

Martial Unity 401

Chapter 401: Announcement

The news came all of a sudden. Twelve countries announced the existence of the Serevian Dungeon as they got together to sign the Serevian Pact which specified the terms and conditions that the signing countries agreed to operate under when colonizing the Serevian Dungeon.

Soon after, the Martial Union and the Kandrian Royal Family published an announcement regarding the participation of the Kandrian Empire in the Serevian Dungeon wars as well as the cooperation of the Royal Family and the Martial Union in the colonization of the Serevian Dungeon.

"Finally!" Rui sat up in ecstasy as he browsed through his accouter.

[Announcement:

The Martial Union is commissioning Martial Apprentices above grade seven to participate in the Serevian Dungeon mission. The details of the commission are as follows;

Mission objective: The aim of the mission is to aid the Kandrian Empire in the colonization of the Serevian Dungeon. This includes protecting assets and territories but also the invasion of territories of other colonizers of the Serevian Dungeon.

Commission clientele: The Martial Union and the Kandrian Royal family.

The difficulty of the mission: grade ten.

Time period of the mission: Indefinite

Remuneration: Five hundred Martial credits per hour or nineteen gold and two silver coins per hour for grade-eight Martial Apprentices.

One thousand Martial credits or thirty-eight gold and four silver coins per hour for grade-nine Martial Apprentices.

Two thousand Martial credits or seventy-six gold and eight silver per hour for grade-ten Martial Apprentices.

Mission commencement: twenty-third of winter.]

"Woah." Rui's eyes widened at the remuneration. "That's insane."

Two thousand Martial Credits per hour was an extreme remuneration pay that Rui seldom ever saw in any mission.

"The Martial Union must really want its Martial Apprentices to go all out on this mission," Rui murmured.

That was clearly the reason the Martial Union was incentivizing the mission to Martial Apprentices. It was going to be facing off against powerful Martial Apprentices from other nations, all of whom were going to be the cream of the crop. If the Martial Union held back, it would simply lose thoroughly.

"Damn," Rui muttered excitedly. "This is going to be insane. Twelve countries?! Just how many powerful Martial Apprentices will I run into?"

"Many," Julian answered his rhetorical question. "It seems this Serevian Dungeon was what you were referring to earlier when you spoke of a big conflict between Martial Apprentices. How did you even find out about it?" Julian asked curiously.

"Mission." Rui waved his hand. "Do you know what featherblood mercury and nereneal flintstone are?"

"They're too esoteric compounds." Julian nodded.

"Yeah. I know that. I meant what are they used for."

"Featherblood mercury is used for higher-grade healing potions, while nereneal flintstone is used for communication technology like you accouter, for example," Julian explained.

"Interesting..." Rui muttered.

Both healing potions and communication technology were extremely vital for human societies to function in their current state.

"No wonder the nations are taking this so seriously." Rui nodded. A city-wide dungeon nearly filled to the brim with purified featherblood mercury and nereneal flintstone.

The mission commenced in forty-eight hours. Still, Rui intended to get himself accepted to handle the mission. He had no doubt that the Martial Union would accept him with open arms. Why wouldn't they? Rui was the one who had discovered the Serevian Dungeon and had already proven his capability in the Serevian Dungeon.

Even if it weren't for that, he was a grade-ten Martial Apprentices. This held even more significance since the difficulty of becoming a grade-ten Martial Apprentice had risen significantly and the Martial Apprentices who were still grade ten even after the updation of the Martial Apprentice evaluation grading system were very few.

Furthermore, several of the techniques he had mastered were suited to the mission in question. His enhanced stealth capability as well as his sensory compatibility all bolstered by the Mindmirror secondary brain.

If he was not qualified, then no one was!

Rui immediately began hurrying up as he put on his Martial Uniform and mask, immediately heading for the Martial Union after having bid goodbye to his family. He didn't know when he was returning, after all.

Once he had reached the Martial Union there already was a huge rush at the headquarters. Among the crowd was a large variety of Martial Artists who had most certainly come to inquire regarding the Serevian Dungeon mission.

Rui managed to squeeze his way through the crowd. He immediately headed towards the commission's department.

"Excuse me." Rui reached out to one of the staff members. "I would like to accept the Serevian Dungeon mission."

"Will do, Apprentice." She smiled briefly. "Age?" She asked immediately.

"Sixteen."

"Martial Artist grade?" She asked.

"Grade ten," Rui muttered.

"Name?"

"Rui Quarrier."

"And finally, usually there needs to be proof of identity." She nodded. "Please provide your Martial license please."

"Ah Apprentice Rui Quarrier." Her expression changed. "You have already been marked as priority recruitment in your profile. There will be no delay in the acceptance of the mission then. Please fill these forms and sign in the required places."

"Done." Rui drew her attention as she went through all of the pages.

"Thank you, Apprentice Quarrier." She replied. "Here's the mission bill for the mission you have accepted."

Rui beheld the mission bill of the Serevian Dungeon mission with excitement. In his eyes, the otherwise normal booklet had been glowing and sparkling as it developed its own halo.

Without any further delay, he ripped open the booklet, breaking the seal in the process.

"Interesting." He immediately murmured as his eyes lit up in eagerness. The mission bill began delving into the means by which the Serevian Dungeon had been discovered providing context to the Martial Artist who had chosen to undertake the mission so they understood as much as was generally possible about exactly what they were getting themselves into.

"Woah." He remarked. "They're even using some of the documented images that I had collected as a part of my mission, that's cool." He shrugged, as he read on.

Chapter 402: Approach

The Martial Union and the Royal Family had chosen an interesting strategy for expansion and colonization. The twelve nations participating in the raid of the Serevian Dungeon had all agreed that each nation was entitled to one percent of the territory of the Serevian Dungeon. This one percent of the territory was recognized as unassailable and unfringeable by each of the twelve nations participating in the raid of the Serevian Dungeon.

The Martial Union and the Royal Family had chosen a territory-expansive strategy that chose to continue expanding their territory until they ran into the first hostile colonizing force. In such a case, the assault team was to immediately begin attacking the hostile colonizing force with the aim of seizing as much land as possible. General conditions established were to minimize the number of nations with which the Kandrian Dungeon team picked a fight.

Restricting the number of nations with which they picked a fight with was to ensure that the dungeon team did not stretch themselves thin as far as defense and resources went. There was no point in picking a fight against ten people and losing all ten than picking a fight against only five people but winning three. The biggest issue was balancing ambition with the constraints of the dungeon team.

Another rule of thumb they had to follow was to target the weaker nation over the stronger ones, if possible. Ideally, they would want to take on smaller and weaker nations because they were easier to bully. It was inefficient and ineffective to try and take any of the other three super-nations; The Sekigahara Confederate, the Republic of Gorteau, and most importantly; The Britannian Empire.

The initial assault and defense squads that would be accompanying the dungeon team were only part of the total amount of Martial Apprentices that would eventually partake in the colonization of the Serevian Dungeon.

This was because not even the Martial Union could magically gather every single Martial Apprentice on the spot in an instant, most of them were deployed on missions and could only be deployed to the Serevian Dungeon after their existing missions were over.

The Martial Artists that got to be part of the initial assault squad would end up seeing most of the action in the Serevian Dungeon.

This was why Rui was eager to be part of the initial dispatch.

"Purpose of visit, name, and ID please." He was told when he reached security.

"I'm here to partake in the commencement of a mission I'm commissioned for, I'm Rui Quarrier, and here's my Martial license."

In no time, he was inside the building. He immediately headed over to the commissions' department.

"Excuse me." Rui addressed a staff member. "Where can I find the dispatch for mission KEMU-3142?"

"Give me a moment." She said as she verified his documents, before finally providing him with the information he was looking for.

Rui immediately headed to the dispatch facility of his mission.

Before he even stepped into the facility, he could feel the mountain pressure on him. He slowly opened the door and stepped in to be greeted by many silent stares that all exerted pressure on him.

They were all high-grade Martial Apprentices. Rui could feel that every single one of the was without a doubt no lower than grade eight with a good chunk of them being grade-nine and some even grade ten.

"I knew you'd come." A familiar voice of a girl addressed him. "It's been a while, Rui Quarrier."

"Fiona," Rui muttered as he smiled, amused. "It has been a while indeed, I never got to congratulate you on winning the Martial Contest. Congratulations on that. A bit late, but better than never."

She shrugged, waving the matter off.

"What did you mean you knew I'd come?" Rui asked curiously.

"Well, I found out that you were the one who discovered the Serevian Plateau in the first place, so expected that you would be here since you definitely know more about it than we do."

"Everything I know is listed in the mission bill for the most part." Rui shook his head. "I only spent several hours in the place, it's not like I have a great amount of experience on the matter."

"By the way, are you going to be part of the assault squad or the defense squad?" She asked, her eyes lit with curiosity.

"Assault squad," Rui replied unhesitatingly. "I'm interested in active battle with the best of the Martial Artists the other nations have to offer."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "Are the Martial Apprentices of the Kandrian Empire too weak for you?"

Her tone was jovial, especially since she was the one who defeated Rui in the Martial Contest.

Rui smiled wryly at her comment. "Yes, unfortunately."

Her eyes widened at those words. "Well, given the feats you achieved, I suppose that's not particularly hard to believe."

She was clearly referring to him leading four other Martial Apprentices to victory against a Martial Squire. That was a shocking feat that still buzzed the Kandrian Empire every now and then more than seven months after it had already happened.

Rui simply smiled at those words. Yet he frowned when he felt a pang of hostility emerge from the crowd of Martial Apprentices in the dispatch facility. He turned in the direction of its source as his eyes widened in surprise.

"Ian Nepomniachtchi." He murmured,

He had completely forgotten about the obnoxious arrogant Martial Apprentice that he had defeated in the third round of the Martial Contest.

But evidently, Ian had not forgotten about that. Rui could feel an unadulterated hatred brewing in his eyes as he stared Rui down with a well-concealed but ultimately oozing glare that had specks of bloodlust. Rui could already tell that the man hadn't taken his loss gracefully, accepted he was wrong, and moved on. Instead, the man had clearly nursed a vendetta and grudge against Rui that had been smoldering in him for more than a year.

Rui sighed. "I hope this idiot doesn't do something stupid."

Chapter 403: Converse

"Oh Ian?" Fiona laughed. "Ignore him, but be careful, he's really mad at you for beating him in the Martial Contest last year."

"I can tell." Rui sighed.

"By the way." Fiona turned to him. "You're much stronger than you were a year ago, but you feel very weak, like a normal human, what's that about?"

"Ah... That's a mental technique I use to reduce my presence and danger so that normal humans don't get affected by me even if I don't maintain my emotions perfectly." Rui explained.

"Oh? Fiona's eyes flashed with curiosity. "How does that work?"

The two bantered for a bit before another individual entered the dispatch facility.

"Martial Apprentices, gather around." All of you are those who have, both applied for one of the two two squads of the dungeon team and all of you have been accepted for the respective roles."

"I am commissioner Feristen of the Martial Union in charge of the commission. I will be breaking down the mission for all of you once more."

He projected an image on a wall before gesturing at it. "The initial one percent core sovereign territory that every nation possesses that cannot be infringed via mutual agreement is something that can be done with choice. Rest assured, the choice will be made by experts who will be part of the dungeon team who will carefully make the decision based off of the positions chosen by the smaller and weaker states as well as the largest and most powerful states that will make life easier for all of you."

Rui nodded. It made no sense to leave such a strategic militaristic decision in the hands of laymen like Martial Artists. Rui was not arrogant enough to believe that his previous life's memories and other cognitive advantages would somehow magically make him an expert in the field of militaristic strategy.

"Once you safely escort the dungeon team into and through the Serevian Plateau until you reach the Serevian Dungeon, you will escort and protect the dungeon team to the coordinates of the location chosen by the strategic department. Then you will form a perimeter around the dungeon team on high alert as they begin the base formation." He paused.

"Once that occurs, the defensive squad will engage in standard location protection missions protective protocols, while the assault squad will begin engaging in expansion and seizing of territory. The variables will vary and you will be expected to consult the strategic department on the assaults conducted." The

commissioner nodded. "The nature of the mission is such that very little can be concretely said beyond what I already have. The mission will commence in eighteen hours, be sure to be at this dispatch facility by then. It is recommended you finish all your paperwork well before then. You'll be meeting up with the dungeon team as soon as the mission commences. And with that, I bid all of you good luck. Perform well, and you may earn some extra bonuses."

He nodded before promptly exiting the dispatch facility.

The Martial Apprentices followed the commissioner's words as they filled in the paperwork before leaving.

"You're not planning on going back to Hajin right?" Fiona asked.

"No. It would be pointless to go back only to come back half a day later." Rui shook his head.

"Then do you want to come over to my place?" Fiona asked she threw a side eye at him.

Rui met her gaze as he contemplated her offer, before shrugging. "Alright, thanks for the offer."

"Yay." She grinned before dragging him by the arm, much to his surprise.

Once they exited the office of the Martial Union, she waved to an extravagant horse-pulled carriage with the emblem of the Roschem Family stopped right before them.

"Er...miss, who might this be?" A maid from within asked once she saw the hand of a young man in hers.

"He's now a guest of the Roschem Manor." She declared.

"...Very well, miss." The maid relented.

"Get in." She told him as she hopped in herself, patting the seat next to her.

"Are you sure this is ok?" Rui asked, scratching his head.

"It will be fine, let's go." Fiona insisted, giggling.

Rui sighed as he got in, sitting beside her. Soon, the carriage began moving.

"You know..." She began. "That last fight we had was unlike any other fight I've ever had in my life."

"Oh?" Rui asked, raising an eye. "Why do you say that?"

"I never had too much of a strong ambition for any one particular thing. But after seeing how far you're willing to persevere for the sake of pursuing your Martial Art... I got a little curious, you see." She continued, as she turned to face him. "I wonder what pursuing your Martial Path really feels like."

In that moment, Rui felt as though she had actually matured a lot since he last spoke with her when they ate dinner together.

"That's good to hear." Rui nodded. "Have you named your Martial Art yet?"

"No. Why?" Fiona asked.

"Just curious." Rui replied. ('So she hasn't yet made much progress on the individuality of her Martial Art.')

This wasn't particularly unexpected after all. She was still only a somewhat carefree sixteen-year-old. Even Kane hadn't named his Martial Art yet because he hadn't developed enough individuality yet. Although he did fulfill the other condition of Squire Candidacy; maturity.

"Well, you have enough time. Just make sure you remain true to your Martial Path, always." Rui added.

"That sounds like something an old man would say." Fiona noted.

"It's just your imagination."

"Is it?"

"It's actually something the headmaster of my Martial Academy branch, Headmaster Aronian had told me. His wise words had truly helped me through some trying and difficult times."

"Really?" She peered at him suspiciously.

"Really." He laughed awkwardly.

The two bantered until they finally reached the Roschem Residence.

"And this is my home." She waved at her home.

"Wow." Rui cooed. This is going to be good."

Chapter 404: Spar

The Roschem Manor welcomed Rui as a guest and he was given his own guest room to stay at. This was a luxury beyond Rui's expectations. Fiona chattered with him a lot as they waited for the commencement of the mission.

He'd learned a lot more about Fiona by that point. She was a grade-ten Martial Apprentice, even after the update of the Martial Artist grade system. Which meant her prowess was the real deal.

"By the way." She said at one point. "Do you want to spar?"

Rui's eyes lit up in interest as he considered her offer.

"Sure." He nodded. He had considered the same thing, but he wasn't sure if it was wise to challenge her in her own home after she had invited him. "I've been wanting a rematch for more than a while."

"Alright." She grinned. "Let's get started then."

She took him to a sparring facility inside the Roschem Residence., making him sigh at how rich and loaded her family was. He had visited the Arrancar Manor before and had seen something similar there as well, but that was more than three years ago. Back then he lacked the contextual understanding as to how ridiculous it was, unlike his current self.

"This is meant to withstand the power of Martial Apprentices." She told him. "We can go all out here without a worry."

"Honestly..." Rui scratched his head. "It's gonna need to do more than just withstand the power of Martial Apprentices for us to truly be unworried."

She smiled at those words. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"Alright, if you say so." Rui shrugged.

"Take your positions." One of the servants served as a referee.

Both Fiona and Rui took neutral stances against each other. They were both all-rounders, it was one of the reasons Rui wanted to face her. She was an all-rounder Martial Apprentice who was capable of going toe-to-toe with him.

She was the perfect opponent to exercise his capability with the VOID algorithm.

The atmosphere grew heavy as the two began focusing.

"Begin!"

WHOOSH

Fiona lashed out as she crossed the distance between them in the briefest instance. She didn't hesitate to launch a barrage of powerful yet swift attacks. She had a much better understanding of his Martial Art since the last time they fought. She knew that he grew stronger as time passed, and she wanted to prevent from him growing to a stage where she would no longer have an advantage against him in combat.

She knew that his true strength did not come from overwhelming physical parameters but the freakish way he was able to adapt and evolve to his opponent with accurately timed and placed movements with high precision. Thus, prior to his change was the one time he was most vulnerable.

Yet to her surprise, overwhelming him was much harder than it seemed.

WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH

Rui bobbed and weaved as he evaded every single one of her attacks. His reactions were incredibly sharp.

('No, they're too fast!') She realized. It was as though his brain was simply functioning faster than what was possible in the Apprentice Realm. He reached with almost no delay, in the briefest of flashes.

She didn't understand. She knew that he was capable of ridiculous reactions after he did his so-called adaptive evolution thingy. But she was pretty sure it was far too early for that to have already kicked in.

And she was right.

What she was dealing with was not the VOID algorithm. Rui was still building the predictive model of her. What she was facing was just the raw battle cognition upgrade that he had gained from the Mindmirror symbiote brain. His reactions and reflexes had all improved significantly thanks to

programming the secondary brain with those neurological patterns with the Mental Embed technique so that the secondary brain could parallelly process identically alongside Rui's own mind.

His reaction and processing speed had increased by more than one hundred percent. Despite possessing greater movement speed than Rui, she simply struggled to land a proper attack on him.

Of course, she was far from done.

CLAP!

She released a loud sound that disoriented Rui on the spot.

('High-density infrasonic sound waves?') Rui cursed as he identified the principle of the technique she had used. Infrasonic sound waves were sound waves at a frequency below the audible range of the human ears. Greater amounts of this frequency of sound caused disorientation, sea sickness, and nausea.

She used a technique that generated high-density infrasonic sound that would disorient the target if the technique.

BAM!!

She managed land in her very first jab on him and the very first damage inflicted on an opponent in the duel.

Rui grimaced as he used all four of his Apprentice-level techniques; Adamant Reforge, Inner Divergence, Elastic Shift, and Acute Edge to mitigate the damage done by her attack, yet it was only partially effective, he couldn't negate everything.

('Damn, she hits like a truck, as always.') Rui grimaced. He had always known that she hit hard, but she had become even stronger than she was before. Her single strike throbbed through his body.

Yet, Fiona wasn't done. She lashed out after him again, refusing to let him catch his bearings and awareness. She continued to whale out an onslaught of attacks, hoping she would get in more attacks by exploiting his openings.

Yet;

WHOOSH

BAM!

Rui evaded attacks as he slipped in a clean strike that neatly squeezed through an obscure hole in her defense.

It was a Flowing Canon with enough power to push even her back.

She glanced back at him with a wary expression. He, in turn, had a confident expression as he met her eyes with a new stance. He hopped lightly as his arms were aggressively placed. His new stance was offense and speed-oriented stance which placed less weight on defense.

The statement it made was clear. He didn't need to focus on defense when fighting against her.

Chapter 405: Outcome

Rui calmly took his new stance as he met Fiona's probing gaze.

The initial predictive model had been completed. Rui had managed to hold on for long enough for himself and the Mindmirror Symbiote brain to work together.

This time, it was his turn to go on the offensive.

POW POW POW!

He began with a flurry of jabs at her, testing her out and feeling her reactions as he continued refining his predictive model.

It wasn't enough to be called a flaw, but one shortcoming of the VOID algorithm was that he needed data in the same areas as the things he was trying to predict by creating a predictive model.

Because of the fact that she had been on the offensive the entire time and he had been on the defensive, he didn't have much data on her defensive patterns. Although he could still predict her with parameters that were unchanging across offense or defense, the predictive model was at its most effective when it had adequate data.

WHOOSH WHOOSH

BAM BAM!

He casually evaded her, having predicted her movements with the predictive model, while launching perfectly placed and timed uppercuts into openings created by her own attacks.

She grimaced as she leaped back, throwing a concerned glance at Rui who chased after her, refusing to let her get her bearings in the fight.

With every attack he threw, success or failure, the prediction model gained access to more and more data that allowed the predictions to become more and more refined.

She knew that she had already failed in trying to defeat him before he evolved to her. The best she could do at that point was trying to win regardless of the evolution.

Yet she didn't have any viably means to do so

CLASP

Rui caught one of her arms having predicted her attempt at using the infrasonic sound attack to disorient him to try and exploit the opportunity to land a powerful blow on him then and there.

Yet, Rui mercilessly used Flow Flux bolstered with Flame Breathing and Outer Convergence.

She stumbled, yet before she could even try to regain her balance;

BAM BAM!

Two Tempestuous Ripples hit her from below as they launched her airborne as they carried her well outside the boundaries of the ring.

THUD

She landed heavily, out of bounds.

She sighed. "That's your win, I guess."

"Hehehe." Rui chuckled as he smirked. "Looks like I win this time."

"You've truly gotten ridiculously strong." She admitted. "Since when was your evolution thingy that strong?"

"For a while now," Rui admitted.

Back when he had fought her in the Martial Contest, he had not yet mastered the predictive model at that time. He had fought Fiona purely with the more primitive stylistic adaptation systems of the VOID algorithm back then. Although it wasn't entirely obsolete, it was obsolete compared to what he was capable of now.

It wasn't as though Rui had created something brand new in the time since the Martial Contest. The only difference was that he had mastered the Mind Palace and the Mindmirror Symbiote which allowed him to use the VOID algorithm himself in combat not just viably but also perfectly and sometimes even excellently.

Yet the VOID algorithm itself was the outcome of a project, Project Water that had taken him a lifetime to achieve.

So the power he had obtained in the last year wasn't just something he had obtained in the last year. But something he had finally crystalized after decades of effort.

"How did you get this fast and this strong?" She asked curiously.

"Hard work, talent, calculated risks, and a lot of luck." He replied dismissively.

He'd rather have kept the secret as down on the low as possible.

"Besides, you've gotten a lot stronger too," Rui added, consolingly.

"I just mastered a few stronger Martial Art techniques." She said.

"That's more or less what I did, really." Rui shrugged.

The two bantered some more as time passed. Rui enjoyed the extreme hospitality that the Roschem Family provided him. He had basically never experienced such luxury since he wasn't rich enough to afford such luxuries. He partook in everything they had to offer until the time for the commencement of the mission took place.

"Finally." Fiona muttered as they set out for the Martial Union. "This took far longer than it should have. What was the point of having to wait eighteen hours when we could have started immediately back then?"

"We may have been ready, but the civilian parts of our Serevian Dungeon team may not necessarily have been ready. These include miners and mining equipment as well as research scholars and other extraction teams for resource acquisition." Rui explained.

"But why not?" Fiona asked.

"Because there is more than just manpower that goes into these teams," Rui answered. "You need the necessary equipment and machinery, you need supplies; both personal and industrial as well as means of transportation that needs to come together for our Serevian Dungeon team to be ready."

"Ah, makes sense." Fiona nodded. "I'm just glad I'm not stuck with defending and protecting these nerds instead."

"You're also in the offensive squad by that you mean?" Rui asked, raising an eyebrow at the girl.

"Yes, of course." She nodded. "I would get bored just sitting around waiting for attacks. I accepted the Serevian Dungeon mission because I was quite curious about what the Serevian Dungeon was like and whether it was as exotic as people say or not."

Rui nodded as an interesting point took his attention.

"I wonder what Squad Ian Nepomniachtchi, is going to be a part of," Rui asked out aloud.

"Who knows, we'll find out." She shrugged.

"He struck me as an aggressive person, hard to imagine him coming all the way to the Serevian Dungeon unless he wants to actively seek out fight himself." Rui noted.

"That is true." Fiona laughed at his words mirthfully.

The two of them got out of their carriage once they arrived, immediately heading inside.

Chapter 406: Arrival

The two of them quickly headed over to the designated dispatch facility. Plenty of Martial Artists had already gathered at the dispatch facility. They all prepared as they gathered the necessary gear and equipment. Thankfully for the Martial Artists, the Martial Union had provided them with the necessary potions free of cost.

This was one of the incentives that the Martial Union had offered to incentivize the mission and attract even more powerful Martial Artists to undertake the mission.

Rui and Fiona immediately began preparing their kits with the recommended and necessary gear.

Soon it was time for being dispatched. However, they weren't going to be dispatched to the Serevian Plateau immediately. They first needed to intercept the dungeon team that would be dispatched from the Kandrian Government.

The Martial Union's role in the dungeon wars was purely Martial and militaristic. The Kandrian Government would be solely shouldering the burden of gathering the team that would be in charge of mining and resource acquisition. Specifically, the Ministry of Mining and the Ministry of Environment and Ecology would be joining hands in the endeavor.

The Kandrian Royal Army would be dispatching several defensive corps to aid the dungeon team. The army would be bearing the heaviest weight as far as defensive measures went. This was natural, as although manual bodyguarding and surveillance from the Martial Artists of the Martial Union in the defensive squad was certainly quite necessary, it was not enough by itself. Setting up defensive barricades and defensive technological solutions were also equally necessary.

The army would contribute to the core defense while the defensive squad of the Martial Union would focus on repelling attacks on their territory.

They would be joining the convoy before it was dispatched from an army base.

Rui counted the Martial Artists using Seismic Mapping.

('Forty-eight Martial Apprentices on the very first dispatch?') Rui raised an eyebrow. ('The Martial Union isn't holding back it seems.')

Furthermore, each of these Martial Apprentices was high-grade Martial Apprentices of the Martial Union. Both the quality and quantity of the Martial Artists being assigned to a single mission far exceeded anything he had ever participated in.

Soon, commissioner Feristen entered the dispatch facility. The Martial Artists had all prepared themselves in time. They would soon need to be dispatched.

"Apprentices. The time has come. The dungeon team is currently in military base KEM-423 right outside the town of Vargard. All of you have the coordinates in your mission bills. It's time to dispatch. Get going."

The Martial Artists left the facility as they headed towards the designated military base outside the town.

The sight of forty-eight Martial Apprentices zipping through the town of Vargard spurred waves of excitement among the common public. It was very rare to see such an exorbitant number of Martial Apprentices traveling together. Such a sight inspired awe and amazement as each of these mighty beings individually was far beyond what normal humans could ever be.

Soon, they arrived at the designated military base. It was large and heavily fortified, with large spiked walls that barricaded any entry.

The security was not light, and guards armed with weapons and other devices Rui could not even identify.

"Purpose of visit?" The security guards asked with a straight face and a stern expression.

"Mission KEMU-3142." One of the Martial Apprentices at the front of the crowd chirped up.

The security team began inspecting each and every mission bill and Martial license with heavy scrutiny. The Martial Apprentices were heavily scanned as were their belongings before they were finally allowed in.

"Barrack number 7." Rui was told as he was returned his belongings.

The Martial Apprentices made their way to the designated barrack. The barracks housed many large motorized vehicles of different kinds.

"Martial Apprentices of the Martial Union." A man in an adorned militaristic uniform addressed them. "I am colonel Carnes. I am the acting leader of the Kandrian Serevian dungeon team, as I'm sure you're already informed. The Kandrian Serevian will soon depart now that you have arrived as per protocol."

Soon, the many motorized carriages emerged out of the barrack in a particular formation. The motorized carriages on the outermost layer were heavy, large, and highly armored. They were part of the defensive deployment to protect the dungeon team.

The inner circle was comprised of supplies and storage carriages that contained necessary supplies and resources that were absolutely vital for maintaining a fortified mining endeavor.

The Martial Apprentices already knew what to do. They would be traveling by foot, forming a perimeter protecting the dungeon team convoy.

Soon, the voyage to the Serevian Dungeon commenced. The journey was estimated to take a whole day. After all, a large traveling convoy couldn't move as fast as Rui did when he ran to the Serevian Dungeon. The journey would be agonizingly slow.

Both the offense and the defense squads partook in the perimeter. The many Martial Apprentices with sensory techniques kept an eye out on their surroundings as they traveled alongside the dungeon team.

Nearly a whole day had passed until they finally reached the Serevian Plateau. They paused some distance away from the cliff that led down to a forest.

It was impossible for them to travel down the cliff, of course. Fortunately, the Ministry of Environment and Ecology had already chartered a viable route down to the Serevian Plateau safely. The convoy veered as they evaded the cliff safely. Traveling parallel to the cliff. As time passed, the elevation of the cliff declined slowly as the convoy traveled downhill.

Soon, the cliff melted into a straightforward pass.

The convoy took their very first step into the Serevian Plateau. Many of the Martial Artists tensed up as they continued traveling. The mission bill stressed the dangers of the Serevian Plateau. The fact that one needed to be a grade seven Martial Artists just to be barely qualified to travel the Serevian Plateau hadn't escaped their memories. Even if they were all powerful Martial Apprentices chosen for this very reason, it didn't ease their burdens.

Chapter 407: Confrontation

Part of the reason for this was the size of the convoy. It was one thing for a nimble, flexible, and fast Martial Apprentices to travel the Serevian Plateau. It was entirely another thing for large convoys such as the Kandrian Empire's Serevian Dungeon team to travel the Serevian Plateau.

The biggest difference was the size which made them extremely loud and conspicuous. On top of their conspicuity, their inability to easily and swiftly retreat and disengage from any conflict that may arise made their position that much more vulnerable. Martial Apprentices often simply retreated or escaped in the face of grave danger.

But in this case, they couldn't.

Rui was also a bit worried. He did not think he himself was in any particular danger of dying. But he certainly did worry about the convoy. The Serevian Plateau had a large amount of Apprentice-level fauna and flora. The individual prowess of the creatures was not a problem, the problem was the sheer number of the creatures that the Serevian Plateau held. They were at a numbers disadvantage.

Of course, the Ministry of Environment and Ecology as well as the military weren't stupid. They were aware of the same problem as well. In addition to the forty-eight high-grade Martial Apprentices that were protecting the dungeon team convoy, there were the defensive carriages that were capable of pulling their own weight. The many defensive carriages that formed their own parameters protecting

the core of the dungeon team inside all began buzzing and humming. From atop the large and heavy defensive armored carriages emerged large long structures that eerily resembled a railgun or a canon. Rui felt a sense of danger from the structures that were clearly weapons.

Yet he felt more confident. The sheer prowess of their convoy was quite high. Even if they were attacked, whoever attacked them would be quite sorry for ever having done so.

Even if a large wave of Apprentice-level creatures happened upon them, they would certainly be able to repel them away with ease.

Another major problem for the dungeon team convoy was traveling itself. The Serevian Plateau didn't have the wide space needed for a wide convoy of this nature to be able to travel unperturbed while still maintaining the necessary formation.

However, this had also been accounted for. The carriages at the very forefront of the convoy were equipped with path-clearing devices and technology that cleared away any trees that obstructed the path of the convoy, swiftly.

Yet, this also hindered their path considerably. They needed extra time because of all the delays that the clearing of the path was causing.

Their journey was not unhindered, either.

"Pack of eight Frost Wolves coming from nine o'clock!" Rui shouted as his Seismic Mapping recognized the signature of the seismic radiation.

The Martial Artists around Rui immediately turned toward the direction that Rui had indicated their arrival to be from. The canons of the armored defense carriages turned in the direction that Rui had announced they were coming from.

Soon, they came.

Seven wolves appeared, sprinting toward them at an incredible pace.

Rui, Fiona, and several other Martial Apprentices launched long-range attacks toward the wolves as the canons fired.

BAM BAM BAM!

Multiple attacks crashed into the wolves as they whimpered in pain. The attacks of high-grade Martial Apprentices and the many canons atop the armored carriages were overwhelming.

Most of the wolves died while the remaining ran away, in fear for their life.

Rui sighed in relief as he glanced at the canons atop the defensive armored carriages with an impressed expression. This was his first time witnessing esoteric technology in combat. As expected, it was not weak. The sheer speed and power of the projectiles launched were quite impressive and dangerous even to Martial Apprentices. Only Martial Apprentices of the high grades could deal with them. Martial Apprentices of the low grades would likely be unable to dodge it due to the speed and unable to withstand it due to the power.

Rui could only think of the conflict between Martial Artists and sovereign states when he saw what the canons were capable of. He hadn't forgotten that the only way the Kandrian Royal Family was competitive with the Martial Union was through their esoteric technology. The Royal Family invested in esoteric technology to the same degree the Martial Union invested in Martial Art. Its technological capabilities were supposed to allow it to be a threat to the Martial Union, and Rui was starting to see how. If the Royal Family and the Royal army possessed weapons of such power and much greater, then that alone would be a threat to the Martial Union.

Thankfully, canons like these weren't nimble and flexible like Martial Apprentices were. They were also a permanent money drain proportional to the firepower they outputted whereas Martial Artists were not nearly as expensive to maintain.

However, the Kandrian Royal Family wasn't just limited to weapons such as these. They had various other technological solutions that allowed them to be quite competitive with Martial Artists. This included other weapon technologies outside of mere canons.

Rui recalled what Julian had told him a long time ago. One of the main ways the Kandrian Royal Army kept up with the Martial Union was through temporary augmentation potions. These were potions that could temporarily augment the consumer of the potion significantly, granting them superhuman physical and mental parameters. These potions allowed ordinary humans to fight Martial Artists on an even footing, at least until the effects of the potions wore off. This way, even though the Royal Family had far fewer Martial Artists than the Martial Union, they had ways of allowing ordinary soldiers to fight with Martial Artists.

('I wonder if we'll see any of those in this dungeon team.') Rui wondered. It was quite plausible that they would. After all, if it was one of the core ways by which the Royal Family and the Royal Army stayed relevant, then there was a pretty good chance he would see it, one way or another.

Chapter 408: Core

Rui put his thoughts aside as they were attacked multiple times after the first attack. Sometimes it was hippogriffs, other times it was larger wild cats, and sometimes it was aerial beasts.

Yet each time they were attacked, the Martial Apprentices and the canons fired, warding off beasts before they could even come closer to the convoy. Most creatures that attacked them either died or got hurt enough to simply run away. Ultimately, most creatures in the animal kingdom had a strong sense of survival that prevented them from fighting highly dangerous battles that would likely result in them getting butchered.

After many hours of agonizingly slow travel, they finally reached the core of the Serevian Plateau.

The land had suddenly and sharply elevated highly at a particular point, just as Rui had remembered it.

The only question was how the carriages of the dungeon team were going to travel up all the way to the surface of the elevated land.

That had also been planned by the Ministry. The convoy veered to the side as they traveled parallelly to the Serevian Dungeon before they happened upon a particularly large cave that was much larger than any of the ones that they had run into prior. The cave had been located prior to the commencement of the mission when searching for a cave that would allow the dungeon team convoy to reach the surface of the Serevian Dungeon.

The convoy temporarily broke formation as the carriages proceeded one by one through the large cave, following a particular path that brought them to the surface. The Martial Apprentices had secured the entrance and exit of the cave and had also scouted the path ahead of time to make sure that there weren't any hostile Apprentice-level animals that would pose a threat to the particularly more vulnerable carriages of the convoy.

"That's the last of it." Rui nodded as the final armored carriage finally pushed itself up to the surface of the Serevian Dungeon.

He turned back, facing the Serevian Dungeon for the first time since his last mission. "This place hasn't changed much." He nodded.

Soon the carriages huddled together in their formation. However, this time, some of the inner carriages buzzed and hummed as the top of these large carriages began to change as certain devices began growing out of it. Several devices resembling satellites had formed atop these carriages. They were positioned such that they faced the entirety of the Serevian Dungeon in all three hundred and sixty degrees of vision.

Rui knew what they were for. Not only because the mission bill had spoken about them, but also because they resembled the technology of Earth a bit too much.

According to established protocols, the dungeon team was supposed to gather environmental data before that data would be set back to the higher-ups back home.

The Ministry and the government back home would process the data and choose the location of their core territory.

The location of the core territory of a sovereign nation in the Serevian Dungeon was extremely important. According to the Serevian Pact that the twelve countries that laid claim to the territory of the Serevian Dungeon, the territory that each sovereign nation declared as its core territory would be, as sworn by all nations, unfringeable and unseizable by any other nation.

Thus, the location of such territory was an extremely important and strategic decision that needed to be made. The choice was important enough that it would permanently impact the outcome of the nation's participation in the Serevian Dungeon war.

Thus, it would likely take some time before the relevant militaristic and strategic experts in the headquarters of the operation back home in the Kandrian Empire, figure out the most optimal spot for declaring as territory.

Important decisions like this took into account logistical and inventory constraints, the risk of getting attacked by other nations, risk of getting attacked by Apprentice-level beasts. It also needed to take into account the distance from the edge and the cost and difficulty of restocking.

It also needed to take into account the evaluation of mining viability and resource availability.

For now, the dungeon team convoy set up a temporary base and other temporary defensive measures. A simple fortification fencing was erected for basic protection as the defensive squad and the armed and armored carriages also formed a perimeter around the dungeon team.

It was only after several defensive and surveillance measures were taken before the inhabitants of the Serevian Dungeon finally exited the carriages. It was quite clear that the many individuals who emerged from the inner carriages were mix of intellectuals and manual laborers, particularly miners. They contained people of the intellectual professions such as environmentalist scholars as well as ecologist scholars for very obvious reasons.

Both of these professions were quite needed in the Servian Dungeon, of course, but they weren't the only needed professions. The Ministry of Mining had deployed miners and specific mining technological solutions that would aid in the process of the extraction of some of the vast reserves of featherblood mercury and Nereneal Flintstone.

They immediately began looking busy as they began acquiring samples of literally everything that could even be sampled. In comparison, the offensive squad was mostly jobless. It wasn't their fault of course, their turn would only come after the Kandrian Empire chose their core territory and only after they stabilized their base in their core territory.

Thankfully, the decision came within a few hours.

To everyone's delight, the decision of the core territory of the Kandrian Empire within the Serevian Dungeon had overlapped with their existing position. Meaning they didn't need to move places in order to begin colonizing their core base in their core territory at the edge of the Serevian Dungeon.

Rui had partially expected that the core territory would be placed at the edge of the Serevian Dungeon. After all, it was a smart move from his point of view. There were several clear advantages to doing so.

Chapter 409: Analysis

The benefits of choosing the core territory at the edge of the Serevian Dungeon were clear. For one, the restocking and resupplying of necessary goods and supplies for the Serevian dungeon team became a lot more convenient for the Kandrian Empire. Otherwise, the routine supply shipments sent by Kandrian Empire would need to enter the Serevian Dungeon. Once it entered the Serevian Dungeon it was vulnerable to attack from hostile Martial Apprentices who had no qualms about attacking supply shipments in order to hind the Kandrian Empire.

Protecting the supply shipments heavily enough to deter the attacks from other competing nations would require an immense amount of Martial Art resources that would make the already expensive expenditure of the entire endeavor far greater than it already was.

However, making the core territory of the Kandrian Empire at the edge of the Serevian Dungeon meant that the supply shipments never needed to enter any hostile territory in the Serevian Dungeon. Furthermore, it restricted the area over which their territory could be attacked from. Doing so reduced the threat they would be subjected to, while also bolstering their defenses due to a much lesser area over which an attack could occur.

Part of the reason that choosing territory at the edge of the Serevian Dungeon was a wise choice was because of the fact that the twelve nations had agreed to never engage in combat in the Serevian Plateau outside the Serevian Dungeon. This was to prevent the escalation of the conflict of the Serevian Dungeon outside it into full-blown war.

The Serevian Dungeon's limit of the Apprentice Realm functioned as a hard ceiling for the limit to the degree to which the conflict could escalate to; to never above the Apprentice Realm.

However, once the conflict moved outside the Serevian Dungeon, then Martial Artists of higher Realms would no longer be limited by the defense mechanism of the Serevian Dungeon. The conflict could freely escalate to the Squire and the Senior Realm rather quickly.

Once that happened, it wasn't just about the featherblood mercury and nereneal flint stone. Martial Artists of the higher Realms were extremely valuable. The losses suffered by all participating sovereign nations in such a conflict would be tremendous and would likely even the net profit being made.

Thus, out of consideration for themselves and others. The twelve nations agreed to the terms and conditions in order to limit the losses suffered by the Serevian Dungeon wars.

Thus, choosing one's core territory at the edge of the Serevian Dungeon effectively meant that their backs were covered. Of course, the Kandrian Empire still took defensive measures in case one of the twelve countries chose to violate the Serevian Pact. However, the probability of this occurring was quite low as the Pact specified that the violators of the Serevian Pact may have their territories infringed upon by all the other eleven states participating in the Serevian dungeon wars.

The work had begun immediately. The many non-combat carriages were soon unloaded and docked as the civil engineers began building quick accommodations for the entire team to be able to live in the Serevian Dungeon.

They began employing esoteric civil engineering technology to build small but efficiently spaced huts that were viable housing accommodations for the members of the dungeon team. The military began deploying the more sophisticated defensive and counter-offensive solutions that it had come prepared with, bolstering the defenses of its base.

These included multiple lines of fortification, and an army of live canons pointed in all directions that an invasion could come from.

What drew Rui's attention the most was when the soldiers of the Royal Army finally got out of their military carriages.

What surprised Rui was the lacking of Martial Apprentices, even when considering the Kandrian Empire's lacking Martial Artists. The remaining soldiers seemed like normal human beings. Yet many of them had strange contraptions on their arm and other gizmo that Rui had no idea what was.

He shrugged, before turning his back to the actual martial Apprentices.

They weren't many, but they were quite strong. What interested Rui was that two of the Martial Apprentices actually wielded weapons. This was quite a rare coincidence. Rui studied the weapons of these Martial Apprentices carefully.

One of the wielded a gigantic sword, tied to his back. It was actually quite shocking to see such a ridiculously large blade on his back that was almost as tall as its owner! It was a longsword that hyper-emphasized power rather than speed and durability differences.

(Still, does he actually manage to successfully land hits on his opponent with something that unwieldy) Rui wondered with curiosity and intrigue.

He turned his attention to the other one. Her weapon was a trident, a three-pronged spear. This was not a weapon he had any familiarity with it. He had never seen the concept of such a weapon in his life. Yet he conducted a quick mental analysis on the object.

The lethality of the weapons had a lot going for it. It became far easier to land critical attacks with the extra piercing prongs. However, it didn't mean there were no shortcomings at all. The pressure it exerted through each tip was reduced by one-third because of the amount of area through which the force was being exerted onto him.

Furthermore, it also likely reduced the flexibility of offense of the weapon. It was much more difficult to be able to attack with the triple-prong spear head which made it more difficult to actually land the damage it ought to have.

Of course, this was just the price to pay for being able to inflict the three wounds with a single attack that normal spears would be unable to do. At the end of the day, he would likely have still chosen the spear as the most superior weapon, but he wondered whether that would be the case for her. The existence of the Martial Path that created hyper affinities for certain forms of combat often meant that what was objectively the best did not matter.

Chapter 410: Coordination

A day passed as the Kandrian military speedily worked on the fortification of their core territory. Walls were erected, simple lodging were constructed at incredibly high paces. One of the many things that the army had to take care of was sealing the many caves that littered the territory beneath them that led onto the surface. It served as a hole in the defense and security and could be exploited by hostile Martial Apprentices to infiltrate into the territory.

Of course, this would violate the Serevian Pact and it was unlikely that any nation would cross the line, the military was not taking any chances. There was also the psychological pressure of living with such a security hole. So much so that there were a few Martial Apprentices of the defensive squad who had been chosen because of their mastery of the Seismic Mapping technique.

It took a few days for the base camp to fully stabilize as the most important issues had been taken care of and the secondary and tertiary tasks were being handled by the dungeon team dispatched by the Ministry of Environment and Ecology and the Ministry of Mining.

Rui was starting to get a little bored until finally the offensive squad was ready to be dispatched.

"Martial Apprentices of the offensive squad." Colonel Carnes addressed the offensive squad. "The first phase of the colonization of the Serevian Dungeon is complete. The Serevian Dungeon team will begin an aggressive expansion deeper into the Serevian Dungeon henceforth with continuous supply shipments from the Kandrian Empire. As per protocol, the offensive team may commence the offensive attacks on any foreign settlements that aren't part of the core territories of other nations. As all of you are surely aware, you cannot attack the core territories of the Serevian Dungeon. This would violate the Serevian Pact on behalf of the Kandrian Empire."

Rui nodded. None of the Martial Apprentices were foolish enough to do something that stupid, when the mission bill as well as the commissioner of the mission and the colonel leading the mission had all drilled it into their heads that infringing on the core territories was absolutely unacceptable.

"The maps that you will be provided contain clear and defined illustration that detail the core territories of the foreign nations in high accuracy and precision." Colonel Carnes informed them as a soldier hauled a box. "Each of these maps also details the territories of a few nations that have already begun expanding territory. As all of you are aware, your goal is to hinder and obstruct the colonization of our competitors to the highest degree possible. Ensure that our competitors cannot take a single step outside of their core bases!"

The Martial Apprentices simply stared at him blankly. They were unaccustomed to such pep talks, being from the Martial Union. The Martial Union was very much practical and business-oriented. Martial Apprentices were not motivated with pep talks, but with money and other more concrete benefits.

Regardless, the Martial Apprentices were motivated.

"Colonel Carnes is correct." Commissioner Feristen nodded. "The higher-ups at HQ have already messaged relayed all of you your offensive missions on your accounters regarding the targets that you will be attacking. Refer to the map and commence the attacks at the given timeframe."

The Martial Apprentices were immediately given the maps with the territories of their competitors.

"Red marks the core territories while blue marks the extended territories, huh?" Rui red the map along with its legends.

The closest territories to the Kandrian Empire's territories were several small nations. The Kingdom of Nochus, the Republic Jerefin and the State of Hreefeal were the among the three nations closest to the Serevian Plateau, directly touching it at certain points. This allowed the three nations to get a head start in the exploration and colonization of the Serevian Dungeon.

Rui glanced at his accouter as he read the message.

"My target is... the Kingdom of Nochus huh?" Rui mused as he read the orders of the message that the Martial Union had sent him.

The Martial Artists of the Martial Union were different from the soldiers of the army that had a high amount of cohesion and coordination. The Martial Artists of the Martial Union had no such thing unless it was with members of a party.

It wasn't possible to foster such kind of coordination with Martial Artists who were effectively no different from freelancers. The individualistic freelancer mindset was what gave the Martial Apprentices its greatest strengths, but it also gave them their greatest shortcomings. The Martial Union was inferior to the Kandrian Royal Army as far as coordination of its forces went.

This problem was the reason why the Martial Union included training of large-scale coordination guidelines in the Martial Academy. The training wouldn't magically make all teamwork absolutely perfect, but it would ensure that at the very least the coordination wasn't a negative.

It included simple principles that allowed Martial Apprentices to not get in each other's way.

That training would be put to use in this mission since the Martial Apprentices that would be working together to assault a certain base had no basis for coordination.

In fact, Rui didn't even know who his fellow teammates were that would be attacking the Kingdom of Nochus!

The Martial Union was taking full control, moving each Martial Apprentice like pieces on a chessboard so that the pieces didn't need to try teaming up together only to make a mess. In comparison, colonel Carnes had full authority over the Kandrian Dungeon team and the garrisons of the Royal Army. He would be making a lot of decisions and would be held accountable for them.

Rui shook his head as he began preparing for the assault on the territory of the Kingdom of Nochus. Each nation would be bringing out their best, which meant that their defenses would be significantly stiff.

Regardless, Rui was quite excited for his first battle of the Serevian Dungeon wars. Just what kind of Martial Artists would he run into?