Rui's ability to push back with his last statement, making it seem as though Rui was implicitly stating that Squire-level power was useless.

Rui could try and dissect his statements and his reasoning in a debate, but that was tedious and long-drawn, and ultimately pointless, he would simply be wasting everyone's time and patience. It was better not to bother with something like that.

('And that's why he said that because he knows that I know that there is no point in doing anything of the sort.') Rui noted. ('Sly bastard. I'm even more certain that something is a little off here.')

However, Rui never intended to extract information from the old man himself, he was too careful. Rui had already observed that he held an incredible amount of sway about the information he conveyed through verbal and non-verbal communication. It would take Rui extended long-term effort to be able to extract information from him.

('But the same cannot be said for your subordinates, old man.') A slight smile cracked under his mask.

Their reaction to his question was not something that someone would have to an extremely stupid question with an obvious answer. When he studied them with his senses and techniques, he couldn't really make out much obvious emotion on their faces at all.

('And that's what gives it away.') Rui mused.

Their emotional expression was controlled to hide whatever they were feeling. And the only reason they would feel the need to do that is if there was something to hide at all in the first place. In the context of these particular circumstances, Rui could safely rule out whatever it was they were hiding as most certainly not benign or unimportant.

Besides, he could sense they were nervous inside. But unfortunately, that didn't mean too much. There was a war incoming within twenty-four hours, nervousness was rife. Furthermore, his little flex earlier had affected them as well, so he truly could not say that their nervousness was indicative of anything. If anything, it could be said that he could learn more from their desire to control their reactions.

"Well then. It appears my worries were misplaced." Rui simply stated. "I suppose I'll be seeing you later at war, gentlemen."

He turned away, leaving. There wasn't much else for him to do here.

"Ah one last thing, Squire Falken." Old Fushin called out to him.

Rui paused, turning his head back to meet the old man's gaze with the edge of his eye.

"Our Martial Apprentices, do you mind serving as their training and sparring partner?" He requested. "I'm sure they'd be thrilled to receive the rare opportunity to do so. Of course, only if you're willing. But it's not like you have anything else to do the rest of the day, correct?"

Rui stared at him for a while, before simply nodding his head and turning back to walk out.

An entire minute passed before a Martial Apprentice broke the silence. "He's far away enough."

"Close the tent," Fushin ordered.

The inner layer of the tent had been layered with a sound-insulating esoteric fabric that prevented any sound from entering or escaping.

"That was terrifying." One of the men fell back to his knees. "I think this is a big mistake. Who knows what he'll do to us when he finds out the truth."

"How did he even catch any wind of it at all?" Another one complained.

"He's highly intelligent... Just our luck." Fushin stroked his beard, sighing. "There should have been nothing. Nothing but the tiniest of scraps of clues, yet he noticed all of them and managed to deduce and infer much of the truth, considering what he worked with. Not only that, he took prudent steps to verify his suspicions and then confirmed them to be true... Are all Martial Squires like this? Did I underestimate these breeds of superhumans? Hmm..."

Chapter 514: Opportunity

"He was going find out anyway eventually... But his blame would have fallen on the Martial Union ordinarily. But now that he seems to understand there is more to this than meets the eye, the blame will likely fall on us when the time comes." He sighed. "It's inconvenient that he is so sharp."

They discussed the matter to a greater extent. Rui on the other hand thought about the matter by himself.

('At the very least, I can be certain it's not malicious.') Rui nodded. It would violate the terms of the contract and would be interpreted as an open declaration of war against the Kandrian Martial Union. A team of Martial Squires would be immediately dispatched and the entirety of the Zurtun rebel group would be massacred indiscriminately.

Despite all the deception at hand, the rebel group was fundamentally driven to claim back their homeland and return back to their families. There was no mistaking this. This meant that whatever deception was going on at hand likely was not malicious against him, but more so exploitative in nature.

('Seeing how shrewd that cunning old fox is, I bet it's technically not a violation of the contract either.') Rui sighed. He didn't think the old man would do anything that could be proven to violate the contract since that would invite a severe penalty from the Martial Union.

('It's also something he can't reveal without giving me legitimate grounds and incentives to call off the mission in a justified manner according to the contracts.')

If whatever he was hiding, which had to pertain to the true reason for the mission, was benign and harmless, then Fushin would have revealed it to Rui. It would have even been mentioned in the contract. But clearly revealing it was problematic, thus it was being hidden.

That gave Rui further clues.

('I cannot attack the client at any given point in time unless my life is at stake.') Rui noted. ('This means he's not worried for his life, the consequences of revealing the information he is hiding are more so to do with the mission being voided if he does reveal it.')

('But what information could void my mission and cancel it if I learned about it?') Rui wondered.

There were several possibilities that came to mind. Yet before he could consider them deeper, a spike of seismic radiation in the distance drew his attention.

('Hm, the Martial Apprentices are training.') He realized as he focused his senses in that direction. Rui recalled Fushin's request regarding sparring with them, sighing. He wasn't in the mood to be charitable with the man, but it was true that he genuinely had nothing else to do for another twelve hours.

The twenty-seven Martial Apprentices of the Zurtun rebel group were collectively sparring a great distance away from the base camp and the mountain so that they wouldn't give their presence away to the Britannian Battalion occupying the fort.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

Ten Martial Apprentices were launching attacks at a gigantic boulder in groups of three, forming a wide and deep crater that grew deeper with each group of attacks the Martial Artists threw.

('This must be the offensive team that will work on breaking through the thick and dense wall of the fort wall.') Rui thought inwardly, nodding. The coordinated offensive power of ten Martial Apprentices would make short work of the fort walls in a reasonably short period of time. Once the fort wall was penetrated, the army could quickly swarm inside and the Hlorn weapon would be rendered useless. It couldn't be used inside the fort, it would cause too much damage to themselves.

He smiled slightly as he saw Vemy among them. She seemed to be an offensive Martial Artist with a kicking-oriented Martial Art. What was distinct about her style is that it seemed to put more weight on singular power above all else. She launched long-winded spinning kicks that generated tremendous amounts of torque that she transferred to her target in a devastating blow.

It was a style that distinctly resembled Taekwondo in several ways.

Just as he analyzed her movements deeper, he was interrupted.

"Come out." One of the Martial Apprentices suddenly looked in his direction, in the forest, calling him out.

('A Martial Apprentice with a sensory technique.') Rui mused. He wasn't particularly alarmed. He was not especially trying to hide and he had nothing to hide. He was simply taking liberty in observing them train.

"I won't say it again, come out." He said, walking towards the forest.

Rui sighed, revealing himself in the distance. The Martial Apprentices looked at him in surprise, wondering why a mighty Martial Squire would bother spying on them, meager Martial Apprentices.

"Uh..." The man scratched his head, loosening his tone a bit. "Do you need something, sir?"

"Not particularly," Rui replied, approaching them. "General Hunfer requested me to train and spar with all of you, but I didn't want to barge in and disturb you when you were preoccupied, you have my apologies."

Their eyes lit up with interest. Almost none of them had met a Martial Squire prior, let alone be trained by one!

The best they had ever been trained by were the old surviving veteran Martial Apprentices of the Zurtun town. However, while they were experienced and knowledgeable, not even they were aware of what it took to become a Martial Squire.

The same could not be said for someone who had managed to elevate himself to a higher Realm. This was the only person within their reach who could tell them more about the road to a higher Realm. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that they had something even more important, they would have long swarmed him to learn more from him.

"Please guide us." They requested sincerely.

Rui nodded. "Alright, will do. While there's nothing that I can do to make you stronger for tonight's operation, what I can offer will be helpful in the long run."

Chapter 515: Teams

"We understand." The man addressing Rui said. "We'll make the best of your teachings."

They nodded vigorously. Vemy threw him a brief mischievous smile sneakily that the others didn't notice.

('So she didn't tell them, phew.') He sighed inwardly.

"How do you propose we go about this?" The man asked.

"Hm..." Rui thought about it. His mind flashed back to the days when martial Apprentices all ganged up to fight Kyrie, once the sparring session was over, she would round them all up and instruct them on their shortcomings, flaws, and weaknesses as well as offer suggestions on how to mitigate or get rid of them.

"We don't have much time," Rui told them. "A third of you come at me at once first, followed by the remaining third."

It was not practical to try and spar with twenty-seven people at once. Not because Rui could not accomplish it, but if he wanted, he could slaughter all of them with relative ease. But sparring twenty-seven people at once wasn't really practical for a meaningful form of training because there was a physical logistical limit to the number of people who could attack him at once, and a limit to the number of Martial Apprentice he could focus on grilling at once.

Meaning, sparring twenty-seven at the same time would make all of them feel left out for longer periods of time. It was better to spar with fewer people at once and ensure that each of those people could have a proper sparring session where they were intensely involved with the fight.

They nodded at that proposal, having similar thoughts.

"You three." Rui pointed to three random Martial Apprentices out of the crowd. "What are your names?"

"Cern."

"Gerard."

"Mina."

"The three of you are the strongest of all of you, aren't you?" Rui could clearly sense that those three were the only full-fledged higher-grade Martial Apprentices in their group.

The three of them nodded with surprised expressions, wondering how Rui was able to discern it so easily. Was this one of the abilities of Martial Squires?

"Form three teams that each of you will lead, and decide who will go first," Rui told them as he sat on a rock, observing them.

Rui observed them intermingling with each other carefully. What they didn't know was that Rui was already testing them. Depending on how smoothly their team formation went, it would tell them much about themselves. If they scrambled to obtain all the strongest Martial Apprentices for their own team at the cost of the other teams, then it would generally reflect poorly on their sense of unity and teamwork. If they were truly united in their goal to make the best of this opportunity for all of them, it would reflect in their choices and actions.

('So far it's already going well.') Rui nodded inwardly.

Cern, Gerard, and Mina were discussing amongst themselves rather than trying to compete with each other by trying to attract the other Martial Apprentices to their team. In little over ten minutes, they had already formed their teams.

"We're ready, Squire Falken." The three of them told him with three groups of Martial Artists behind them.

Rui swept his eyes across the three groups, analyzing them. He was satisfied when he saw that the teams were broadly equally strong. Although it was impossible to create three perfectly equally strong teams, he was pleased that they had gone or an approach that made each team equally strong that allowed all of them to experience a similar level of power from Rui.

He also noticed that each team had roughly three of the ten offense-oriented Martial Apprentices that he had seen practicing coordinating their attacks to blasting a large opening in walls to allow the army to pass through smoothly. Meaning each team had a similar level of offensive capabilities. This meant that they had tried to create teams that not only were equally strong but also equally balanced.

"Good." Rui nodded. "Let me begin by explaining how I'm going to go about this. I will be restricting my power and speed to the peak of the Apprentice Realm, though I may decide to use even lesser if I can, barring my toughness and reaction speed, both of which I cannot truly restrict or change in any other way, got it?"

They all nodded. It made sense, there was no point in him going all out as that would simply kill them or defeat them so fast that there was nothing of value to be learned in their loss. They would gain no valuable experience.

"So which group will be going first?" Rui asked.

"I'll be going first, Squire." He smiled confidently. He was a large man with a towering well-built physique, and also the strongest offensive fighter amongst all of them.

The nine of them surrounded him quickly while the other two groups retreated to an adequate distance to give both sides enough room to fight all out.

They all took their stances, waiting for Rui to send the signal.

"Alright then..." Rui cracked his knuckles. "Come."

WHOOSH

In an instant, two Martial Apprentices were at his sides while another was above him. Two more emerged, attacking him from the front and behind.

('Three maneuvering-oriented Martial Apprentices and two offense-oriented Martial Apprentices.') Rui casually noted while he studied their movements that were in slow motion in his eyes. He had no intention of flexing his power and blasting them all away, which he could even with his stated restriction.

Instead, he caught the attacks of all the two Martial Apprentices attacking from his sides and slowly shifted them to the Martial Apprentices that were front and behind him, pulling them in those

directions. His twisting motion also deflected the attacks of the Martial Apprentices front and behind him that was about to touch his back and front, redirecting them to the Martial Apprentices to his side.

Their attacks were redirected such that it looked like they were attacking each other in a chain!

Chapter 516: Spar

He simply pulled the Martial Apprentice who was kicking down, launching himself as he somersaulted out of his position, replacing himself with him.

POW POW POW POW!

BAM!

The four Martial Apprentices who attacked him on land grimaced as they not only hilariously missed their target but also ended up hitting their teammates. The one Martial apprentice who launched a flying kick found himself standing where Rui was, while Rui was standing outside their circle.

Everyone looked at him with amazement. This is what he was capable of when he restricted and limited himself to the Apprentice Realm.

Team Gerard quickly gathered itself, regrouping before they came at him again, two maneuvering-oriented Martial Apprentices dashed out at him with tremendous speeds, launching swift and short barrages of jabs.

Rui never let his inherently high toughness do the job for him. He cleanly parried away every single strike with as little movement and effort as he could, just barely applying the necessary force to ensure that they don't connect with him properly. He considered constructing predictive models to try and minimize the effort he needed to expend to take them down, but he decided not to. That was far too overkill, they wouldn't even comprehend what happened to them and would gain the misunderstanding that all Martial Squires could replicate the feat. He did not want to give them an inaccurate view of the Squire realm.

('These two aren't bad.') Rui mused. ('But their top speed is much greater than their agility, creating unnecessarily high amounts of inertia, making it difficult for them to decelerate and reach zero. They're fast at their peak but they're not quick to switch.')

They were almost like trains. Bullet trains had a very high top speed, but these massive transportation vehicles took their time to reach their top speed and to get back to zero from top speed. Of course, this could be due to their Martial Art being highly centered around speed, but that didn't necessarily mean everything had to be sacrificed to obtain speed at all costs, everything was needed to create a viable Martial Artist.

He had already identified numerous shortcomings and flaws

WHOOSH

He avoided a powerful blow from one of the Martial Apprentices, crouching. The powerful kick blasted across empty air.

CLASP

Rui caught his leg, swinging him down to the ground.

BAM!

The man grimaced.

('This is the second time you're launching an attack off the ground.') Rui smiled behind his mask, amused. ('Don't take your feet off the ground so often if you're helpless midair.')

He sensed a powerful wind projectile being launched at him from behind.

('Oh?') Rui raised an eyebrow. As it lashed out toward Rui, he simply watched as it arrived.

STEP

He jumped, landing on the wind!

The other Martial Apprentices gaped as Rui rode the wind!

He even balanced upon it like he was surfing a wave, which he effectively was.

"Woah" He landed on the ground once the energy of the attack fizzled out. "That was fun."

He turned to face Gerard who had launched the powerful attack, nodding in approval. ('He waited for me to deal with the maneuvering-oriented Martial Apprentice who launched an airborne attack so that he wouldn't hurt them, yet the attack was launched before he was out of the way, meaning he predicted I would deal with him quick enough.')

This showed that Gerard had a respectable degree of foresight, something none of the other Martial Apprentices had demonstrated thus far.

('But you were too presumptuous.')

Rui disapproved, as he casually evaded a few more attacks from those around him. ('If I chose to dodge instead of slam him to the ground, your attack would have hit him instead, inflicting critical damage.')

He returned his attention to the remaining Martial Apprentices.

There were four of them who had tried to dogpile him with attacks again, yet this time they were a bit more clever about it.

CLASP

Two Martial Apprentices grabbed him in mirror body holds, from behind while the two offense-oriented Martial Apprentices threw their most powerful strikes straight toward his face.

WHOOSH

Rui evaded them ever so slightly as he bent forward.

BAM!

He chained that maneuver into an over-body flip, throwing the two Martial Apprentices that tried to restrain him straight to the ground with a powerful impact.

POW POW!

A lean roundhouse kick swept across their faces, striking them hard. The two of them leaped back, grimacing. The Martial Apprentices took a moment to re-position themselves.

('When he said he would be restraining himself to Apprentice-level output, I thought it would be a difficult fight for both sides.') Gerard gritted his teeth. ('Since the reason why he's stronger than us; the power of a Martial Squire would no longer be in play. But he's toying with us even though he's outputting power and speed that is not too different from us.')

Gerard paid close attention to him as the battle resumed. ('What is it that makes us different? Theoretically, all of us should be physically capable of this level of power.')

Gerard studied all of Rui's movements carefully, ceasing his attack briefly. He watched Rui dismantle all opposition while making it look entirely easy. Every move he made seemed measured and planned, causing a cascade of events that perfectly played well for him.

('He's using his power like a surgeon uses a scalpel.') Gerard realized. (Each of his moves is precise and accurate. They're always at the right time and place, ultimately, it's playing a much greater role than it does when we wield that same power!')

Gerard had always thought he was a sophisticated and refined fighter, but before the elegant brilliance of Rui, he felt like a caveman swinging around a club trying to fight a fencer.

"I have a long way to go." He sighed.

Just this battle alone had given him a lot of inspiration and motivation. He felt determination growing within him, the determination to win the upcoming battle, and the determination to grow stronger after.

Chapter 517: Guidance

Of course, while he was motivated and determined to accomplish what Rui was demonstrating, he did not realize it was futile. Martial Squire's brains possessed a far greater degree of the same cognitive and mental enhancements that Martial Apprentices possessed.

The reason Martial Apprentices were so strong with Apprentice-level techniques was that Martial Apprentices were able to fight with a high degree of efficiency, they were able to use all of the energy generated by the cells of the human body extremely efficiently unlike normal humans, allowing them to exhibit an extraordinary amount of output, much of which would otherwise go to waste.

This was even more true for Martial Squires, who was able to exhibit a degree of efficiency that far exceeded even that of Martial Apprentices. That was one of the reasons Rui was able to school the Martial Apprentices even though he didn't use the formidable power of the body of a Martial Squire. He used his power with a degree of efficiency and effectivity that was physically impossible for a Martial Apprentice.

('Still, he doesn't know that.') Rui mused. ('As long as he doesn't know that and believes it is possible, then the motivation and determination to obtain that power will drive him further down his Martial Path.')

Rui had no intention of correcting his ill-conceived notions, not as long as they were beneficial to him. He simply proceeded to beat up not just team Gerard, but also team Mina and team Cern for nearly half a day. At the end of a long and extensive sparring session, all the Martial Apprentices collapsed to the ground exhausted while Rui hummed to himself admiring the pleasant weather and climate that was less common in the cold Kandrian Empire.

"How are you completely fine after fighting for that long? Is it some special Squire-level stamina-oriented technique?" Gerard asked, panting.

"Martial Squires have inherently superior stamina." Rui sighed, wishing he could take his mask off and enjoy the cool breeze. "No need for a technique."

"That's not possible! How can Martial Squires have superior stamina even when they aren't employing any Squire-level techniques?" The man asked, surprised. "Are Martial Squires even humans?"

Rui didn't respond to that, that came too close to the truth that he couldn't really reveal and get away with. But it was an interesting question. He tried not to think too much about it, but technically, he wasn't a human anymore. At the very least, he wouldn't be classified as a homo sapien according to the biological nomenclature that existed on Earth.

He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. But regardless, he didn't have any strong feelings about it. He looked human, he was able to function in society as a normal human, he was human at heart and he was still able to pursue his Martial Art and Martial Path.

It was a technicality that didn't truly change anything. It didn't even change the fact that his children would be genetically human instead of whatever he was. The evolution process was isolated from the reproduction system because it was too harsh and ended up resulting in turning the subject sterile. Thus, in order to retain one's reproductive capabilities, certain parts of the reproduction system had to be excluded from the procedure. Doing so would allow the Martial Squire to reproduce normal human beings.

This was another interesting avenue for thought that was interesting to ponder.

Gerard sighed, drawing Rui's attention. "The more I learn about the strength of a Martial Squire, the more I want to step into that Realm of power..."

Rui didn't even need to hear the rest to know where this was going. "So, you want me to help you out with what it takes to become a Martial Squire, correct?"

Gerard sheepishly nodded.

Rui sighed. "I cannot divulge anything about the actual breakthrough to the Squire Realm, I am bound by oath. But I can divulge what it takes to become qualified to undergo the breakthrough to the Squire Realm to some of you."

"Some of us?" Gerard frowned.

"Yes, the rest of you aren't nearly ready yet, learning about it will be harmful to your progression to the higher Realm," Rui informed them.

"Who among us qualified and why?" Gerard asked with a hint of anxiety, he would be disheartened if he wasn't qualified to learn even about what it took to just be ready to attempt breaking through to a higher Realm.

"Generally, it's based on power and experience," Rui informed. "Among all of you, I sense only nine individuals are qualified to learn about the conditions to becoming a Squire candidate. The three team leaders, followed by you, you, you, you, you, and you."

He pointed at the nine individuals.

"Then can you tell us?" Gerard.

"I expected that I would be asked this at some point, so I wrote it down on a sheet of paper." Rui pulled out a folded piece of paper and flicked it to Gerard. "Show it only to those who are qualified, but only after the battle, it is best not to be distracted and underperform. You might end up costing everybody the war."

Rui got up. "With that, we're done. Good luck to all of you, rejuvenate yourselves, and prepare for the war."

"Thank you for your guidance." Gerard thanked him as they all bowed to his retreating figure.

Rui had taken his time sparring and guiding them thoroughly. Part of it was because he enjoyed the process, he had taken up missions where he boosted the growth of Martial Apprentices by sparring with

them regularly. Using the predictive and adaptive evolution model to detect all the flaws and shortcomings and then sparring with them in a manner that forced them to get used to their opponent trying to exploit flaws and shortcomings for them to learn how to compensate for them in the long run, was incredibly satisfying.

Besides, he had nothing else to do the entire day, so it was a good way to while away time.

Chapter 518: For Home

The time had arrived.

Rui had spent the remaining quarter of the day in contemplation of what Fushin Hunfer and his lackeys were hiding, but eventually, he stopped. He had already inferred a lot of information through deductive and inductive reasoning, but there was a limit to how much he could learn through that route. The more he tried to deduce further, the less reliable and baseless his conjectures would become. It was ultimately a wasteful mental exercise. He could not conjure up new information out of thin air.

('I need to be careful though.')

Rui sighed.

He had already concluded that whatever they were hiding was not malicious against him, it was at most convenient exploitation that would aid in their goal. Rui was quite certain that their conviction to reclaim their hometown that had been colonized by the Britannian Empire was very real. He could feel it in most of them to a strong degree, and it made sense.

These were all former soldiers that defended their fort and hometown, they all had some family or the other that was currently being ruled by the Britannian Battalion and exploited to provide value to the Britannian Empire.

One reason he wasn't too alarmed and paranoid was that he had relatively high assurance regarding the magnitude of the matter. For example, it certainly couldn't be something that would definitely get Rui killed or defeated but would spare them all, that was inconceivable even if Rui entertained wild possibilities.

Anything that was guaranteed to kill Rui would absolutely be guaranteed to annihilate all of them, it would be foolish to put him and themselves in that situation. Perhaps if it were done by the average person, Rui wouldn't put it past them, but Fushin Hunter was too shrewd to do something that foolish. At most this was a calculated risk.

"Besides, this might actually turn out to be good, ironically," Rui chuckled. There were certain possibilities that he had come up with that were actually favorable to him. He wouldn't mind those possibilities coming true.

He whiled away his time considering these thoughts, even while he was in his room, having dinner; food pills. Hours passed until the time was night.

"Squire Falken." A person called out to him from the outside. "It's soon time. Please be on standby."

"Will do," Rui replied back.

He got up, heading out of the tent as he made his way to the core of the main camp. He could feel the air growing taut the closer he headed toward it.

The atmosphere was taut as everybody was stiff with nervousness and determination.

Rui made his way to the camp headquarters.

"Squire Falken, it's time, we will dispatch in about half an hour once the very final step is undertaken. You recall your position and all the details of the plan, correct?" The old man asked with a respectful tone.

"Every word." Rui shortly replied.

Rui would be stationed at the vanguard of the army as they approached the fort, as they had previously agreed.

"But I have another idea." Rui suddenly spouted.

Everybody paused as they looked at him nervously, last-minute changes were rarely a good thing.

"The night is dark, I think I should sky-walk to the fort at a certain elevation and attack from the sky when the Hlorn weapon is brought out. It gives me an eagle-eyed view of the entire fort and allows me to know exactly when it is brought out. I could even relay information to you if you need it. And it has a better element of surprise and would increase the likelihood of the operation."

To his surprise, Fushin agreed with that course of action.

"If that is what you want, then that works too." He simply responded to Rui, earning the surprise of everybody.

In reality, Rui did not care much about which approach he took. This was simply a clever plan he had undertaken to gain more information from the man. He wanted to see Fushin's reaction to a last-minute change in the plan. If he objected hard to the plan even though the end result of the plan would be the same, then Rui could be certain that whatever he was hiding had something to do with the position he had given Rui in his strategy of attacking the fort.

But the fact that he had no problem with Rui detaching far away from the army and going his own way showed that it wasn't particularly important to him where Rui was prior to the actual commencement of the assault. Meaning whatever he was hiding didn't have anything to do with anything before the actual conflict itself.

Of course, with how shrewd the old man was, there was a possibility that he figured out Rui trying to gauge more information from him, meaning it was entirely possible he had said that simply to throw Rui off.

"On second thoughts, I think I'll stick to the original plan," Rui commented.

"That works too."

Rui did not want to separate from the army because if he was with them, anything bad that happened to him would also happen to all of them, by sticking with him as tightly as he could for as long as he could, he was binding his fate to theirs. If he was hit by a nuke, then they would also be hit by a said nuke. There was almost no way he could exclusively become the victim of something for the time period that they were all together.

Time passed and eventually, every single final preparation was made. The entire camp had been neatly divided into their respective units and everybody was exactly where they were, with everything they needed and knew everything they needed to know.

"Zurtuns," Fushin addressed them, just before they were all about to be dispatched. "Today is the day. Today is the day we reclaim our home and our people. Today is the day we reclaim what they have taken from us! Today is the day we win this war! FOR VICTORY!"

"FOR VICTORY!!!"

"FOR HOME!"

"FOR HOME!!!" The army echoed.

Chapter 519: Unsurprised

Very swiftly he pumped the morale and the energy of the army to a decent degree. Soon enough, the order had been delivered and the army began dispersing. The general himself would not be taking part in the operation, he was far too old and losing him would likely be even more devastating than losing some Martial Apprentices. In the time that Rui had spent in the camp, it was very clear to see that Fushin played an important role in the Zurtun Rebel group. He was the core, in many ways.

Rui turned, looking at the old man as they left. He felt a chill run down his spine as he saw the man staring straight at him with a smile on his face. Rui had to take a moment, breathing deeply to compose himself. He steeled his heart as he forged on with the army. They were on foot because the horses would draw too much attention, furthermore, they were wearing sound-insulant footwear to reduce the amount of noise they made.

Rui's standard Martial Union uniform consisted of footwear that did the same thing to a higher degree. They soon reached the mountain summit, where four guards came into view. Yet before they could even process what was happening.

POW POW POW POW

All four of them were killed by the Martial Apprentices that scouted ahead.

The scout squad was supposed to eliminate the guards that were posted along the way to the fort. They did so just narrowly before the army came into their field of vision so that they could quickly be replaced by rebels of the rebel group who would pass off as the guards, even wearing the necessary armour and other attire.

The army quickly delved into the forest, keeping away from the standard path that led straight to the fort gates. They would easily be detected, they wanted the cover of the trees in the already dark night that would obfuscate their approach for as long as possible, as long as they didn't make any mistakes.

This part of the operation was slow and rigorous and truly tested the perseverance of the army. They would need to climb up a mountain carrying all the gear that they were carrying without making too much noise. They couldn't collectively pant or stomp their feet, they needed to be careful and soft while still exerting themselves significantly.

Hours passed, Rui casually strolled up while the men around him were doing their best to maintain their pace and ensure they didn't generate any noise. They breathed hard, trying to mitigate their exhaustion and fatigue.

Rui turned his gaze forward as he realized they were close to the boundary of inevitable detection. The scout Martial Apprentices signaled as much to the army, causing them to all stop as they passed on the signal to the people behind them in a wave until every last man knew it was time.

They all crouched, slowly pulling out a rejuvenation potion out of their pouches and inhaling it.

They each consumed rejuvenation potions, invigorating themselves. If they attacked in their current state, they would do so poorly that they would all die very quickly. Thus, the plan was to complete

energize them so that they were all in peak condition. Even the Martial Apprentices consumed some potions. The only one who didn't bother was Rui. Slowly climbing up a portion of the way up a small mountain was a walk in the park for a Martial Squire.

Five minutes later, every single last soldier in the rebel army had consumed a potion.

The unit captains signaled the charge phase, and soon the entire army accelerated towards the fort that was clearly visible in the distance.

Rui sensed turmoil in the fort as seismic radiation originating from the fort had increased exponentially.

('They know and they're making haste.')

Rui noted as he sharpened his senses, preparing for anything. Whatever the old man was hiding, would most likely be revealed within a short period of time. He kept an eye across all directions with his senses as they charged towards the fort.

The long-range units soon began firing explosive arrows towards the fort once they reached the necessary range. However, arrows rained back on them as well.

"SHIELDS!" The captains yelled.

Soon each soldier raised their shield above them as they continued running. They managed to mostly get away unscathed but there were some who had been hit by the small explosions in unshielded areas, causing them to fall.

Rui ignored the arrows entirely as he paid attention to the fort with Seismic Mapping, gaining reasonably sharp view of what was going on inside.

('There it is.')

Rui concluded. As both Seismic Mapping and Primordial Instinct told him about the weapon. Rui could feel the sheer amount of energy packed in the cannon. If he got hit by a round from that, he would not get away unscathed or with minor wounds. If not for its significant strategic inconvenience in these particular circumstances, they would have gotten utterly annihilated by the weapon in their previous encounters. It had a strong Squire-level sense of threat in his mind, his subconscious sense of danger evaluated it as a threat.

"PENETRATION SQUAD GO!" The captain yelled once they reached the fort walls.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

The offensive Martial Apprentices immediately fired away attacks rapidly with flawless coordination as they together made huge a huge crater that only grew bigger by the second.

Rui focused on his target, which was making its way to the fort wall.

('Now!') Rui shot up, launching himself above the wall in an instant as he flew a great distance inside, straight towards the canon.

Yet just before he reached it, he froze, before leaping away.

BOOM!!

A massive crater formed where he had been standing just prior.

Time slowed down profusely as Rui's senses were in overdrive as his awareness hit unprecedented peaks, trying to comprehend the situation he was in.

Yet, the answer was self-evident.

Rui could feel it in his bones.

At the center of the crater was a single silhouette behind the dust.

STEP STEP STEP

The figure walked out nonchalantly despite time being almost frozen in Rui's perception. Whoever this was, it was someone who existed in the same realm of cognition as Rui himself.

And the inevitable soon followed, confirming what he already knew with sheer instinct.

A squire-level aura descended upon the entire area as the very air froze, growing taut. The war itself creaked to a halt as the aura bathed the battlefield, inspiring fear in all those it graced.

Not a single person was unsurprised.

Chapter 520: Clash

The atmosphere was perilous. Before such oppressive pressure, even Martial Apprentices were scared stiff.

A second Squire-level aura bathed the battlefield as Rui stripped away his mind mask. The two Martial Squires made their presence known. The fate of the battle rested upon the conclusion of the battle between them. Even if the human and the Martial Apprentice forces of one side won, if the Martial Squire of the opposing side lost, then they would still lose. They could not defeat a Martial Squire who had mastered his power.

The dust cleared as the two Martial Squires got a close look at each other.

The man who stood at a distance from Rui was a surprisingly young man, perhaps several years older than Rui. Rui could sense that he was similar to himself, someone who had somewhat recently begun his journey in the Squire Realm. At the very least he wasn't as strong as someone like Squire Kyrie who had mopped the floor with Rui even after he became a Martial Squire.

It was not going to be an easy battle if Rui chose to fight it in the first place.

"Heh..." Rui grinned at the sight of the man.

Rui had already suspected this scenario was a possibility. He didn't know how it was possible. How did the Martial Union not know this ahead of time? This was almost certainly something that the old general knew, clearly. This was what he was hiding, there was no doubt about that in Rui's mind.

He didn't know how or why this happened, but frankly, he cared even less. This was one of the possibilities he had suspected, but it was also one he wished occurred rather than hoping against. Why had he been yearning to undertake higher-grade missions? It was all so that he could fight full-fledged Squire-level threats!

Now that he had been prematurely blessed with the opportunity to fulfill his wish, he was not going to let it go. This was very evident in the frightening bloodlust in his aura that drove chills down the spines of all those who experienced it.

Rui had no intention of running away. He was going to fight and defeat that Martial Squire, no matter what!

The two Martial Squires didn't even bother exchanging words with each other. They had already communicated everything worth communicating.

All that was left was the battle.

For a brief moment, nothing happened.

Every soul was still.

Something had to give.

And something did.

BOOM!!!

The very ground beneath them crumbled as the two Martial Squires pushed at it, propelling forward. The very atmosphere recoiled in terror as their every movement generated enormous wind currents that blew everybody away.

BAM!

The two collided fists, causing a devastating shockwave to emerge from their clash. It expanded outwards, launching humans into the air. Only the Martial Apprentices were unperturbed by the force.

"RARGH!" The Martial Squire threw a heavy attack toward Rui, aiming for his face.

WHOOSH

Rui ducked as he launched a swift and sharp straight kick with his right leg, aiming straight for the jaw of his Martial Squire.

POW!

The attack connected, much to Rui's surprise. Yet what surprised him, even more, is that he shook it off relatively easily despite flying high into the air. He didn't seem particularly shaken or damaged at all. There wasn't the slightest bruise on his jaw despite eating a kick to it head-on.

WHOOSH

Rui took to the air and launched himself after the man.

POW POW POW

The man didn't even bother defending himself as he simply took Rui's strikes head-on. Rui frowned, confused, it was a bizarre sensation. Rui was going his best to inflict as much damage on his opponent as possible, it felt distinctly ineffective. As though the impact of his strike were being muffled in some strange way.

This was especially hard to comprehend when he was constantly using Reverberating Lance to permeate the damage as deep as possible. It was a powerful technique that increased the lethality of his strikes significantly, yet for some reason, even this technique didn't do too much to him.

POW!

Rui drove his fist into his opponent's abdomen, trying to burrow it as deep as he could.

BOING

('Hm.')

Rui knitted his eyebrows as he stepped away from his opponent, momentarily leaving them at an impasse. ('What was that?')

He felt as though he had hit a bouncy beach ball, it was a bizarre sensation.

('His skin and flesh...') Rui realized with wide eyes. ('They're like extremely elastic rubber!')

He clearly recognized that there was something off about the man's body based on the sensation that the man's skin and flesh gave him. He was cognizant enough to realize that while he was indeed using a Squire-level technique that contributed to his defense, it was not the cause for the strangeness of his skin and flesh.

('It must be a feature of his Martial body.')

Rui realized.

The Martial Union had developed many evolution procedures that gave the body many different and strange features. The only reason Rui didn't experience any of them in the discovery of his Martial Body was that he was an all-rounder and thus had undergone an evolution process that gave his body general features.

However, it was clear that this was not the case for the young man. Not only had he gained highly elastic flesh, but he also had a technique that allowed him to maximize that feature of his Martial body. This likely meant that there was enormous compatibility between his defensive technique and his physique. This was something Rui still lacked at this point, and the difference showed. Even when he combined Outer Convergence and Reverberating Lance, he was unable to inflict almost any damage whatsoever on his opponent!

('This is going to be a really rough battle.') Rui sighed inwardly as the two Martial Squires circled each other.

Yet, despite that, he grinned. Despite the difficulty of the challenge before him, he could only feel excitement and enthusiasm.