

Martial Unity 151

Chapter 151: Exploring Possibilities

The herd began relaxing as they settled down, resting as the sun had almost completely dipped under the horizon. Rui observed carefully, waiting and hoping for the target of his mission to show up. As the night grew darker, he couldn't help but wonder how the target of his mission had managed to hunt so voraciously and yet be so elusive.

The Shaia Plains were gigantic, meaning the herbivore population was immense. In order for a single or even a handful of beasts to hunt so excessively that they significantly impacted the herbivore species and be still be so elusive that the Ministry had a hard time learning more about it, he couldn't even imagine how such a thing came to be.

It didn't matter how powerful one was, hunting a huge number of herbivorous animals everyday was not something that could be done very secretly. If it was just one or two animals, it would be one thing, but as many as would be needed to affect the ecosystem?

Was it really possible to do such a thing uncaught?

Rui intended to find out. Out of all the herds he had detected, he had chosen the largest herd. Chances were that the target of his mission would go for larger groups of prey because of the greater amount of food it could eat. Thus, increasing Rui's chances of being able to ambush the predator.

Of course, it was entirely possible that the predator roamed around the Shaia Plains in a much more random fashion, hoping to get lucky enough to stumble into a small herd that he could then completely devour.

If that was the case, perhaps Rui's strategy would not necessarily increase his odds.

('Can't be helped.') He shrugged. The Shaia Plains were enormous, there was a limit to what could be done by him. There was even a chance he would fail this mission and the Martial Union would dispatch a team of Martial Apprentices to aid with the reconnaissance and extermination of the target or targets of the mission.

Or he would get lucky.

He laid in wait the entire night, staying up using a rejuvenation potion to erase his drowsiness. He waited patiently.

And waited some more.

And some more.

And just a little bit more.

And soon he had waited so long that the sun began rising out of its slumber.

"Dammit." Rui cursed. "I knew this would take patience and perseverance. But I may have underestimated the psychological fortitude required for such missions."

Now that dawn had come, he ceased the static surveillance and returned to grid searching.

Using some handy small portable tools that came with the standard gear for reconnaissance hunting missions, he was easily able to divide the Shaia Plains into squares, positioning himself at the center of the squares and began applying Seismic Mapping to scan the area thoroughly.

Trees, shrubs, grass, insects, smaller mammals and even some larger ones entered his senses. He could even sense an ecosystem within the land. Seismic Mapping did have subterranean sensing capabilities to a high extent. The problem was that it became harder to form a clear image of distances deep underground than it was to form on land, because the human mind found it harder to parse information about an environment it did not live in.

The goal of the grid searching was to locate the habitat of the target of the mission via direct surveillance, so he especially kept a look out for any seismic signatures that were either unknown, unusual or could match the estimated appearance of the target of his mission.

It was only a few hours later that he ran into something.

"A six-legged deer corpse." Rui muttered as he approached the corpse. It could barely be called corpse, since almost only the bones had been left behind. Yet the remnant flesh had not rotted much at all, despite this. There were barely any flies circling the corpse either.

('All of this indicates that the corpse is still fresh as far as time since death goes.') Rui thought to himself, he was no forensic expert. But he could be reasonably certain that the deer was hunted very recently.

('Last night.') Rui realized.

This meant that the beast had ran into different herds than the one Rui had been trailing. His luck mst have sucked.

At a distance, several more deer corpses could be seen, all in a very similar condition. This was very odd to Rui for several reasons.

"Why are there these many corpses in such a small geographic area?" He pondered out aloud.

Normally, when a predator hunted an animal from a herd, the herd would evacuate from the area of the predator immediately, getting far away before finally stopping. Meaning, by the time the predator consumed the food he had caught, there would be no more prey anywhere within its range of vision.

Which is why having numerous corpses so close to each other was rather strange. It was almost as if the herd of animals simply stood around patiently watching the predator fill its belly until it was to be there turn.

"Something is off here." He murmured. He was no zoology or ecology scholar, but it didn't take a genius to understand that there was something strange going on here.

"Either the predator consumes its food at extraordinary speeds, such that it has finished consuming its prey before the rest of the herd can escape..." He voiced out on possibility. This was a terrifying

possibility. What kind of a beast could instantly the sizeable carcass of a six-legged deer to such a degree that little more than bones were left with such speed?

"...Or the predator simply killed as many deer in rapid succession as it could before proceeding to consume them after rather than before, in order to maximize the amount of food it got from a single hunt."

This possibility was potentially even worse. This implied the beast had a decent degree of awareness, intelligence and self-restraint.

Just the thought of that made the atmosphere heavy.

Chapter 152: Discrepancies

Generally, predators were too hungry to bother in doing anything else besides from consuming their meal once they hunted their prey. These beasts were already entirely lacking in any significant self-awareness and self-restraint to be able to resist their hedonistic urges. In a state of heightened hunger, it was almost certain that consuming their prey to satiate their hunger would be their priority.

Apparently, the target of his mission disagreed. He knew the carcasses were likely the remnant of the target of his mission. They did match the intelligence provided to him.

The intelligence provided by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment stated clearly that the target devoured almost every ounce of flesh of the carcasses of its prey. The pictures provided by them matched the sight of the carcasses he saw.

Rui sniffed the air. There was a faint acidic odour in the air, this also matched the traces of a corrosive acid detected on the carcass and the soil beneath. The Ministry of Ecology and Environment had concluded that the beast target of the mission likely had an acidic saliva that it used to aid in the digestion of the carcasses of its prey.

If that was the case, then Rui had genuinely begun to give more credibility to his first conjecture that the beast was able to consume the carcasses of its prey at an incredibly rapid speed. Acidic substances were able to degenerate and decompose organic matter incredibly fast and thoroughly.

Still, there were many more oddities at the scene.

Rui looked around the environment and the corpses, frowning.

There were several things of note.

First, this was a section of the Shaia plains with very few trees and only short grass. Meaning it was an open part of the plains. It was basically impossible to hide.

The second thing Rui was paying attention to was the ground. It was comprised of clayey-mud with high-silt saturation, the type that would retain foot prints quite well.

He could see hoof-prints that matched what one would expect from six-legged deer. But what surprised him was that there weren't any footprints of the predator in the distance that led to the carcasses.

So how did the predator reach them in the middle of this open field without leaving any footprints on the way?

('So, it hunted the deer in the middle of this open field where every step left a footprint, even moreso when you're moving faster and stepping harder, without leaving any trail of footprints?') Rui frowned.

Rui closed his eyes as he processed through all the information available.

There were several straightforward conjectures to be made with the intelligence provided by the Ministry of Environment and Ecology as well as his own observations and deductions.

The fact that there were no footprints visible entering and exiting open plain mean that either they were never there, or they had been erased.

The latter seemed too absurd, a predator beast erasing its own tracks? Furthermore, even if it erased its own tracks, how did un-crush the grass that something of its size and power would doubtlessly crush on its way in?

Furthermore, why didn't it erase its footprints from when it rested and consumed its prey?

Rui shook his head; it was far too unlikely in the face of the other option.

The other option was that the tracks had never been made at all.

This directly followed with two of the least absurd options; The first option was that it had the ability to fly, glide or float, to some extent.

The second was that it was deceptively light, and thus did not create a trail of trampled grass and footprints.

He had considered whether this place just happened to be the primary habitat and home of the animal and the deer had unwittingly stumbled upon it, which seemed to be the most plausible and reasonable option at first, but how did it leave without leaving any footprints?

It's not as though the other options were without issues. If it was light? Why did set footprints after entering? Rui wondered about this as he stared at a stange footprint he had seen among the hoof-prints of the deer that matched the descriptions of the creature, and probably belonged to the target of the mission.

That left flight, which wasn't inherently weird as a possibility, wings were extremely common in the animal kingdom, after all. But none of the eye-witness accounts mentioned any wings. Furthermore, the beast was immensely elusive to ordinary forest surveyors of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment apparently.

How could a big beast that travelled by flying in the air possibly be elusive? Travelling birds in an open sky were among the easiest things to spot, and birds were far smaller and inconspicuous than an apex predator flying around in the sky.

"Something's not adding up." Rui muttered. He wasn't able to figure out what.

It could be that the beast just had some esoteric capabilities that gave it some abnormal and unconventional degree of stealth. Maybe intangibility, though that would beg the question why it was ever sighted at all.

Or why the deer clearly showed a running pattern that indicated they could see their pursuer.

Rui documented his findings using the eco-survey device that the Ministry of Ecology and Environment had given him for situations just like this.

As he continued his grid searching, he ran into multiple odd instances where traces of a hunt occurred or a trace of the predator could be seen.

He also ran into corpses left behind by the native predators of the Shaia Plains, species of the big cats, that normally hunted the herbivorous species of the Shaia Plains. In these cases, he was able to deduce what had happened from the environment around the corpse, fairly straightforwardly with no logical discrepancies.

As time passed, he managed to grid search a decent portion of the land, which he could conclude were not the primary home to the beast.

Soon, dusk came, and he prepared for a night of dynamic surveillance. Hopefully he would run into the beast tonight.

Chapter 153: The Key to the Mystery!

Rui used Seismic Mapping to search for the largest source of seismic radiation and began heading towards it as fast he could. After some time, he ran into a herd of deer numbering hundreds, which was quite large. And he tailed them at a distance, careful not to alert them of his presence, which was easy enough when one considered that they were resting.

Now he just had to pray that this herd would be targeted so that he could get a close look at it for once.

As time passed by, his hopes grew more and more dull. He waited, but nothing happened. His patience wore off and he felt tired from simply waiting and doing nothing.

In a way, he had come to develop respect and admiration for predators. Predators often had to endure agonizingly long waits before a realistic possibility of a successful hunt occurred. That respect extended to hunters as well. These Martial Artists that regularly took hunter-class missions were definitely not to be trifled with.

('Well, even bodyguard missions can be long periods of patience-draining waiting.') Rui realized. Though he had never gone through a rigorous long-term bodyguard mission quite yet. His only two major bodyguard missions were quite short compared to the norm.

As Rui began to delve into his thoughts a bit, a sudden abrupt shift in the seismic radiation he was sensing with Seismic Mapping drew his attention.

He sensed what appeared to be a lot of seismic radiation from one particular source away in the distance, he was too far away to be able to assess exactly what the source of all this seismic radiation was, but he could not ignore it.

It didn't make sense for such seismic turmoil to occur normally. Most animals were resting, furthermore the only species that were had enough weight and numbers to produce the seismic noise he was sensing were the herbivores.

('A herd of deer or gazelles are running.') Rui realized in excited anticipation that he might actually be detecting an ongoing attack by the target of his mission.

Of course, this wasn't necessarily the case. There were other predatory animals that hunted at night what he detected might be an ongoing hunt by another native predator species of the local ecosystem of the Shaia Plains.

Still, he couldn't let it go. He immediately got up and began sprinting towards the source of the seismic radiation he had detected; his abrupt speedy movements had shocked the living daylights out of the large herd of deer that had had no idea that Rui had been stalking them for pretty much the entire night.

Rui sprinted excitedly, getting closer and closer. He thanked the fact that the target of the mission was largely nocturnal, this was truly beneficial to the Seismic Mapping technique. Nights were quieter, and generally had less seismic radiation and noise running through the land than during the day, making it easier for Rui distinguish the noise quite well.

It was the equivalent of the difference between standing in a hall saturated with people talking and a hall with only two people.

In the former, it would be a miracle if anything could be properly heard and distinguished across the room, in the latter one would be able to hear even soft sounds from across the room.

As Rui sprinted and got closer and closer however, he noticed that the seismic noise was reducing.

('Wait, why is it reducing?') Rui panicked. ('Is the hunt ending?')

That was terrible news. He began sprinting at even higher speeds, pushing himself to the absolute limit. Using the conjunction of Parallel Walk, Balanced Direction and Outer Convergence, exceeding his speed limits, this was a bit haphazardous on his part since Outer Convergence was not a technique optimized for maneuvering, and it's not like he had massive amounts of experience with it either.

Each step sent him flying meters at a time almost causing him to fall at times, but the speed boost was definitely worth it.

As he got closer, he began to panic even more. This was because he was able to sense the source of the seismic radiation with much greater clarity than before.

BOOM

He landed hard, stopping abruptly as he skidded across the mud and grass. He quickly scanned his surroundings carefully.

A large herd of gazelles fleeing away.

Corpses of gazelles.

But nothing resembling his target, or even any predator at all, really.

('Damn!') Rui cursed. ('Where the fuck is it?')

Rui had so many questions.

There was something hunting the gazelles just minutes ago, and now he couldn't sense any animal resembling it on land at all?

What were the odds that it escaped at the precisely last moment?

Rui felt truly frustrated, it was genuinely horrendous luck.

He quickly got up and began scanning the area for any clues that might give him greater insight into the target of his mission.

He glanced over at the skeleton carcasses, there was still fresh acidic saliva over some of the leftover flesh, sizzling as it rapidly melted the flesh and skin into a gooey sludge that dripped into the ground. This confirmed that it could eat at incredibly rapid speeds, something he and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment had already suspected.

He looked around at the ground. The soil was indented with the footprints from the hooves of gazelles, pairs of footprints with three long claws, which was identical to the previous footprints he had seen as well as the information provided by the Ministry.

Yet once again, the footprint trail of the herd of deer as well as his own, could be seen coming and going and there was no incoming or outgoing trail of footprints that indicated the creature came and went by land.

He stomped the ground in frustration, using Outer Convergence to vent. A tiny reverberation spread through the ground, just enough to shift the closest carcass by half a foot.

Rui briefly glanced at it, and just as he was about leave, something caught his eye.

A strange indentation in the ground just under where the corpse had been a second ago.

Rui kicked the skeleton carcass away, as he crouched to get a closer look. The mud was uneven and grass had been disheveled and thoroughly crushed and uprooted.

Rui frowned as he sifted through the mud, digging deeper and deeper as recognition struck him like a lightning bolt.

"This place... has been dug up and refilled extremely recently!" Rui exclaimed. The mud was at an unnaturally uneven height, it was wetter and darker and the mud was easier to dig up, with no resistance.

These were all classic tell-tale signs of very recently dug up and hastily refilled mud!

"Wait..." Rui realized immediately. "Don't tell me..."

Rui realized he just might have figured out the key to the mystery!

Chapter 154: Course of Action

A huge bombshell had exploded in Rui's mind. Suddenly, everything from before was starting to make sense if what Rui was beginning to suspect was true. It was all starting to click.

The lack of footprint trails incoming and exiting the area of the hunt despite the fact that smaller and lighter creatures had footprints incoming and outgoing out of the area. Then the presence of its footprints around the carcasses. It's impressive elusiveness, being able to appear and disappear in and out of an environment far too easily and inscrutably.

All of this could be explained if the creature was primarily subterranean or its primary mode of transport was subterranean fundamentally!

This wasn't an absurd notion. Even on Earth, subterranean fauna was found worldwide and included representatives of many animal groups, mostly arthropods and other invertebrates. However, there was a number of vertebrates, although they were less common.

This paradigm was not necessarily true in the world of Gaea, however. The world of Gaea was filled with many strange and exotic species that were capable of far more than the fauna on Earth was. Although travelling through subterranean means of transport to accomplish what the target of his mission had accomplished and shown to be capable of was not possible by any Earth-based fauna, the same could not be said of fauna of the world of Gaea.

By travelling underground, the target creature would be able to travel to and from locations without ever leaving a trail of footprints. However, it may need to come above ground to actually hunt and eat its prey, which would explain why its footprints were there at the site of the skeleton carcasses.

Everything seemed to fit.

('Almost everything.') Rui corrected. (There's the question of how my Seismic Mapping didn't sense it.)

Seismic Mapping allowed the user to understand the shape of the topography as well as position of objects on the land via sensing and understanding seismic radiation. If the creature was moving underground incredibly fast, wouldn't it generate immense amount of seismic vibrations and radiation?

('Maybe not.') Rui conjectured. ('Maybe its body is optimized for geodynamic subterranean to such a degree that it could travel through the ground at incredibly high speeds without producing much disturbance through the land.

This wasn't uncommon in other modes of transport. Birds could fly through air at incredible speeds without ever producing a single sound ever.

Same for many aquatic creatures, that zipped through water at vigorous speeds.

If the target of his mission was similar in that nature, then Rui could understand why he had difficulty perceiving it, especially when he had never been within a hundred meters of it. Who knows, perhaps he would actually sense it clearly if he were closer.

The problem was, the creature was gone just as he arrived.

('That's another issue.') Rui frowned. ('Was it just dumb luck that it left just a little before I arrived?')

Upon this revelation, Rui wasn't sure anymore. There were a few more odd things with his subterranean travel hypothesis.

('How does it detect its prey or the direction it wants to travel in or general topography underground?') Rui wondered.

There's no way it could see or smell prey underground. Light did not travel underground and neither did odour. There was no air underground either, so how could it hear sound waves through the air?

('It might have a seismic sense similar to Seismic Mapping.') Rui realized. It was a bit of an obvious conclusion once one asked the question how the creature could perceive information while being surrounded by mud, gravel and rocks.

In that case even more things made sense. His horrible luck was no longer luck but an outcome of his target's sensing of his approaching. That begged the question, why did it run away the moment it sensed him? It was an apex predator with prowess at the Apprentice Realm. It shouldn't necessarily be afraid of a single Martial Apprentice.

Yet it left the scene the second it sensed, assuming it did sense him.

('Was it because of how hard and fast I was running.') Rui wondered. He had used Parallel Walk and Balanced Direction while also using Outer Convergence to boost his speed and stepping power. Having used Seismic Mapping at the same time, he knew for a fact that every step he had taken generated enormous amounts of seismic radiation.

If the creature could hear through the land, it would have heard a creature causing explosions with every step it took. Every step had enough power to hurt even itself.

In this case, fleeing away was not a strange choice, Rui realized. He had given the creature an exaggerated impression of himself, causing it to simply flee evacuating the area before this new apex predator reached its location, rather than risking a fight to death with a creature that seemed extremely physically powerful.

('That would also explain why it never went after the largest herd in the Shaia Plains.') Rui realized. ('It must have sensed me using my Apprentice-level techniques to chase after the deer, and assumed that I was another apex predator native to the land hunting after that particular herd of six-legged deer, so it avoided conflict by hunting other herds of deer or gazelles that were scattered around the Shaia Plains.

Rui sighed in helpless resignation as he realized the measures he had taken to increase his chances of running into the beast had thoroughly killed any chance of him running into the beast even in a million years.

Rui exhaled, reminding himself that this was all deductive conjecture, rather an irrefutable proof. He had applied deductive and inductive logic to the data available and had made some basic presumptions of the target and constructed a well-thought-out possibility that had the highest likelihood of being true than any other hypothesis or theory that wone could conceive. However, he was not a zoological or ecological scholar, so his opinion didn't hold much credibility, even to himself.

('I need convey all of this to the Martial Union and the Ministry.') Rui realized. ('And I need to find some damn proof.')

Chapter 155: Consideration

The first thing Rui did was begin documenting the entire scene, he used the eco-survey device that the Ministry of Ecology and Environment provided to him and carefully used it to collect pictures. He especially documented the refilled hole, extensively documenting it so that it couldn't possibly under-considered when the Ministry went over his reports.

Once he was done, he began considering his options.

The first option was to simply routinely continue his mission according to recommended guidelines, and hope for the best. Ultimately, neither the Martial union and Ministry expected a Martial Apprentice to solve the entire mystery of the mysterious creature all by himself, as long as he fulfilled his duties, he wouldn't receive any backlash.

However, this route reduced the probability of Rui succeeding in completing the mission objectives. Which meant that Rui would not receive the full mission reward if he went down this route, most likely at the very least.

The second option was to take a more proactive reconnaissance approach to the matter as a whole and begin verifying and gathering evidence of his hypothesis, or gather evidence that ends up disproving his hypothesis one way or another.

And eventually use this hypothesis to actually fulfill the first objective of his nested mission, which was to collect swathes of data regarding the beast so that the Ministry knew exactly what they were dealing with.

He had already resolved to go for the latter, he just wanted to make sure he wasn't missing anything and had considered his available courses of action.

('Alright then.') Rui exhaled, sitting down on a rock after he finished documenting all that needed to be documented. ('Time to make a plan.')

He grew engrossed, completely forgetting about the grid searching that he was supposed to engage in. He didn't particular care either, if his hypothesis was even partially true, then the on-land grid searching was frankly entirely useless and unreliable.

('The first primary goal is to finish the first objective of the mission.') Rui established. ('To do that I primarily need to document its appearance as well as its habitat and home, and ideally tag it with one of the tags that I've been provided with.')

He thought as he glanced at one of the small devices the commission department of the Ministry Ecology and Environment, it was meant to serve as a rough tracker that Rui could use to tag the target of the

mission. Though he wasn't sure it would stick to the target of his mission if he used it, if his theory was true.

As for the other objectives, Rui could use his constructed hypothesis of the beast to fulfill the first objective of his mission. If his theory was true, then he would be able to predict or manipulate the beast to some extent. Using this, he would be able to gather the information about the creature he needed to fulfill the first objective.

If that plan succeeded, it would serve as proof that his theory was, in fact, accurate. Since if the theory or hypothesis wasn't accurate enough, any plan based on the theory would simply fail. Thus, succeeding would be the ideal outcome.

If the plan failed, then it was a strong indicator that his theory was partially or entirely wrong, or incomplete. Which meant he needed to change his approach.

Either way, he gained new information.

('Alright, what plan do I enact, that relies on my conjecture to manipulate the target of my mission?') Rui wondered.

The plan needed to rely on predictions that Rui could make if the beast was indeed a subterranean traveler with seismic sensing.

The first fact of the matter was that it likely hunted in the direction that it detected the seismic radiation characteristic of hooves of herbivorous animals. This was the most straightforward manner in which it could reach its prey.

Another fact of the matter was that it could travel extremely fast, at the very least as fast Rui, perhaps even faster. This was based on the fact that the creature was already out of Rui's Seismic Mapping range by the time Rui had reached its hunting site, this was definitely an incredible feat.

One more fact, if Rui could even call it that, was that it seemed to have an aversion to powerful animals that could potentially kill it. This would explain why it scurried away the moment it sensed Rui, and also why it didn't hunt for the largest herd of animals that Rui had been surveilling two days ago. This also

indicated that the beast was certainly cautious and had some degree of rationality, despite its immense hunger that had caused the problem in the first place.

It acted within a certain limit and perhaps that could be used against it in the first place.

He glanced at the carcasses in the vicinity, recalling that it consumed food at incredible speeds. Rui wondered if that trait was something that could be used against it. Maybe by knowing the timeframe would allow him to predict it...?

Rui shook his head, he wasn't able to conceive of a way that he could catch and document its appearance using that, if anything, that trait just made it irreconcilably harder to catch it, at least other predators needed to slow down after they hunted.

Rui skimmed through the other pieces of information of his theory in his head, looking at each one individually and holistically, wondering how he could exploit them.

It was difficult because there were too many variables to account for, and far too many constraints that got in the way of every plan.

('One of my biggest issues is size of the Shaia Plains, it's too huge, making it difficult for me to come up with a plan, especially a plan that somehow prevented the beast easily evading me at every turn.') Rui sighed. ('It's not like I can use that against it eith-')

Rui froze as an epiphany struck him.

"Wait a minute, there's one option I haven't considered yet..."

Chapter 156: This Time

"Apprentice Rui Quarrier." A woman sitting at a desk said. "We have gone over your request and have accepted it, as we informed you. The items you requested will arrive soon enough."

Rui merely nodded on the other side. "Thank you."

It had been a week since he had accepted the Shaia Plains nested mission. He had filed a request to the commission department of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment for certain items when he had finally come up with a plan to tackle the beast.

Normally, requesting the client for help was considered unprofessional. However, the ministry was not an ordinary client, but much more of a collaborator. This was thanks to the Kandrian Martial Covenant that specified the terms of cooperation between the Ministry of Ecology and Environment and the Martial Union and its Martial Artists.

Thus, he was able to request aid from the ministry without any compunctions. Thankfully, his request was accepted. That was the reason he had visited the closest branch of the ministry; to receive the items he had requested.

"May I know what the evaluation of the intelligence that I documented was?" Rui inquired. "It would be quite helpful to understand what actual experts think of the data I documented and the hypothesis I provided."

"It was quite surprising for us to find such a nuanced take and analysis in your personal statement, considering you're not an expert on the field." She replied with an intrigued expression. "Yet your analysis was quite valid and sound although rough around the edges, the evidence is well documented and supportive of the overall narrative."

Rui nodded. As long as the Ministry of Ecology and Environment was receptive of the hypothesis, then he likely hadn't made any glaring errors when formulating it. Now the only thing he had left to do was execute his plan.

"We're quite interested in the outcome of your strategy, it is a rather novel way of going about reconnaissance." She said. "We wish you good luck."

"Thank you." Rui stated as he collected the items he had requested. "Well, I'll take my leave."

He left the office of the ministry official as he set out to return to the Shaia Plains. He was feeling pretty good about this plan in his gut and couldn't wait to try it out this night.

He glanced at the bag, holding it carefully, wary of what were inside.

Explosives.

This was his ingenious plan. Within the big box in his arms were a large number of timed explosives that he had requested from the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, around thirty small-grade explosives.

How these explosives worked? Rui didn't know, and frankly didn't care. He only cared about how he could use this to his advantage.

When thinking about how good the target of his mission was at evading him, he realized that he might be able to use this to his advantage. He recalled that just force from his running alone had caused enough seismic radiation to scare the beast off immediately.

This had been an incredible curse at this point, now he intended to turn it into a blessing, by exploiting this trait to fulfill his objectives.

The idea was simple; if intense seismic radiation made the beast stay away, then he could use this fact to restrict its hunting locations and targets. He could use this to manipulate it into going after the hunting target that Rui wanted it to go towards.

He could do this by rigging these explosives in different locations across the Shaia Plains and timing them to explode one-by-one just as dusk came.

The positioning was what mattered the most. Rui would have to place them across the Shaia Plain in such a manner that all hunting locations except for the one he would be waiting in ambush for would have explosives embedded in the land.

Just as the hunting time period of the target of his mission was likely to begin, the explosives would all detonate in rapid fashion. This would create immense seismic radiation from a lot of directions.

However, the beast wouldn't be able to know the seismic radiation was caused by explosives. It was extremely likely that the beast would interpret the heavy seismic radiation as the presence of other predators, that had occupied all locations except one.

The only hunting location without a single explosive was the location Rui would be waiting at. To the beast's seismic sense, this would be the only location with herds of herbivores grazing on grass that didn't have a single predator in the area.

Given its tendency to avoid competition, Rui was quite certain, that if his hypothesis was true, the beast was sure to travel there to hunt for deer and gazelles.

Rui was quite confident in this plan. Even if it didn't work, it would concretely give him new information by disproving his theory regarding the target of his mission. However, Rui found it quite incomprehensible that the plan would be an utter failure. He predicted that a partial success at the very least was guaranteed.

He had intended to run around the Shaia Plains, burying the explosives about a meter deep. He couldn't bury it too shallow, otherwise far too much energy of the explosives would be wasted into the air. He couldn't bury it too deep otherwise the beast's seismic sense would easily detect that the source of the seismic radiation wasn't from a predator above ground.

One meter felt just deep enough to retain enough energy to alarm the beast while still shallow enough for other predators to not be ruled out as a cause. Of course, Rui had just estimated this intuitively, but he didn't think it was far off from the optimal height.

Just as he pondered about the chinks of his plan, he had already arrived at the Shaia Plains. He gazed at the beautiful expanse of the plains as they extended over the horizon.

"This time..." His eyes narrowed. "This time I'll get you."

Chapter 157: Time Had Come

Rui had spent the next few hours placing the explosives in the right locations. He had to be very precise and accurate in his placing.

If he threw them around haphazardly, then the beast might simply not take the risk to come hunting at all. He placed all the explosives on the other side of the hunting areas away from the heartland of the Shaia Plains, lining them inwards.

This would make it seem like very distant predators were approaching each hunting zone from the other side. These explosives were all placed extremely far away from the hunting zone that Rui wanted to guide the beast too, to ensure that they wouldn't prevent the beast from going where he wanted it to.

This plan did require a bit of luck. Rui needed a herd of deer or gazelle of significant number to graze in the grazing lands where he hadn't placed any explosives, where he intended to hide, lure and ambush the target of his mission.

Once he had placed the explosives, he had three hours before it was time. He went over his plan once more.

('First, I need to find a herd of deer and gazelle in the area I haven't placed any explosives before dusk arrives.')

He couldn't do this after dusk arrived like he did before, because by then the creature would undoubtedly be awake and active. If he used any Apprentice-level techniques after the creature was awake and alert, then it would immediately detect him and avoid the general area he was in. And he couldn't possibly travel far without any Apprentice-level techniques.

Thus, he ideally should have found at the very least one herd of deer in the location he was planning to lure the beast in. If there were more than one, then he should probably round them up or monitor the largest herd out of all of them.

He had initially intended to merely gain intelligence; however, the Martial Union and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment had already confirmed that the difficulty of the second objective; the beast's extermination was within the difficulty grade initially set by the Martial Union. After reviewing all the evidence at hand, they had come to the conclusion that even if a grade-five Martial Artist may not be able to succeed in exterminating the beast before it escaped, they were likely strong enough to at the very least escape with their life in a fight against Martial Artists.

And if they wrong, well, that was the life of a Martial Artist. Every Martial Artist knew that traversing their Martial Path in the Martial World meant a life of peril, they were expected to endure all of it.

Once Rui had received word of this decision, he had to alter his plan a little and prepare himself for potential combat.

('Still, the first objective takes priority.')

Rui got up, there wasn't much time before dusk, he needed to find a herd, the largest herd before the sun dipped and begin trailing them before the beast grew active.

It hadn't taken him a particularly long time before this happened. Over the past week his familiarity with the seismic radiation of the Shaia Plains had risen immensely, and he had become more proficient with tracking down herds of herbivores. He immediately began running towards the herd, but abstained from using any Apprentice-level techniques, although it was still some time before the beast likely grew active, Rui didn't want to take any chances at all. He didn't think the Ministry would take kindly to a request for yet another set of explosives.

He slowed down once he ran into a big enough herd, and thankfully the only large herd of gazelles in the area, perfect for his plan.

This time, instead of laying on the ground, he sat atop a humongous boulder the size of a small skyscraper and watched the herd from above. Against normal predators that relied on normal senses, this may have been a bad decision, but against a beast with a seismic sense, this was the best option.

The seismic radiation he produced would have to travel through the gigantic boulder and only then through the ground, muffling and distorting the readings to a good degree. Even though the seismic radiation and the location of the source would very much be sensed, it became much harder to interpret the data accurately, this was one of the shortcomings of his Seismic Mapping as well.

Now, everything was finally in place, and dusk had come, the beast was on the hunt.

Rui grew taut with alertness and he dismissed all of his senses to focus his mind utmost on the beast. He didn't want to miss anything.

He glanced at his pocket watch. ('Any time now....')

Suddenly, his seismic sensing picked up a bunch of impacts in the ground across the Shaia Plains.

Rui grinned. The explosives had gone off exactly when he had timed them to.

He had timed the outermost explosives to go off before the inner explosives. To his Seismic Mapping, it seemed as though giant creatures were taking big burly steps one-by-one, as they walked towards the various grazing areas of the Shaia Plains.

This was exactly what Rui had intended, he had placed and timed the explosives in such a way, that any seismic sense would think that the seismic sounds were caused by big scary giants.

Furthermore, in all direction except one. The direction Rui was in. The creature would have no choice but to go to the location Rui was at if it wanted to avoid these giant creatures making these huge explosions.

Just as the explosives all finished exploding, Rui detected a sharp seismic signature roughly moving towards his location at incredibly high speeds from somewhere in the center of the Shaia Plains.

Rui laughed out loud with immense ecstasy and excitement, to think this would work out as well as it seemed to be.

He calmed down, regaining his composure, as he got up and prepared himself.

The time had come.

Chapter 158: Hunt Has Begun

Five hundred meters.

Two hundred meters.

One hundred meters.

Fifty meters.

Ten meters.

Just when it was ten meters away from the herd, Rui was already in crouched tensed position, waiting for the right moment to use Balanced Direction, Parallel Walk and Outer Convergence to leap towards it.

And there it was.

The ground trembled, and a meter away from herd, a huge bump emerged.

Five meters in length, five pairs of limbs, scales covering its entire body. But that was not the most eye-drawing part of the beast.

It had a single big eye, and a circular mouth that expanded immensely to reveal jagged razor-sharp teeth within as multiple tentacle-like tongues protruded out.

It looked like a monster created by a character design department of a horror film that were allocated far too much time and money to make the monster look as grotesque and terrifying as possible.

It was the first time that Rui had seen such a grotesque creature in either of his lives.

Rui immediately began recording from the eco-survey device, relieved that he had effectively fulfilled the first objective of the mission. The eco-survey device was strapped onto his body, a feature that made it convenient to carry around and use immediately when needed, allowing it to witness everything that Rui did.

Rui waited for it to consume, at the very least, one beast. He wanted to document its consumption to verify that this beast was in fact the beast responsible for the mass-hunting of the herbivorous population of the Shaia Plains.

('Nice, nailed it.') Rui thought ecstatically as he watched the beast consume a gazelle in seconds, as its acidic saliva decomposed the deer's flesh into a gooey sap which was sucked in immediately.

A living gazelle was reduced to a skeletal carcass in less than a second.

This was when Rui decided to jump in. He clutched the standard-issue tracking device and leapt towards the beast with Apprentice-level techniques. The beast in turn froze as it detected powerful seismic radiation from very close by. It tilted its head in the direction of the source of the seismic radiation.

BOOM

Rui landed ten meters away from it, grinning in ecstasy and flinching in disgust at the beast's appearance.

The beast on the other hand, did not look pleased, if it was capable of making expressions in the first place. It was an apex predator as well, even if it avoided other predators, that was to minimize risk, not because it was incapable of winning. There were very few predators in the Shaia Plains more dangerous than itself.

But Rui was a Martial Apprentice, and was entirely focused on the beast in front of him. The weight of his mind pushed on the beast's mind, making it wary.

Every sentient living being had a nascent instinctual sixth sense, if it could be called that, as a result of evolution. This sixth sense was a result of subconscious analysis and evaluation of the risk and danger.

Right now, the beast's instincts were warning it that as tiny as the little pup of a creature Rui was, it was dangerous.

The beast struggled to make a decision. One on hand, the gazelles had already fled away and its meal had been interrupted, evoking its primal rage and unsated hunger, on the other, fighting someone as strong as Rui in its current hungered state was even more dangerous.

('It's more rational than I expected.') Rui noted. The beast had simple stared at him with its giant wide eye.

Suddenly, the beast retreated, as it faced Rui.

('It's really gonna run away? That is incredibly rational.') Rui cursed, he'd hoped the beast would attack him.

Still, Rui had anticipated this, and prepared a contingency.

The beast dug mud at an immense speed, using its saliva to break down the resistance in order to speed up the process.

But Rui was even faster.

He pressed a button on a device he had obtained with the explosives from the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

It was a detonator, a detonator that detonated all the explosives he had obtained from the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

Of course, most of the explosives he had obtained had long been detonated before to guide the beast into coming here, but there were a set of explosives Rui had not yet detonated.

These explosives were placed ten meters deeps outside the grazing they were in.

The detonator was triggered, the beast froze.

Rui grinned. "That's right... Don't go there, there's danger there, come here instead."

The objective of the detonated explosives was to prevent the beast from retreating by placing the explosives in such a way that would fool the seismic sense and the beast's limited intelligence that there were threats underground capable of producing such seismic radiation.

The beast dug itself out of the ground, a faint look of fear could be seen on its face. When did so many predators enter the Shaia Plains? It didn't understand. Its limited intelligence associated all intense seismic radiation with threats.

The only safe way out of the Shaia Plains were on land, in its mind.

And this was all part of Rui's big plan.

FWHOOSH

Rui dashed towards the beast at incredibly high speeds with all of his Apprentice-level techniques, and as he anticipated, the beast turned away, moving remarkably fast even on land.

But not as fast it was underground, and not as fast as Rui was.

He immediately caught up and tagged the beast with the standard-issue reconnaissance tracker that the Martial Union and the ministry had provided him.

The reason he hadn't done it earlier was because he wasn't sure the tracker would remain intact when the beast attempted to escape when it began digging, since he assumed the tracker was almost certainly not built for high-intensity subterranean rigour.

But now that the beast was escaping on land out of fear of the strange subterranean predators that had surrounded the land there was no problem placing the tracker.

"The hunt has begun." Rui grinned, as he chased after the beast.

Chapter 159: Rui vs The Beast

The hunt had indeed begun.

Rui sprinted after the beast as it evacuated, reaching it immediately. Atop land, he was faster. He circled to the side of the beast.

BOOM

He launched a powerful strike to its side.

"ROOOAAAAR" The beast screeched in anger, as it turned to lash out at Rui with its mouth and limbs. Rui had no choice but to evade. There were several reasons for that.

The acidic saliva of the beast was too potent. None of his Apprentice-level techniques were enough to be able to withstand it, they were entirely far too removed from defending against corrosive attacks like that. He focused with all of his concentration as he evaded bites and tongue lashes of the creature, and claw swings

Thankfully, its offense was not complicated or convoluted. It had elementary attack patterns that it repeated over and over again. It never used any tactics or strategy, and was not flexible and versatile in its offense at all.

This was to be expected. It was, at the end of the day, a carnivorous beast with a voracious appetite. As cautious as it seemed at times, it was not an intelligent being, and was slave to its shortcoming and urges. Furthermore, right now, it was in a bad psychological state. Hunger, anger and fear clouded its already primitive judgement.

As far Rui, he fought cautiously despite this. This was because the VOID algorithm was not functioning to its normal level of effectivity in so far as predictive and counter-deductive capabilities.

The reason, of course, was no mystery. The VOID algorithm was built for humans, beasts were outside its intended utility and purview. Of course, it wasn't like there was no overlap. It was just that the further apart the target of the VOID algorithm was from being human, the less effective it was.

Right now, the VOID algorithm was functioning at about thirty-nine percent effectivity. This was because the most elementary level of predictive and counter-deductive measures were quite universal. Distance and center of gravity were universal variables that undoubtedly tied back to combat for pretty much all lifeforms. But the higher levels that employed systems based on the more sophisticated data science research into humans specifically that Rui had conducted into the past, were not applicable.

These higher parts of the VOID algorithm were much harder for Rui to apply to combat, he was usually unable to apply it most of the times.

Still, Rui did have some advantages.

BLINK

BAM

He launched a combination of Flowing Canon and Outer Convergence. This was one of his most powerful attacks. The blow contained so much force that it broke a set of scales on the creature, and struck the exposed flesh beneath.

"ROOOAAAR" the beast screeched in pain and anger, lashing out at Rui with an attack only to miss fully.

The creature had one big eye, which led to Rui to suspect that it largely relied on vision outside of seismic sensing. Meaning on land, it could only rely on vision.

Which further meant that Blink was its mortal enemy.

Furthermore, due to its primitive intelligence, it didn't even understand what was happening. And even if it did, it was simply incapable of setting up traps using blinking.

Rui even doubted if it had any awareness of blinking, beasts lacked a lot of self-awareness, compared to humans.

Which meant Rui could fearlessly abuse and exploit Blink to the absolute maximum.

He had begun to grow more and more used to the beast's combative tendencies, and was quite confident that he could take down the beast, something he wasn't prior. He had placed the tracker on the beast, so that even if the beast was too strong for Rui, he could at the very least fulfill the first objective of its mission, but now he could take it one step further.

('Assuming I can force it to remain here.') Rui noted. Eventually, the beast's caution from the explosives that Rui had used to trick it would wear off, meaning it would undoubtedly escape via subterranean travel.

That was why Rui had to somehow force it to not go underground, and he had figured out the perfect way to go about it.

The scales

Rui had already suspected that the scales were meant to allow the beast to withstand the immense tearing force of high sub-terranean travel.

Under the scales, as he had just seen, was a much softer exposed hide and flesh. Rui had felt it and damaged it, so he was relatively certain that the exposed flesh would not be able to withstand high sub-terranean travel at all. In fact, it was quite likely that the scales it had were evolved to withstand high sub-terranean travel.

It also explained why the creature was so cautious despite having such uncontrollable anger. If it were a normal predator, some damage here and there would not be that big a deal. But this was not the case for this beast. If this beast endured significant damage to its scales, then its ability to travel underground was highly compromised. If it tried travelling underground with exposed flesh, then that flesh would be ripped and torn apart if travelled underground.

Its scales were also not something that would heal in a short time, if at all.

Thus, Rui's plan to prevent it from travelling underground was simple; Expose more flesh, and attack already exposed flesh damaging it further.

BLINK

BOOM

BLINK

BAM

BLINK

POW POW POW

...

BLINK

WHAM

Time passed as the beast endured more and more damage.

The two had long moved away from the original location, the beast had been fighting back while continuously running away at top speed.

And Rui had been attacking while also running at top speed.

BLINK

JAB

"Yes!" Rui exclaimed as he managed to jab the creature's eye with a heavy jab amped with Flowing Canon and Outer Convergence, used in combination with Blink. Unfortunately, the eye was rather, large and he had failed to rob it of its vision entirely.

This was the final straw.

"ROOOOOAAAAAAAAR!" The creature had lost its mind as it abandoned escape and rushed towards Rui at top speed.

This was the final clash.

* * * * *

Author's note: Shoutout to Ethan and Jyork for the many golden tickets. Thanks to you two the novel is in the top 200 for golden ticket rankings.

Chapter 160: Final Moment

Quite some time had passed since the hunt had begun. The creature had finally come to realize that its life was truly at stake this time. Whoever this predator was, it was determined to hunt and eat it. Previously, its encounters with other predators had been brief, and it was able to disengage and escape. But not this time, this time it was truly in danger.

It abandoned all hope for outrunning and escaping its opponent on land, the human boy was too fast, and its flesh was too damaged and exposed to dig underground. It threw itself at the boy, hoping to take its life.

Rui on the other hand, felt much more pressured once this happened. It was much scarier to fight a beast that used every ounce of its mind and body dedicated solely killing you than it was to running away and fighting back in self-defense.

The two scenarios were on two different levels of difficulty, even if the latter was easy to handle, the former wasn't.

('That's if I choose to fight it head on.') Rui thought as he leaped back.

There was a very simple strategy Rui was employing in response.

Just stay away.

The creature was slower than Rui was, and was already damaged and bleeding. Being faster, Rui could easily ensure the beast was always too far from him to damage him.

Chase him with all its might it did, and yet it fell short of Rui.

Such was the brutality of nature, of survival of the fittest. It wasn't even able to go down fighting, it would go down struggling to even lay a claw on Rui.

Or so Rui thought, atleast.

SCRUNCH

Against all odds, the creature began digging once more. It dug and swallowed mud, excreting it speedily allowing it reach underground extremely fast.

('What?!') Rui grew alarmed. Why was it going underground? At this point, Rui had hurt it so much that it shouldn't be able to withstand any long distance sub-terranean travel at all.

Rui grew prepared as he full-fledgedly activated Seismic Mapping and prepared his maneuvering Apprentice-level techniques to track and chase after the beast.

Yet what he sensed next made him sweat beads.

The creature was not running away.

It was moving straight towards him!

Rui's face grew pale as he understood what the creature was doing. Travelling underground in its current state was extremely dangerous, indeed.

But fighting the boy as it was, was even worse! It was guaranteed death.

It was unable to travel far underground without bleeding to death. Escaping was out of question. But what if it didn't need to travel far?

The boy was only five meters away. If it could use sub-terranean travel to reach him and reduce his flesh to goo, then maybe it would be able to survive in the long run!

('Fuck.') Rui cursed. This was a resourceful plan on its end. It had already resolved to kill him using everything it had, not it was willing to sacrifice everything it had to kill him, including its health.

This was bad, because now Rui had lost his biggest advantage; his superior speed. This was an advantage that allowed him to force the creature to fight on his terms, he could choose when to engage the creature, and he could choose when to disengage.

Well, not anymore. Rui braced himself for a rough fight as Seismic Mapping sensed a huge mass of angry sub-terranean flesh rushing to kill him!

LEAP

BOOM

Rui managed to leap out of the way just barely in time as the beast erupted from the ground. The beast could attack him underground and that meant he needed to be extremely careful with his timing! If he dodged too early by jumping away, then the beast would simply reach his landing location before he did, being faster, and would attack him just as he reached the ground, and that would game over. He could not dodge mid-air.

Thus, he knew quite well that he needed to dodge the attacks just a beat before it was too late. He had a very thin of error, and a very thing range of success. Leap too early and he would get eaten, leap too late and he would definitely get eaten.

He had only had one advantage here; his health. He was almost entirely unharmed, asides from some acid that had hit his skin from the last attack. But the creature's condition was truly starting to fall apart, it had already been harmed significantly by Rui's targeted striking, and using sub-terranean travelling, even if shortly, had accelerated its damage. It was starting to bleed excessively and Rui had sensed its movements growing more sluggish, its reactions dull and its attacks, weaker.

('It doesn't have much time left.') Rui realized. ('I need to stall like my life depends on it.')

And it did, quite literally. A single bite would kill him without a question. But now that the creature had more pronounced weaknesses due to its deteriorating condition, Rui had regained a lost advantage that he normally had; the VOID algorithm.

This algorithm loved weaknesses and mercilessly exploited and abused them. The algorithm ran at full speed as Rui did everything he could to stall the battle and make life harder for the beast. He even climbed trees and began leaping from tree to tree. Yet, the beast, being underground was able to uproot trees, to his surprise.

The battle went on, Rui made inaccuracies and mistakes. Each time he was splashed with a little acid, flinching as it corroded his skin. Thankfully, it didn't damage his body to the point of effecting his combat capability.

"ROOOOAAAAR." The beast screeched, as it erupted from the ground.

WHOOSH

Rui avoided the jaws of death once more, never taking his eyes from the creature even once. He could feel its desperation, fear and hatred. In some ways, he even felt some degree of sympathy, but he crushed those feelings.

It was truly the final moment, Rui could feel it. He needed to do everything he could to win. That was all that mattered.