

Martial Unity 611

Chapter 611: Converse

"So, what did you want to discuss with me, Mr. Cerni?" Rui asked tentatively.

"I wish to discuss the modus operandi that I hope you will be engaging in when completing the mission," Feruir Cerni replied. "I wish for you to spare the lives of the crew of the convoy while wearing a particular Martial garb of another nation. I require you to kill the Martial Squire, followed by handicapping and incapacitating the convoy."

Rui immediately understood the motive of the mission.

('He wants to compromise the supply line of the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana coming from the Kingdom of Violis and frame it on another nation or group.') Rui realized.

There was no other reason to have Rui wear a separate Martial garb and spare the crew of the supply shipment convoy.

"Of course, you don't have to particularly spare their lives in a manner that makes it obvious. All you need to do is allow them to escape when you spar with the Martial Squire assigned to protect the convoy," The man explained. "Once you defeat the Martial Squire and kill him, do not pursue them. Instead, let them escape back to the Kingdom of Violis."

"So, if I'm understanding this right, you want me to, first, engage with the Martial Squire alone and kill them, while ensuring that the crew of the convoy managed to escape while making sure they see the Martial garb that you will provide, correct?"

"Correct."

"And this is all part of the commission contract, right?"

"Right."

"I'll hold you to that." Rui pointedly told him.

"Please do not worry, I have no intention of crossing lines that will undoubtedly result in my death." The man assured.

"Alright," Rui tentatively replied. "Where do I pick up the Martial garb?"

"I will send you the address where a correspondent will provide the appropriate Martial garb," He stated.

The two of them conversed for a bit more before finally coming to an understanding.

"Alright, that is all I wished to convey and confirm," The man nodded. "I will immediately accept your application to this mission."

Rui scrolled through his notifications once the call had ended, and sure enough, there was a notification informing him that the client had accepted Rui's application.

('Not that he is the true client, anyway,') Rui mused to himself.

Rui was relatively certain that Feruir Cerni was not the true client of the mission, but was most likely a subordinate of the person who had truly commissioned the mission. Rui had observed his mannerisms, demeanor, and speech patterns throughout their conversation, and the man had many tells that indicated that he was likely a highly trained individual in the service industry.

Rui wasn't particularly surprised. There were, no doubt, many clients who wished to keep their hands entirely clean of any connection to the commissions that could perhaps serve as proof of their involvement with a particular operation.

('The Martial Union isn't exactly the most trustworthy in all aspects,') Rui noted. ('Especially if you're an outsider. I wouldn't be surprised if the Kandrian Martial Union sells confidential client information highly covertly.')

He had grown increasingly familiar with the Martial Union's conduct as time passed and his engagement with them increased.

('Not that any of this matters at all,') Rui shrugged.

Regardless of who the true client was, Rui's mission did not change in the slightest. What Rui needed to do was simply execute the operation like he was supposed to.

Rather than wondering about the identity of the true client, he was more curious about the Martial Squire that had been assigned to protect the supply shipment convoy.

('Oh?') Rui raised an eyebrow. ('An offense-oriented Martial Squire whose Martial Path is centered around torque-driven strikes?')

This was much more interesting to Rui.

A torque-driven striking-oriented Martial Art did not sound like a particularly unique Martial Path, but Rui did not underestimate it. Torque was powerful, it allowed Martial Artists to generate impacts that would surpass that of their weight and power class.

Back on Earth, one of the most powerful striking martial arts was Taekwondo. This Korean martial art was a striking and largely kicking martial art, that focused on delivering devastating impacts driven by torque accrued through rapid rotation before the strike.

Furthermore, the rotation of the body that would be used to empower the impact also made it trickier to predict the timing of the attack as opposed to a more static launch form for a kick.

He was evaluated to be a grade four Martial Artist, thus Rui could be relatively certain that at the very least he was not outclassed. While the man was older and certainly had more experience in the Squire Realm, Rui was not intimidated.

Of course, he did not underestimate his opponent either. He made sure to temper his mindset appropriately.

('I get to test Flux Earther in the field.')

Rui grinned.

It would be the first time, and while it wasn't as shocking of a debut as that of the Pathfinder technique, it was still something Rui was going to look forward to.

He was also curious as to how well he would be able to handle swinging kicks driven by torque with the help of Flux Earther. None of the Martial Artists he had tested it against possessed a style similar to this, after all. Regardless, it was something that would get him more data and help him figure out the strengths and weaknesses of this technique when it came to this field.

Thankfully, knowing the Martial Path of his opponent ahead of time was useful to anyone, but it was especially useful to Rui who could prepare the most with this information. He could already form the bare bones template for the predictive model that would most likely be what he would be creating when he fought his target.

This would reduce the time he would need to form the predictive model on his opponent, not by much, but by enough that it was worth it.

Chapter 612: Intercept

The Kingdom of Violis was sending supply shipments of particular esoteric resources that were necessary for maintaining the communication technology that facilitated remote communication in the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana.

This was the supply shipment that Rui was supposed to be targeting.

When Rui had finished scrolling through the mission bill, he had come to understand the greater picture behind the motives of the mission.

('They're trying to cripple Vinfrana,') Rui concluded.

Although the Kingdom of Violis was the prime target of the commission. Although the supply shipment was from the Kingdom of Violis, the Kingdom did not lose anything regardless of whether the supply shipment made it through or not, though they most certainly would be losing a Martial Squire.

The mission bill clarified the identity of the true client as well, referring to some hotshot from a neighboring nation.

As for why they were trying to accomplish what they were, Rui couldn't care less.

"This doesn't fit all that bad," Rui murmured as he tried on the Martial Art garb that he was obliged to.

"We've bought various different fits for different physicalities," The assistant added. "Furthermore, they're self-adjusting to a certain degree, thus there should be no problem. Of course, if there is a problem, feel free to try another."

"It's fine," Rui finished adjusting, testing it out.

Once he was done with that, he could focus on finishing the mission.

He immediately took the air, flying high as he headed east, towards the supply route that the supply shipment convoy was supposed to be taking.

Reaching the Kandrian border took him only fifteen minutes, however, he needed to keep himself to the ground while he was out of the country.

Especially when he was wearing the garb, as that could potentially violate the non-exposure clause in the contract.

('Which means I cannot travel through the many nations on the way to the traveling route between the Kingdom of Violis and Vinfrana.') Rui noted.

Generally, he transited past the many small, satellite sovereign nations that were in the geographic surroundings of the Kandrian Empire.

('That might make the journey longer,')

He would need to take certain detours around these states and travel through the small cracks in between their borders.

('If it's a nation with no Martial Squires though, I don't need to bother.')

These nations were too weak to stop him even if he dashed passed their sovereign borders.

Regardless, he needed to get to his destination as fast as possible.

('The convoy has actually already been dispatched a day ago. I need to make sure that I intercept them at the right point in the convoy's journey to the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana.')

He simply needed to camp ahead of time at a particularly suitable location and ambush the convoy when it did reach him. Thankfully, he had gotten pretty detailed information on the convoy's structure and constituents, its speed and path among other things.

('This seems about right,') Rui reached a particular spot on a hill.

Down below, a large, wide road of sorts winded as far as the eye could see in both directions.

He had reached a point on the route that the convoy in question would run into in about an hour or so.

He didn't want to reach a point that was too close to the convoy at the time that he would arrive for he might not get the timing right. He wanted enough time to where he could choose a good spot that would allow him to spot the convoy coming but was probably too far for any of the few sensory Martial Artists that he had been informed would be present.

As for the measure he took?

"Huff..."

He sat down behind a tree.

He was monitoring the situation with both Seismic Mapping and Tempestuous Feel, so there was no risk that he would somehow miss the convoy passing through at this point.

In truth, Rui didn't intend on exploiting his element of surprise too much. He didn't want to land a critical blow on his Martial Squire opponent via such a method. That would render the whole point of the mission rather meaningless.

He would let the crew members, including the Martial Apprentices, escape, so he could have a fair one-on-one with his opponent so that he could test how effective the Flux Earther technique was against a powerful impact-centric Martial Artist like.

If he managed to land a critical blow when his opponent was unharmed, then the following fight would likely become meaningless.

Of course, Rui was aware that this attitude wasn't exactly most commensurate with the mission, which was defeating and killing his opponent at all costs and subsequently handicapping the supply shipment. Furthermore, he didn't have unlimited time as the surviving crew members would no doubt manage to contact the Kingdom of Violis and reinforcements would be dispatched the moment they alerted their home nation of the ambush.

This meant that Rui had to work fast the moment that he initiated the ambush. Thankfully, his opponent was an offensive Martial Artist. Had he been a defensive or an endurance-type Martial Artist, then Rui would certainly have had an incredibly hard time trying to take them down within a short amount of time.

But the situation was a lot more manageable since his opponent was an offensive Martial Artist. Now, as long as he exploited his opponent's weaknesses while mitigating his strengths well enough like he always did, then he would be able to pull a win.

In the worst-case scenario, Rui didn't think his life was in danger. At worst, he highly doubted if the Martial Artist in question could possibly restrain him from escaping. A Martial Artist that focused on using torque to deliver highly potent singular impacts was likely far unqualified to be able to prevent Rui from escaping from the scene.

While he would fail the mission, he would gain partial credit for the attack, and while failing sucked, staying alive was worth it.

Chapter 613: Clash

"Hm?" Rui's ears perked as Seismic Mapping and Tempestuous Feel picked up some heightened activity coming from the direction that the convoy was supposed to come. Furthermore, it should have been about time for the convoy to approach, by his estimations, give or take.

He got up before crouching down to a knee behind some vegetation on the hill.

It took a while for Rui to finally be close enough to make out details about the approaching source of the activity that he had perceived using his two techniques.

('Twenty-eight carriages,') Rui counted. ('Matches the information I was given about the convoy.')

The convoy was transporting esoteric supplies to the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana, most of these carriages were storage carriages that were filled with the esoteric raw supplies needed to sustain the communication sectors of the Commonwealth Duchy of Vinfrana. Thus, Rui didn't think it would be easy for them to be able to evacuate with supply carriages.

As long as he disrupted the vanguard and the rear, they would be forced to abandon the entire convoy as they escaped.

Rui's eyes narrowed as the convoy approached closer. His Primordial instinct alerted him to the presence of a strong Martial Squire. He could sense his opponent increasingly clearly.

Of course, Rui was quite certain that his opponent couldn't sense his own Martial Squire status. After all, Rui had been strongly concealing his mental pressure aura with the Mind Mask technique.

Soon the convoy had entered his field of vision, and Rui had already prepared what he was going to open with.

It was time.

Rui leaped into the air, launching seven Sonic Bullets at the rear row of carriages.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!

In less than a second, the carriages had been carefully crippled, and broken apart in a manner that made it impossible to turn around and run back from where they came. The cohesion of the crew broke apart as immense panic beset them, Rui could hear the crew members screaming as they tried to follow whatever protocols they could when attacked.

THUD

He landed in the path of the convoy, unleashing the bloodlust of a Martial Squire.

He launched a powerful Sonic Bullet in the direction of the convoy, but it was too late.

POW

A man appeared in the path of the attack, dispelling the attack with a spinning kick.

('Squire Crillian,') Rui smiled behind his mask.

The man barked instructions to the crew members in a foreign language never once taking his eyes off Rui. His gaze ran up and down the latter's body, noting the garb, only for his expression to grow even graver.

The crew ran away as though their life depended on it, even the Martial Apprentices assigned to the mission did not dare to stick around and try intervening in the fight.

The air grew frosty.

One could almost feel the frozen atmosphere growing tauter by the second as it was wrung under the maelstrom of pressure the two formidable Martial Squires exerted.

It was only half a second in real-time, yet from their perspective, it was all the time in the world.

The man's expression grew increasingly contorted with rage, inducing bone-chilling terror in any human who bore witness to it.

STEP

...

STEP

STEP STEP STEP

He walked towards Rui as he gathered every ounce of power in his muscles, his body shook as it brimmed to the rim with power!

BOOM!

He launched himself forward with tremendous momentum. The sheer power with which his body tore through the atmosphere left violent sonic booms in his wake. His body contorted as he released a thundering swirling kick to Rui's face.

And yet;

RUMBLE

The man's eyes widened in shock as Rui intercepted his strike with a single palm. What was even more bizarre was that the palm didn't even try to stop his attack!

Yet to his greatest shock, the power of his attack disappeared!

By the time his kick had fully extended, Squire Crillian felt weak. He felt as though someone had extracted the power of the attack and thrown it away.

His will steeled as he contorted his body, extracting his leg before launching a spinning kick that sent it coming from the opposite direction!

RUMBLE

The ground shook as Rui once more intercepted the attack, channeling its power through him elastically, before dispelling it into the ground via Reverberating Lance.

Had Squire Crillian witnessed the exhilarating grin behind Rui's mask, he would have lost his temper even more. Yet Rui valued keeping his appearance a secret too much to try and provoke his opponent using non-verbal triggers.

Thankfully, it wasn't needed.

"RARGH!" The man launched into a tirade of torque-empowered blows, trying his best to overwhelm Rui's defense. A torrent of strikes befell Rui, swinging at him from all directions.

"Ngh." Rui gritted his teeth as he barely managed to negate every single swift and powerful strike that his opponent threw.

Rui realized that his opponent's fighting style contained more nuance than he had given it credit. Every attack that his opponent launched was a set-up for the next attack. If he launched a roundhouse kick, then he would use the fact that his body core was twisted, to generate torque for a right hook when he untwisted his body from the previous body in the opposite direction. That then also served as the set-up for the next attack after!

He employed a dynamic attack style that employed all four limbs while also using each attack to charge up torque for the next attack. Which meant that each of his attacks was nearly as strong as a fully charged attack!

Rui, on the other hand, only had two palms which were also the sole limbs that could use the Flux Earther technique, against the torque-empowered dynamic strikes that involved all four limbs.

POW!

A straight punch managed to wind past Rui's defense, landing on his torso.

"Urgh," Rui grimaced as he stepped back, yet his opponent had no intention of letting Rui go.

Chapter 614: Void Pathfinder

It wasn't that Rui wasn't aware of this shortcoming, he was shrewd enough to realize that a dynamic defense that relies on palm interception is held back by the fact that he has only two palms. Arms were part of the upper body, which meant intercepting powerful torque-empowered strikes to the body below the waist took a greater amount of time and energy, and had a larger margin for error.

Furthermore, if the one launching the attacks was someone with as much of a relentless dynamic and flexible offense as that of his opponent, there was no doubt going to be several opportunities that his opponent could probably exploit to land strikes against him.

This was one of those instances.

"Heh," A wild grin covered his mouth as he launched himself toward Rui, oozing an aggressive savage aura. The success had given him great confidence that he could eventually completely crack Rui's strangely effective defense. He threw a wild attack at Rui, yet to his surprise

BAM!!

"ARGH!" The man grimaced in pain as Rui's elbow dug deep into his gut. Rui had evaded the attack cleanly before launching a powerful attack deep into his gut as he charged forward. The sheer power of the impact flung him hundreds of meters away!

"Rgh!" The man stopped his momentum midair, furious.

Yet Rui didn't intend to give him any leeway. Yet, this time, he didn't close the distance between them to launch attacks. Instead, he opened his mouth slightly.

THWOOM!

POW!

The man grimaced as an expression of pain and fury enveloped his face. The long-range attack had caught him off-guard, he did not expect that his opponent possessed such a capability given that he fought close range from the very get-go.

What surprised him more was that the ability had struck him right in the face.

Was that a fluke?

He didn't think so, only Martial Artists specialized in long-range combat could achieve such accuracy in the middle of combat.

He must have gotten lucky, surely.

Regardless, that didn't change the fact that he couldn't let his opponent turn this into a long-range battle. After all, he was a close-quarters combatant. He was utterly harmless in a long-range battle!

WHOOSH

He swiftly pedaled through the atmosphere in a zig-zaggy pattern as he closed the distance between them, while also trying to throw Rui's aim off as much as possible!

BAM!

A large Sonic Bullet slammed into him!

"AAARGH!" The man roared in frustration, as his body emerged covered in light bruises.

How did this infuriating Martial Artist tag him this cleanly yet again?!

THWOOM THWOOM THWOOM!

Rui launched Sonic Bullets rapidly one after the other. His opponent, being a Martial Squire, had learned to recognize the atmospheric tremors that the launch of the technique created. He dashed about in the air, desperately trying to evade them.

Yet to his greatest shock, each and every single attack found its mark.

BAM BAM BAM!

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" The man screamed in frustration in his native tongue.

He had dodged after Rui launched the attacks!

Yet somehow, the attacks still landed on him after Rui had already launched the attack, despite him also dodging after the attack was launched.

For that to happen, Rui would need to have correctly launched the attacks to exactly where Squire Crillian would be when they crossed the necessary distance.

Squire Crillian was slow, but even he wasn't stupid enough to miss the obvious implication of this.

('He knows!') The man gritted his teeth as his expression morphed into one of shock and frustration.
('He knows where I'm going!')

The man shivered as he eyed Rui.

A maelstrom of pressure crashed against his mind as a faint sense of fear clutched at his heart, trying to crush it. He only saw darkness when he gazed into his opponent's eyes, the kind that sucked the very light out of the world around it.

He felt naked under the piercing eyes that never lost track of him.

He felt transparent in his opponent's vision.

He felt like air.

Like a hollow shadow that merely impeded the soul-piercing stare of his opponent, and paid the price.

His heart rate started spiking as his body began perspiring. His instincts only told him one thing.

To run.

This was the power of the ODA System combined with the VOID algorithm in combat. A mind-numbing number of calculations flashed through Rui's Mind Palace as his mind strained under the furious processing of his mind.

With the data provided by the predictive model that he had meticulously constructed through the VOID algorithm's data processing protocols, he could then apply that data to the ODA System. Instead of using current coordinates, he uses future coordinates!

He was not attacking the present, he was attacking the future!

He had never gotten to test the Pathfinder technique in this manner; however, he had spontaneously developed this application of the Pathfinder technique in battle!

It was a commonsense application to a certain extent, to be fair, however, Rui had underestimated how effective it actually ended up being in practice.

This combination was so special, that it deserved its own name.

('Void Pathfinder,')

It was a spontaneous name that he had nearly subconsciously generated, yet it was a fitting yet simple name.

('Trying to run?') Rui raised an eyebrow as he watched the man trying to escape once he realized the futility of the fight. His compatibility with Rui was bad, fighting would simply prolong the inevitable and increase his chances of dying.

Still, Rui had no intention of letting him.

THWOOM

BAM!

A single shot destabilized his sky walking, causing him to collapse into a mountainside.

Rui quickly followed through as he swiftly ran after where his opponent had crashed. He didn't have too much time. Thus, he had to kill his opponent as fast as possible. The escapees would likely have informed the Kingdom of Violis remotely about the attack by now, which meant that Martial Squire reinforcements were most likely already deployed.

Chapter 615: Outcome

Rui's perfect aim had battered Squire Crillian significantly. He had constantly aimed for Squire Crillian's vital spots with potent and powerful Sonic Bullets, causing the man to accrue too much damage to have any chance of winning, most likely.

Yet the man's expression grew grave when he saw that Rui had already caught up with him after blasting him from the sky. What had shocked him was that Rui had gotten his aim perfect despite the fact that he had moved nearly a kilometer away from Rui!

The fact that Rui still managed to launch a potent attack that knocked him out of the sky from such a great distance away was beyond shocking right now, but he had more important matters at the moment.

Surviving.

The damage disparity between them was large. Rui had negated almost every single strike that the latter had launched at him, bar one. Whereas Rui had pummeled him with a large number of potent Sonic Bullets that had hurt him. The damage wasn't too much, but it was enough that it would serve as an advantage to Rui in their fight.

Furthermore, Squire Crillian was cognizant enough to realize that Rui also probably had a stamina advantage at the moment. Sky-walking was quite energy-intensive, especially when used at maximum

speed continuously for quite a while to fail to avoid powerful attacks while Rui had been stationary the entire time.

However, these two factors would be most problematic if Squire Crillian was trying to win, however, he was also cognizant enough to know that help was probably on its way. All he needed to do was last.

In fact, if he managed to hold Rui back, then he would also get to capture the annoying bastard!

Squire Crillian's eyes blazed with fury and exhilaration as he gave Rui a wide, bloody grin. He launched himself at Rui, putting his arms together before him as he charged forward.

('He wants to tank the attacks with a guard and force his way through to reach me.') Rui mused.

"RAAAA-!"

BAM!

A powerful torque-empowered kick slammed into his jaw from the side. The sheer impact, having caught him off guard, caused his body to droop as he felt immensely dizzy.

POW!

The final strike to the jaw sealed the deal as the blunt-force trauma exceeded the threshold, even by Martial Squire standards.

THUD

The man fell to the ground

Rui sighed. "Idiot. You're not the only one who can use torque, you know? I'm a big Taekwondo fan."

Rui knew that if he engaged in what the man wanted, it was unlikely that he would succeed in the mission. While the Pathfinder technique was certainly powerful, it was not a lethal technique against Martial Squires. It would hurt, bruise, cut, and perhaps even crack, but it most likely would not be able to take down a grade-four Martial Artist this quickly.

At least, not while Rui himself was a grade four Martial Artist.

Thus, Rui swiftly switched tactics as he employed his opponent's own strengths against him to launch a game-ending blow to the side of his jaw with a powerful spinning kick.

('I don't have much time.')

Rui was aware of this. He quickly knelt down next to the Martial Artist's unconscious body, turning him up as he stiffened his index finger.

SPLAT!

Blood spurted from deep within the wound in his eye as his heart stopped beating due to the irreparable brain damage caused by the deep jab. The brains of Martial Squire were evolved, however, they were still nowhere near strong enough to withstand the power of a Martial Squire directly unprotected.

As soon as Rui confirmed that he was dead, he took off. He knew that the Martial Squires of the Kingdom of Violis most likely wouldn't take long to get here given the fact that they could travel faster than the speed of sound. Especially in an emergency.

Rui immediately dashed away from the scene as he headed back to the Kandrian Empire.

He immediately sent the mission completed notification to the Martial Union that would inform the client that the mission had been completed.

Rui on the other hand, thought about his fight against Squire Crillian. While the Flux Earther performed very well, negating almost all of the great power of his opponent, it wasn't perfect and certainly had shortcomings. Furthermore, Rui didn't think that the Flux Earther technique was nearly as groundbreaking and revolutionary as the Pathfinder technique was.

He didn't like it, but there was an objective reality to techniques. If he gave the Flux Earther technique to the Earth Sect, he highly doubted he would receive another million Martial credits. Rui suspected it probably would not earn him more than a hundred thousand Martial credits.

Unlike the Pathfinder technique, the Flux Earther technique simply wasn't grade ten. Rui suspected that it would probably be graded as a grade eight technique. After all, it could negate impacts much greater than what the Martial Artist would generally be able to defend against, and it was especially compatible with him because it worked most effectively and reliably when the user had foreknowledge of the incoming attack, which Rui did have thanks to the VOID algorithm.

Grade eight defensive techniques were techniques that generally required an affinity for defensive techniques and talent for Martial Art in general. Rui would normally not be able to master such techniques within a reasonable timeframe, and thus would usually avoid grade-eight techniques. The fact that he had mastered such a technique was thanks to his synergy with it.

Thus, while Project Bounce was not as paradigm-shattering and groundbreaking as the end results of Project Sniper, Rui could still take pride in the end result as one that allowed him to go past his conventional limit.

The Pathfinder technique, on the other hand, was the gift that kept giving. The synergy between the ODA system and the VOID algorithm was more potent in combat than he had ever given it credit.

Chapter 616: Considerations

Of course, the sheer strain that it put on Rui could not be understated. Neither the VOID algorithm nor the ODA system was easy to apply completely in the heat of combat, especially the former.

However, together?

Together they were a whole other beast that truly pushed even Rui's prodigious superhuman mind to its absolute limit. He didn't think he would be able to maintain for any extended period of time. He had only done so for about ten minutes before the battle transitioned.

('Very effective against close-range experts,') Rui noted. ('Unfortunately, I cannot maintain it for the entirety of a battle, thus it cannot serve as a universal solution against close-quarters specialists.')

There were certain templates that fights between certain kinds of Martial Artists followed. After all, while every Martial Art and Martial Path was unique, that did not mean they had zero intersections and similarities.

Fights between long-range Martial Artists and close-range Martial Artists generally went the same way. If the long-range Martial Artist was able to open and maintain the distance between his opponent and himself by firing attacks at them to stop them from coming closer and also moving back, then there was a good chance that they would not lose. Furthermore, if they possessed the capability to inflict meaningful damage with every attack, then their chances of winning were also more significant.

In cases where long-range Martial Artists won, they usually never allowed the close-range Martial Artist to close the distance between them, and fire off powerful attacks from a distance, inflicting enough damage with each attack such that, over time, their opponent would lose, one way or another.

Close-range Martial Artists also had their work cut out for them. Their win conditions were closing the distance between themselves and their opponents so that their opponent was within striking range. At such close range, their victories were almost guaranteed. There was simply no way the average long-range Martial Artist could possibly keep up with a close-range Martial Artist at close quarters.

There were even existing paradigms for close-range Martial Artists as a means to accomplish closing the distance that had already been tried and tested as solutions that were effective enough. For example, one popular solution was to master maneuvering techniques that allowed one to weave through incoming fire from range while closing the distance. Evading the attacks while closing the distance prevented the long-range Martial Artists from pushing them away with said attacks.

Another solution was to either withstand the attacks with a powerful passive defense or to power through them with momentum and strikes.

Regardless, close-range Martial Artists that were able to overcome or bypass the long-range offense usually won by successfully reaching their opponents and overwhelming them with their powerful close-range offenses.

One of the disadvantages that long-range Martial Artists often suffered was that it was too difficult to keep close-range Martial Artists away from beyond a certain range. Some of them could prevent them from approaching closer than a hundred meters, though they were very few.

The issues were too many, it was far too easy to avoid attacks at that distance.

Rui, on the other hand, could keep them away from a huge distance thanks to the fact that Sonic Bullets were difficult to perceive after the launch and the fact that Rui's accuracy was too high even at great distances away. Furthermore, the combination of the ODA system and the VOID algorithm allowed him to ensure that even though his opponent did his best to avoid being a target by moving around in random trajectories, Rui could still hit them very accurately!

This meant that Rui the maximum distance at which Rui could force his opponents away and from entering was incredibly large. Large enough that almost all long-range Martial Squires would burn in jealousy if they found out.

Of course, this was not a viable strategy because not only could Rui only maintain it for a short amount of time due to the mental toll it took on him, but also, when he did eventually reach his limit, his mental strain would hinder his performance significantly, preventing him from fighting optimally against an opponent in close-quarters combat

Thus, unless he somehow massively improved the ease of usage of the VOID algorithm and the ODA system, it was highly unlikely that this would ever become a one-size fits all strategy. Rui didn't think that the difficulty of the VOID algorithm and the ODA system was something that could be lowered. If anything, it would probably only keep increasing as time passes.

He had spent an enormous amount of time trying to reduce the difficulty of the VOID algorithm but to very little avail. The principle of diminishing returns had already long stalled the research of optimizing the VOID algorithm to make it easier to execute.

Rui didn't think that he would have better luck in this world. Even if it was possible, it was simply not worth the time and effort that would almost certainly be needed to make any meaningful progress. It was far easier for him to pursue other avenues of strength, even in regard to the VOID algorithm itself.

For example, Rui was still very cognizant of the fact that the VOID algorithm's protocols were still not adapted to the new world that he had been reborn. He still needed to reconfigure the protocols of the VOID algorithm and perform new original research or borrow from existing research to form the new basis of the adaptive evolution model that actually allowed him to adapt to his opponent's Martial Art.

That was a far more productive and vital area of research to go into.

Even if Martial Artists lived longer, time was a precious resource that they needed to spend wisely and allot appropriately.

('The ODA system is good, but I do not have a need nor a desire to spend too much time trying to optimize it,') Rui noted. ('I am an all-rounder, not a long-range Martial Artist, after all.')

Chapter 617: Invitation

It didn't take Rui long to reach the Kandrian Empire. What took longer was reaching the Town of Hajin because he couldn't run on the ground at top speed, he sky-walked, which was much slower than running on solid land.

He quickly finished the boring and tedious post-mission protocols, detailing statements and a report that conveyed all events occurring since the commencement of the mission and the completion of it. He wasn't too concerned that he didn't have proof that he killed the target of elimination; Squire Crillian. He was sure that the martial Union had already verified and confirmed his death, knowing their extensive information network.

Hell, Rui wouldn't be too surprised if the Martial Union had dispatched a sensory specialist Martial Artist that had already witnessed the entire mission from start to finish.

What he didn't expect was to be stopped when he finished the report by an assistant.

"Squire Quarrier," She bowed deeply, expressing the respect that Martial Artists garnered from normal humans.

"Hm?" Rui turned, facing her.

"I'm here to notify you that Martial commissioner Derun Berfheim has invited you to his office. Please pay her a visit as soon as possible," She courteously informed him.

Rui frowned. "A Martial commissioner has invited me? Why?"

"I'm afraid I was not informed about this; I was merely instructed by the Martial commissioner to convey her invitation to you." She replied, before pulling out a card from her pocket and presenting it to Rui. "This is the address of her office."

Rui plucked the card out of her palms, studying it. On one side, generic details about the Martial commissioner were written, on the other side was the address to his office.

"A rank three Martial commissioner?" Rui raised an eyebrow. He had learned a lot more about the Martial Union in the years that he had spent completing countless missions. He was aware of the significance of a rank three Martial Artist within the Martial Union.

Martial commissioners were executives of the Internal Commissions department. This department was an executive branch of the Martial Union that looked at the various interests, agendas, objectives, and liabilities of the Martial Union as compiled by the Internal Affairs department and formulated missions that addressed them and assigned them to the most optimal Martial Artists most suited to completing them.

These missions fell under the internal missions clause of the Martial contract that every Martial Artist signed with the Martial Union, conditionally agreeing to complete these missions when assigned to them.

Martial commissioners were agents or executives of the Internal Commissions department whose job was to create just the right missions that would address a particular interest, need, or liability of the Martial Union, and assign these missions to the most optimal Martial Artist for the mission.

They required a broad competency and knowledge base in order to be qualified for their roles. They required adept competency in administration, law, sociology, and economics, as well as a deep understanding of Martial Art and Martial Artists.

They were divided into ranks that correlated with the level of importance and significance of the interests and issues of the Martial Union that they dealt with.

Rank one Martial commissioners were the lowest-ranked Martial commissioners. They exclusively dealt with domestic, localized interests and issues whose significance and impact did not extend beyond that of a town of the Kandrian Empire. They dealt with issues such as mitigating lacking intelligence in certain circles or networks of society, or particular locations by dispatching Martial Apprentices to gather intelligence and data. They focused on increasing the ease of access of the Martial Union to customers in low-income and high-crime districts, to increase the amount of business that the Martial Union got, by building highly accessible and secure commission offices that were protected by Martial Apprentices.

These missions, while not highly important and significant on a large scale, were necessary for furthering the interests of the Martial Union and mitigating its issues.

Rank two Martial commissioners dealt with issues on a larger scale, they dealt with matters whose scale, importance, and significance extended to an entire region. They tackled issues such as the ever-present underworld Martial Artist services in certain regions that sought to wring away the unshaken dominance of the Martial Union in the Martial Art industries in certain parts of the Empire. They dealt with optimizing the securities of estate and assets of the Martial Union by weighing the risk factor vs their importance and significance. These were much more important and could affect the martial Union in a meaningful, albeit small, way.

Rank three Martial commissioners dealt with issues of even greater importance.

Rui wasn't even sure what these dignitaries of the Martial Union dealt with on a day-to-day basis, his Martial Artist Realm was not high enough to have access to such information. All he knew was that these dignitaries possessed enough authority to assign missions to Martial Seniors!

What would an executive like that want with a grade-four Martial Artist like Rui?

Rui had some vague guesses, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't think this was about trying to pry a technique out of Rui. Martial commissioners were not Martial Artists, and generally, the more informal Martial Sects dealt with pure Martial Art-related matters.

"...I understand, I shall meet with her," Rui nodded.

The only time Rui had met with a high-ranking Martial commissioner was during the colonization of the Serevian Dungeon, however, that had been highly impersonal as the dignitary had addressed many Martial Apprentices in addition to him.

However, this would be the first time that he would be particularly invited by one.

It took him a minute to reach the address given, leading to a large extravagant office.

"Squire Quarrier," She smiled once she noticed Rui entering the office, and getting up. "I've heard a lot about you, a pleasure to meet one of the most promising assets of the Martial Union among the younger generation."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, mam," Rui replied with a measured tone.

Chapter 618: Diplomat

"I had sought you out earlier, only to learn that you were away on a mission," She told him as she gestured to the seat opposite to him. "I had an assistant staff member convey my invitation to you when you returned."

She gave him a courteous smile. Despite possessing a higher standing within the Martial Union than he did, she did not put on any airs nor was her demeanor and attitude condescending. Part of this, Rui figured, was no doubt due to internal training and guidelines that reinforced the status and importance of all Martial Artists to the Martial Union.

No Martial Artist would face any disrespect from a baseline human being within the Martial Union. The higher-up Martial Artists that held the greatest sway over the Martial Union were no doubt wary of normal humans consolidating power with the power that many of their high positions gave them.

In fact, one reason that Martial Artists themselves didn't occupy each and every single position of power was that there were far too many of them. Another reason was that Martial Artists were warriors that pursued their Martial Path. They did not belong behind the desk, completing administrative and bureaucratic work all day long. That would be the greatest disservice to themselves, and to the Martial Union.

"I was curious as to what a rank-three Martial commissioner wanted to do with a young inexperienced Martial Squire like myself," Rui scratched his head.

"You don't need to engage in false modesty, Squire Quarrier." She shook her head lightly. "Your prowess is unique and surpasses the limits of your Realm in some parameters. That alone means that there is special value and utility in you that isn't there in other Martial Squires."

Rui smiled wryly, not saying a word.

"As I'm sure you have figured out, I invited you here to speak to you about a mission," She explained. "A mission unlike anything you have ever completed, as far as your record goes."

She leaned in closer. "We require you to be a diplomat,"

Rui jerked his head back as his eyebrows furrowed. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me correctly, Squire Quarrier," She smiled, amused at his reaction.

"I'm not sure I did, commissioner Derun," Rui managed to squeeze out. "After all, that seems more reasonable than believing that the Martial Union would commission a Martial Artist, of all people, to be a diplomat."

"In ordinary circumstances, you would be correct," She sighed. "Unfortunately, the circumstances at hand have left us with no choice."

"Please explain," Rui frowned.

She cleared some documents from her desk before opening a map of the Kandrian Empire and the surrounding nations and geography.

Her finger moved to the Nam Ocean that bordered the Kandrian Empire, before tapping onto an extraordinarily small speck of land barely visible on the map to the ordinary eye.

"This is Vilun Island," She said. "It is an island home to many tribes whose way of life resembles that of human civilization at the dawn of the Age of Martial Art. In other words, they're four centuries behind civilization on the Panama Continent. The tribes are in a constant state of war with each other, fighting for territory, supremacy, and most importantly to them; prestige. Due to the varied topography of the island, different tribes developed different philosophies in combat having dealt with different environmental circumstances, focusing all their Martial Art endeavors in one, or at most, two particular fields to an extreme degree."

She pulled out another document, passing it on to Rui. "The K'ulnen Tribe pursues an aggressive striking fighting style to the absolute extreme, subjecting their progeny to heavy conditioning towards striking to ensure the Martial Path of the Martial Artists that emerge out of them are all centered around striking."

Rui read through the document that detailed information on the tribes of the Vilun Isle.

"What is relevant to the mission that the Martial Union wishes to commission of you is actually the G'ak'arkan Tribe." She mentioned. "This tribe occupies the top of the only mountain, Mt Kelato, of the Vilun Island. Its Martial traditions are entirely centered around long-range offense, specifically, techniques centered around atmospheric manipulation."

Rui raised an eyebrow at that statement, gaining a clearer idea of what the Martial Union wanted from him.

"The underlying goal of your mission is their techniques," She straightforwardly divulged. "The Martial Union has a vested interest in obtaining their techniques."

"The Martial Union, the same organization that allocates a large number of funds and resources for the budget of research and development of long-range techniques, cares about the techniques of a primitive tribe?" Rui asked with a raised eyebrow. "Furthermore, with the number of long-range Martial Artists in the nation, it no doubt receives a lot of original development as contributions from Martial Artists, right?"

"Correct," She agreed. "However, that does not mean the value of the techniques G'ak'arkan Tribe isn't high. The number of long-range Martial Artists of the G'ak'arkan tribe isn't too far behind that of the Martial Union. While this tribe is incomparably smaller than the Kandrian Empire and the Martial Union, almost every single Martial Artist is centered around long-range offense, unlike the Martial Union. Furthermore, they have developed their craft for four centuries, and their rate of dissemination is high. Every Martial Artist has access to the techniques of every other Martial Artist. While they are certainly inferior to the long-range Martial Artists of our Union in some parameters, they possess truly remarkable techniques that allow them to outmatch the long-range Martial Artists of the Union in other parameters."

Rui raised an eyebrow. That was truly an incredible accomplishment and a testament to their dedication to long-range Martial Art. Obtaining those techniques would bring great benefit to the Martial Union, so Rui could definitely understand why the Martial Union wanted them.

What he didn't entirely understand was why the Martial Union bothered with diplomacy as opposed to more heavy-handed measures as it did with the other smaller satellite states in its orbit. He wasn't entirely clear why they dragged him into this either, though he definitely had an inkling. There were many things that didn't make sense to him about this at the moment.

Chapter 619: Elaborations

"I'm confused," Rui admitted. "For one, why is the Martial Union even taking a formal diplomatic approach? We dominate the weaker and smaller nations around us much more forcefully because we can. Isn't it more efficient and effective to apply this same approach to the G'ak'arkan Tribe? Furthermore, why me? A Martial Artist with no competence in the field of diplomacy?"

"Your point is valid," She nodded. "We generally do not take such a soft approach when dealing with third parties that are vastly smaller and weaker than us. The two strongest Martial Artists of the

G'ak'arkan Tribe are merely Martial Seniors. If we deploy a single Martial Master or even our best Martial Seniors, we could dominate the entire island... However, our intelligence department and foreign affairs department has long since decided against such an approach,"

Rui waited for her to complete her point.

"The G'ak'arkan Tribe and the many Martial tribes of Vilun Island generally possess a highly warmongering and prideful culture. Based on the profile our foreign intelligence division has created on them, there is an extremely high probability that the G'ak'arkan Tribe are entirely willing to fight a bloody war to the very last warrior, if need be, than to submit or lower their heads." She paused, before continuing.

"Based on the extreme responses that we have recorded from them to a show of domination or hostility, we have deemed that the probability of the G'ak'arkan Tribe willingly submitting their techniques to us if we adopt a forceful and hostile approach is very low. It is much likelier that they would get themselves killed, knowingly, than to cooperate with us to avoid conflict with us. While this may not necessarily be true for every Martial Artist among them, there is a preponderance of warmongering, reckless, and conflict-seeking elements in their culture that will simply cause most of them to respond in an undesirable fashion to our objectives."

"I see..." Rui narrowed his eyes, absorbed in thought.

This was one of the few explanations that actually made sense. The Martial Union's fundamental goal was to progress Martial Art and the interests of Martial Artists. It was not a sovereign state that cared too much about territory or other capital and assets. The Martial Union did not seek to dominate the Martial tribes of Vilun Island. It would far rather cooperate with the Martial tribes of Vilun Island than it would engage in conflict that would end up annihilating those Martial tribes, causing their reservoir of techniques developed across centuries to be forever lost.

Short of these techniques falling into the hands of a technique, there was nothing else less desirable than this outcome to the Martial Union.

"That is why we do not want to take a forceful approach that could very easily lead to this outcome," She sighed.

"That does make sense," Rui nodded. "But I still don't understand why I'm being assigned the role of a diplomat."

"I was getting to that, young man," She chided him. "We have tried making peaceful initiations before, however, they have generally been to very little avail for several reasons."

She raised a finger. "First, their highly insular tribe as well as their enmity with all external entities on the island have led them to develop an inherently hostile and uncooperative attitude towards foreigners. This has heavily hampered any and all diplomatic measures that we have taken in the past to gain their friendship and engage in a mutually beneficial exchange of Martial Art."

Rui could see why this hindered the attempts at befriending the G'ak'arkan Tribe. Diplomacy and negotiation came only after there was an established intent to cooperate due to mutual interests or issues. Between more standardized sovereign states or independent third parties on the Panama Continent, this was a lot easier because everybody played within the same broad framework with each other. Money, resources, political, economic, and militaristic incentives, and disincentives guided the interactions between all of them. There were broad interests, both mutual and exclusive, that all these nations and groups shared with each other.

However, all of that was thrown out due to the highly unique circumstances and history of the G'ak'arkan Tribe, making regular means rather ineffective. The G'ak'arkan Tribe almost certainly didn't care about the Kandrian currency in the slightest bit at all. From what Rui understood of highly insular and small tribes whose culture and lifestyle were deeply rooted in their natural environment, they probably rejected foreign influence on their culture vehemently and would most likely adopt a close-minded outlook on the modern technological resources that the Kandrian Empire could provide.

Rui could easily imagine the Martial Union and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kandrian Government getting frustrated as the G'ak'arkan Tribe remained indifferent to money, esoteric natural resources, technological resources, knowledge, and the various other assets that the Kandrian Empire and Martial Union could muster.

Of course, there were still elements that didn't entirely make sense, but each time she spoke, it became increasingly clearer.

"Another hindrance has been the fact that they only respect strength above all else," She explained. "They do not respect normal humans anywhere near as much as even Martial Apprentices. This applies even to our diplomatic teams consisting of normal people that underwent higher education in

diplomacy and foreign affairs before being hired and trained by the Martial Union. The status and authority that our diplomats have are meaningless in the eyes of the G'ak'arkan Tribe, and they have received less than lukewarm receptions from them."

"Why not dispatch strong Martial Artists capable of earning the respect of even the strongest Martial Artist of the G'ak'arkan Tribe?" Rui asked, gaining a clearer picture of why he was being assigned this mission."

"Martial Artists are capable of superhuman feats in the domain of physical conflict, but unfortunately, that is the one trait that is the most unnecessary and perhaps even definitively uncondusive with the field of diplomacy." She sighed. "We have found that blindly sending in Martial Artists has a high propensity for even worse outcomes where fights almost broke out between the Martial Artists we dispatched and the G'ak'arkan Tribe and our Martial Artists."

Chapter 620: Suited

This was also something Rui had half-predicted. Martial Artists of higher Realms were a different breed compared to a normal human, both literally and figuratively. There were many things that Martial Artists required in order to reach higher Realms, things like individuality and synergy in their Martial Art were paramount. However, at the root of it all, there was a core trait that every Martial Art had in order to undergo to climb up their Martial Path, Realm by Realm.

Willpower.

Determination.

Perseverance.

There were important differences between all of them, however, they could generally be treated as a broad singular temperamental and personality trait.

Without the willpower and determination to strive and continue climbing up their Martial Path, nothing else could come. Martial Artists could persevere through the difficulties of developing their Martial Art only if they had the willpower and determination to. It could be said that Martial Artists comprised a tiny

proportion of the population that possessed the talent, luck, and willpower to break through and attain a new Realm of power.

Of course, no rule was absolute, and all rules related to human civilization had exceptions. There were some Martial Artists who possessed such a tremendously high affinity to Martial Art that they could break through without the willpower and determination that was normally necessary.

Rui had even come across one such example himself. Fiona Roschem was so abysmally talented that she seemingly breezed through the breakthrough to the Apprentice Realm.

However, for the average Martial Artist, it could most certainly be said that they possessed a psychological profile that less than zero-point-one percent of the population possessed!

Regardless of what their driving motivation was, most people could not fathom the sheer amount of mental strength it took to reach higher Realms.

However, Rui could easily see why this highly exalted group of people, while strategic and priceless, were perhaps not the most suited for diplomacy with their unyielding determination and willingness to directly confront problems head-on.

Rui recalled his encounters and interactions with the Martial Artists of higher Realms. Besides from a few exceptions, almost all of them had a foundation of determination and willpower beneath their surface temperament. Colonel Geringan was driven by loyalty to his family and his nation, Senior Ceeran was driven by a purist passion and ambition in regard to his Martial Path and Martial Art that was similar to that of Rui.

"I can definitely see why sending Martial Artists is extremely risky and prone to causing the situation to degenerate detrimentally as far as engaging in a diplomatic relation with the G'ak'arkan Tribe. Diplomats are trained to cut away their self and replace it with that what they represent from their perspectives when interacting the foreign parties and entities. Such a mindset is almost fundamentally incompatible with that of higher-ranking Martial Artists," Rui keenly observed. "However, this is not an absolute rule. Surely there are Martial Artists with not just the necessary ability to adopt the mindset needed to conduct long attempts at persuasion and negotiations that would eventually yield success, but also the intelligence to do so fruitfully and effectively."

Even before Rui finished talking, he had understood why the Martial commissioner had approached him for this task. He smiled wryly, recognizing that he himself had supplied the answer for why she did.

She even smiled back, amused as they exchanged a knowing glance with each other.

"Our Martial Union has built an elaborate profile on you," She began. "You are highly intelligent and have demonstrated an almost unprecedented degree of deductive and inductive logic and reasoning all the way back at the age of thirteen when your mental parameters were evaluated after you first joined the Martial Academy. You have demonstrated remarkable strategic intelligence in many of your missions, ranging from identifying the Earthen basilisk infestation through clever tactics just in time to prevent them from spreading. The clever strategy you once employed in using their ambush to trap and ambush them, the brilliant idea you came up with in the Serevian Dungeon war that ended up winning the Martial Union and the Kandrian Empire the most lucrative parts of the Serevian Dungeon, and your other exploits make you a truly unique and incredible Martial Artist in this regard."

She paused, letting her words sink in.

Of course, Rui wasn't naïve. He could tell that while sincere, she was certainly trying to flatter him to a certain extent.

"Furthermore, your record-high time period of mastery of the Fauna Flow communication technique makes us confident that you are qualified to undertake the necessary training and education needed to converse with the G'ak'arkan Tribe." She elaborated.

Rui's eyes furrowed as he realized the implications of those words. "Wait, I need to learn their language?! I was under the impression that I would be supplied with translators."

"In the past, with other Martial Artists, this certainly was the case inevitably. However, you are certainly capable of mastering a new language, especially given that you have mastered the Mind Palace technique to a rather extreme degree," She pointed out.

"True, but languages are not simple to master," Rui complained. "I do not wish to dedicate much time to mastering a new language."

"You do not need to be too concerned about that," She shook her head. "The G'ak'arkan dialect is a small and primitive language whose lack of sophistication is commensurate with that of their culture, knowledge, society, and capability. With your gifted cognition, your Mindmirror Symbiote, and your mastery of the Mind Palace technique, you should be able to reach a stage where you can communicate competently with them in a short period of time."

"True, but as a Martial Artist, I do not wish to waste time sitting around with books learning languages when I neither the need nor the desire to." Rui insisted.

Of course, Rui had learned Vinfranese, but that was only because he needed to unlock the secrets of the breakthrough to the Squire Realm, there were clear personal benefits back then.